

## Opening Up New Horizons

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The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by an expansion of Russian dance both across the country and abroad. Such renowned choreographers as M. Fokin, V. Nizhinsky, S. Lifar, L. Myasin and some others defined to a great extent further development of dance in the world. This brilliant team generated enormous energy that inspired performing artists in their creative search throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Choreographic revelations that Kasyan Goylezovsky and Leonid Jakobson made in the 1920s still impress audiences all over the world with exquisite forms, subtle emotions and deep meaningfulness that are present in their dances, very natural and unconstrained.

All this could have had an exciting continuation and we can only make assumptions about artistic discoveries that could have been made, but ... “one fine day” the whole process was stopped in a most barbaric way. The 1917 Revolution and the events that followed tore Russia away from the world cultural stratum. The isolation lasted for over 70 years and seriously hampered cultural development in the country itself. The governmental policy in dance put the highest priority on classical dance and folklore, regarding these genres as “norms” that are to be observed by everyone and providing lavish subsidies to support them. Independent artistic search, any deviations from the generally accepted rules and norms was nipped in the bud most cruelly by means of persecutions, lawsuits, exiles, etc. The most courageous artists (V. Meyerhold, O.Mandelstam, for example) died in the Soviet concentration camps.

Naturally, all this has left an imprint on the nation’s mentality, psychology and pattern of education (cultural education, in particular). We cannot ignore these historical factors when we speak about contemporary dance in Russia, because they have played a major role in

shaping the present situation. The “iron curtain” cut off Russia from the world cultural process for several decades. Russian artists had no access to information and were ignorant of the discoveries and achievements made in dance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The policy, which promoted simple “copying” of the Bolshoi Theatre and the Moiseyev Ballet Theatre, left no room for individual artistic vision and finally castrated creativity in contemporary dance. What choreographers were to realize in the first place was that they had the right to be unique and have their own artistic interpretation of the world. Such a mental and psychological change is not an easy process and requires time and a lot of effort.

The first democratic changes in the country woke up the dozing creative energy, but when it finally broke through the walls of norms and restrictions surrounding it, it collided with a whole array of problems.

The Russian dance community found itself in information vacuum. There were practically no publications in Russian on current trends in contemporary dance and research carried out in this area. Nor was it possible to find any archives on the history of dance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For over 70 years local critics and theoreticians kept silence on the developments in the world dance, and no works by foreign authors were ever published on a national level. Naturally, since there had been “no need” for contemporary arts under the old regime, now there were no specialists who could teach theory and practice related to contemporary dance.

Here I must add that the situation has not changed up to now – no educational institution in the country provides training to those who want to teach contemporary dance professionally.

In education, curricular of choreography departments have become hopelessly outdated. This problem deserves closer attention, because it is my deep conviction that no profound changes in contemporary choreography can take place until the whole system of dance education undergoes radical change. In Russia, there are 17 Arts Institutes altogether, where dance departments provide training to choreographers who then find employment with various amateur companies. Professional dancers receive their education at dance schools, where only

undergraduate programmes are available. And just one choreography department in the whole country (at the State Institute of Theatrical Arts in Moscow) trains highly qualified choreographers to work with professional performers in theatres and state dance ensembles. But in all state educational institutions practical training is based on classical and folk dance. Even today, jazz, contemporary techniques are not included into the curricular.

The content of theoretical disciplines in the Soviet times was greatly influenced by the communist ideology, so there was no mention of notation, kinesiology, movement analysis or anthropology in the textbooks and recommended literature. Computers and other modern technologies in education were of no avail to the students. Even today they are not aware of what has been achieved in choreography, theatre directing, painting and philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both abroad and in their home country. As a result, upon graduation from dance schools they are simply not prepared to work in the context of contemporary arts.

It is a paradox, but in Russia contemporary dance first emerged among mime groups and movement theatres, not dance companies. Alexander Pepelyaev, for instance, has gone a long way from working at the *Taganka* Theatre, Moscow, as a mime actor through leading a mime company (1987-1990) to directing *The Kinetic Theatre*, which was selected to perform at the *Rencontres Choregraphiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis* in 1998. He studied drama at Moscow State Institute of Theatrical Arts and received a first-rate training in a studio led by Anatoly Vasiliev. I also majored in drama, and my interest in contemporary dance began when I was working with movement theatres. Such examples of transition from drama theatre to contemporary dance are numerous. I often wondered - why? – and upon some reflection came to a conclusion that the reason was the quality of education provided by Russian drama schools. Even under the Soviet regime they produced highly qualified and open-minded specialists with a wide range of interests and erudition. Improvisation, which is essential for contemporary choreography, lies at the very heart of Stanislavsky's method of action analysis widely applied in the training of actors. Besides, the system of an outstanding Russian theatre director Mikhail Chekhov stimulates the search for enhanced expressiveness in the body, and the very notion of “a psychological

gesture” suggests a synthesis of the life of the human body and the life of the spirit. So, even a superficial comparison of the systems of training actors and dancers, theatre directors and choreographers reveals striking differences, which can explain the pattern of the development of contemporary dance in Russia: drama schools raise artists who are able to take free creative decisions, while students at dance schools are only taught to copy steps showed by their teachers.

