

SLOVAK NATIONAL BALLET

New works and great classics in
Bratislava: a sampler

by Julie Van Camp

Since the fall of Communism in 1989, throngs of American tourists have visited the historic cities once trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Prague and Budapest, along with Vienna, are an especially popular journey in central Europe.

An easy one-hour train ride east from Vienna is Bratislava, capital city of the Slovak Republic, part of the former Czechoslovakia, which split into two nation-states in 1993. Ticket prices in Vienna can leave Americans gasping, especially with the collapse of the dollar against European currencies, making the trip east all the more worthwhile to see The Slovak National Ballet. Round-trip train fare is only \$12.

Ballet tickets costing the equivalent of \$4-10 belie the cliché that you get what you pay for. This country of five million people has the classical arts in its bloodstream, a surprising depth of talent in all the art forms, lavish production values, elegant theaters, generous state support, and knowledgeable and sophisticated audiences.

Productions alternate between two theaters in Bratislava. The historic opera house in Old Town (Staré Mesto) was built in 1886 by the same architects who designed the state opera house in Vienna. A few blocks to the east on the Danube River, in an area being developed by an Irish investment company, a splendid new theatre with opera house and concert hall opened in April 2007.

The company traces its history to 1920 and has been in operation almost continuously since, despite

the tumultuous political history of the region, as an independent nation, a Nazi puppet state in World War II, four decades of Communist oppression, and a member of the European Union since 2004.

The company is most comfortable in the classics and these are the most popular with local audiences. Their *Swan Lake*, in a production dating from 1991, two years after the fall of Communism there, is produced at the new theater. Guest artist Alexandra Timofeeva of the Kremlin Ballet was a brilliant Odette-Odile, but the depth of talent in the company amply fills out the soloist and corps roles. It is surprising that they use the old Soviet ending, with the Prince vanquishing Rothbart, to live happily ever after with Odette. Slovaks loathe their former Communist oppressors, but apparently the more upbeat ending in the here-and-now remains attractive.

The easy familiarity with the choreographic style of Marius Petipa is also in evidence in the company's new production of *Grand Pas Classique from Raymonda*. Staged by Johnny Chang, originally with the Central Ballet of China and most recently of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, excerpts familiar to American audiences captured the exuberant and sometimes sassy ensembles and solos. Of special note was the sparkling technique of Nikoleta Stehlíková, a long-time principal with the company, in the lead role.

The company's production of *La Sylphide* premiered in 2005, with the transition from Russian technique to Bournonville largely successful. James was



C.M. Sobata Zaharia, A. Szabo and S. Najdena in Serenade. Photo: Ctibor Bachraty.

portrayed by an exceptionally promising young soloist, Adrian Ducin, whose presence, precision, and mastery of the Danish style were riveting. Mostly appearing in soloist roles in the repertory, he is one to watch in the coming years.

The company is to be applauded for its risk-taking, when it would be easy to stick with familiar classics. The most eagerly awaited premiere of the fall 2007 season for local balletomanes was *Serenade*, the company's first Balanchine ballet and the first time any Balanchine ballet had been performed in the Slovak Republic. Representatives of the Balanchine Trust, John Clifford and Patricia Baker, staged the production.

The sold-out October 26 premiere was a worthy effort, although the dancers sometimes strained to balance choreographic precision with the illusion of wind-swept effortlessness. It is difficult to go wrong with *Serenade*, though, even to western eyes with the luxury of having seen premiere American companies with a lifetime of schooling in Balanchine technique. The company's sumptuous pit orchestra was a stark improvement over too-familiar pick-up orchestras or, even worse, recorded music from some American

productions of this classic, Balanchine's first ballet in America.

Another daring venture was an evening of Béla Bartók, beginning with the ballet *The Wooden Prince* and finishing with the operatic production of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. Premiered by the company in 2003, *The Wooden Prince* was choreographed by Hungarian Tamás Juronics. His contemporary approach embraced flamboyant theatricality, with performers scattered throughout the audience for their entrances, and loose, swinging contemporary dance moves more reminiscent of Paul Taylor than classical ballet. Bartók, also a native of neighboring Hungary, lived for a time in Bratislava, drawing on Slovak folk music in some of his work. The ballet was more appealing to Bartók enthusiasts than classical purists, but this sort of ambitious exploration of local cultural heritage is welcome for a lesser-known ballet company with such a distinctive regional history.

The most significant new work this past year is the full-evening *Warhol*, premiered in April 2007, and choreographed by the company's young new artistic director, Radacovský. Trained in Bratislava, with performing experience with Jiri Kylian's company in



Warhol. Photo: Ctibor Bachraty.

the Netherlands and several Canadian companies, he brought the texture of American pop culture into the work in ambitious production numbers with a collage of recorded music. Warhol's parents were immigrants from eastern Slovakia, and he is something of a national hero, with visual art retrospectives, public statues, and other acknowledgments of his accomplishments as an artist in the United States.

The lavish production recreates his distant origins in rural Slovakia, the glitter of Hollywood, and the frenzy of Studio 54. The production even included a recreation in the orchestra pit of Warhol's film of himself sleeping and Campbell soup cans decorating the entrances to the theater.

American audiences can take special delight in the sassy Dancing Marilyn's in billowy white silk dresses, the cultural critique of the sixties "happenings," and the daring paparazzi chase through the audience. Slovak audiences seemed to have more difficulty appreciating the American cultural references. Perhaps the fact of Warhol's fame is more important to Slovaks than their absorption of the artistic innovations that brought him that stature.

Of special note in *Warhol* was the performance of principal Igor Holovác in the title role. He captured the sometimes empty, sometimes star-struck elusiveness of the mythological Warhol, in choreography that ran an exhausting range from disco to modern to classical athleticism.

Radacovský also choreographed several new pieces premiered at a festive New Year's Eve program at the historic theater. The most important was *Bolero*, to the familiar Ravel score, using the device of a chess game, with dancers in black and white. The startling piece mixed modern expressive movements and haunting sparring between dancers, who looked like animals sizing each other up.

His *A Change*. . . set to Rossini and Bach was a large ensemble piece about changing relationships, with modern choreography drawing from a range of influences from Taylor and Kylian to the head bobbles and exaggerated bows of the final movements of Tharp's *Push Comes to Shove*.

Radacovský both choreographed and danced in *An Encounter with a Swan*, a duet in practice clothes set to Tchaikovsky's music for the White Swan pas



A. Ducin and V. Simoncikova in *The Wooden Prince*. Photo: Ctibor Bachraty.

de deux. For a new company director who seems determined to challenge both his dancers and his audiences steeped in classical traditions, this was his most effective venture. The allusions to the subtle arm flutters and the open fourth positions of the classic pressed the audience to extend their understanding of the possibilities of dance.

The evening also included a choreographic effort by dancer Holováč, *When to Die Means to Live*. This haunting pas de deux set to an original score by Arvo Pärt used an image of a dead lover from the past who came to life in memories.

Bodily Writing, new last year by Bratislava native Lukáš Timulák, flashed script in English across the back of the stage, echoing the interest in textual visual art with a twist for dance: “We dance what we say.” “Our bodies write the text.”

This company has