And if we do not carry out sweeping changes in dance education, contemporary choreography in this country is doomed to develop on an amateur level.

Now, returning to the list of problems that we are facing at the moment, I need to mention:

- Absence of knowledgeable, competent and unbiased critics. The only national professional periodical – the “Ballet” magazine – is too conservative to take contemporary dance seriously. Besides, it is in financial difficulties now, and can hardly perform its functions properly (some subscribers have not received the magazine for months).
- Absence of any lobbying institution to represent the interests of the newly emerged genre. The Union of Performing Artists, the only professional association of this kind in Russia, has practically turned into a trade-union, and is more concerned with social matters than with art and creativity.
- Unwillingness of the older generation to introduce any changes into the established structures. And the younger generation very often does not have the power and influence to do this.
- Finally, and most importantly, lack of interest on the part of the government in new dance and – as a result – absence of any financial support.

We have contemporary dance companies, we hold festivals, competitions and can even boast having some schools for contemporary dance, but all these are private initiatives which have become a reality only thanks to enthusiasm of certain people dedicated to dance. Their

efforts have already allowed us to overcome some difficulties. In the recent years, they have brought over a large number of highly qualified foreign teachers who have first-hand experience with the theory and practice of contemporary dance, which is especially important for the new generation of Russian choreographers. The success of those projects is largely owed to the support of the French Culture Centre, the British Council, the Goethe Institute and American Dance Festival. With their assistance, workshops by foreign teachers and choreographers have been held regularly in Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk and Volgograd.

In Yekaterinburg, Lev Schulmann, a committed and self-sacrificing director of the Centre for Contemporary Arts, has brought up several generations of choreographers and performers and created in the region a favourable environment for building a Russian school of contemporary dance. Since 1992, the city of Severouralsk (near Yekaterinburg) has been hosting a choreographic competition named *Class*, which brings together young choreographers from all over Russia. The festival is very popular, especially in the regions adjacent to the Urals. As it grows in its scope, presenting more and more companies each year, its participants become more skilled, more experienced and more creative. The concept of the festival is to some extent reflected in its name - “a class” in Russian may denote a group of students taught together, a meeting of such a group and a room where classes are taken. The different meanings of the word describe different aspects of the festival.

The organizers of the festival have formed a very good tradition: when the competition program is completed, they arrange a “free space” evening show where everyone – dancers and choreographers – can give a short presentation, dancing whatever they want in whatever technique they choose. A sort of brainstorming – crazy ideas, weird movements, strange techniques. This event is extremely popular and everyone anticipates it with great pleasure, probably because it helps us to better understand ourselves, to appraise the current situation and decide where we should move further. Contemporary dance festivals in Russia are not numerous, and among them *Class* is the only annual gathering where one can see an overview of Russian contemporary dance scene, from beginners to recognized masters, and trace the changes that have taken place since the previous festival. The major goal it pursues is discovering new names in Russian choreography.

I must also mention two other important dance forums – *International Contemporary Dance Festival* in Volgograd and *The Art of Movement* festival held in Yaroslavl. Both are very young and are only making their first cautious steps trying to find their own place in the cultural life of the country. The Yaroslavl festival focuses mainly on improvisation in movement and invites not only dancers and choreographers, but mime actors and teachers of scenic movement as well. The organizers define their concept in the following way: “We do not give preference to any of the existing trends and provide open space for creative interaction and mutual enrichment of various styles and techniques within the versatile world of contemporary and traditional dance.” Their major concern is cross-fertilization of ideas and exchange of information.

As you see, contemporary dance festivals in Russia basically aim to decide certain practical questions. In this respect, the festival in Volgograd is not an exception. But the festival is just one of the initiatives launched by Volgograd Centre for Contemporary Choreography, whose diverse activities also include educational and research programs, collection and dissemination of information, organization of tours, shows, exhibitions. All these projects serve to achieve one major goal – the foundation and development of the Russian school of contemporary dance, with each program being designed to solve one specific problem which calls for immediate attention at a given

period of time. And the festival provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the results of the work that has been done, set new tasks and consider ways of coping with them. The festival is structured in a way that allows spectators to enjoy shows of high aesthetic quality, and enables dancers to obtain information and improve their training. The program for professionals includes a research conference, workshops, video programs, round table discussions, exhibitions, etc.

The 1997 festival made the participants acquainted with the history of contemporary dance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus trying to fill major information gaps and introduce them into the intellectual and technical context of contemporary arts. The next festival scheduled for June 1998 will focus on the ethnic roots of contemporary choreography and examination of its anthropological aspects. These questions are of special importance for the Russian dance community because we believe that in this country emergence of authentically Russian new dance forms can come about only as a result merging national rituals and dance traditions with modern vocabulary and styles.

To demonstrate how this has been accomplished in other countries, we plan to invite professional companies from all the continents (Africa, Australia, Americas, Europe, Asia) who work with contemporary vocabularies and techniques but retain their cultural identities and give a national colouring to their works, so that audiences can immediately identify the country they come from.

There are quite a few dedicated people here in Russia, who would spare no effort to facilitate the creation of a national school of contemporary dance, but probably there is only one institutions which sees the nurturing of professional contemporary dancers as its major goal. The Moscow School of Contemporary Dance headed by Nikolay Ogryzkov is a private educational institution for children aged 10 to 17, where students' payments for tuition account for the larger part of financing. Its program is unique because the school provides space for testing new teaching techniques, new disciplines and approaches to curriculum designing. And this is natural, since its director – Nikolay Ogryzkov – has integrated and synthesized knowledge he obtained at Moscow Academic School of Choreography, the Moiseyev Ballet Company where he worked as a dancer for 18 years and in private classes he took in the USA, France and Argentine. “I want to mould these children with my own hands. I want to see what shape their bodies and souls will take and how what we call a choreographer's style is translated into a dance with the help of their imagination and talent”. This is Nikolay's vision of his work and the main goal of his school, which seems to be a small island in the world of Russian contemporary dance.

I need to emphasize that all that has been said above refers to the European part of the country only. We still do not know what is happening beyond the Urals range. We are separated by vast distances, and economic difficulties have created barriers that are difficult to overcome. In such a situation, a special tribute should be paid to the initiative of Novosibirsk State University – a “forge” of the Russian intellectual Establishment – which has founded a Centre for Arts, a base for 4 independent artistic institutions. The Centre sees contemporary dance as a major area for its activities. It hosts a contemporary dance studio for university students, as well as a contemporary dance theatre, and for several years in a row it has been organizing summer courses in

contemporary dance with teachers from Europe and the USA. And though the Centre has no professional status and provides no professional training, its work is very important since it is the only place on the territory covering two thirds of Russia, where choreographers and dancers from Siberia and Far East can obtain knowledge and additional training which is deficient in standard educational institutions.

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words about Russian contemporary dance companies and choreographers. They are not numerous – 10 fingers would be enough to count all of them – and they are facing financial difficulties and struggling hard to win recognition by official structures. I will mention a few most promising companies: St.Petersburg Ballet Theatre (choreographer Boris Eifmann), Vladivostok Theatre of Chamber Dance (choreographer Olga Bavdilovich), “Expressive Movement Class”, Moscow (choreographer Gennady Abramov), “Provincial Dances”, Yekaterinburg (choreographer Tatyana Baganova), “Russian Variant”, Chelyabinsk (choreographer Olga Pona), Volgograd Theatre of Contemporary Dance (artistic director Margarita Moyzhes) and the Yevgeny Panfilov Ballet Company, Perm. This last name deserves some more attention. One well-known dance critic has defined Y. Panfilov in the following way: “Dyagilev’s spirit of innovation was revived in Panfilov.

He is the most original, most daring, most talented choreographer of his generation”. Like his famous fellow countryman Michail Lomonosov, he came to a big city from a small village in the north of Russia to study dance. He was over twenty at that time. Fantastic dedication to dance, inexhaustible energy, great talent and enormous thirst for knowledge have made Panfilov the leader of Russian contemporary choreography. His style is characterized by a very clear vision of directing (he knows exactly why he takes this or that decision in directing), paradoxical thinking, reflection of contradictions of being, undisguised emotions, with the dancer body as the basic means of conveying expressiveness. Yevgeny Panfilov is one of those who try to reinforce the cult of independence in a very challenging way. His creativity moves along one and the same path: rapture – doubt – irritation. This happens because his work is true art.

This article should not be regarded as a serious research into Russian contemporary dance. It is a product of my contemplation over the

current situation and over the problems we face in our everyday life - I simply have tried to build an overall picture of contemporary dance in my country. Of course, no sweeping changes could have taken place in such a short period of time. But some things have changed. And it is important that we are aware of the problems and we know how to solve them.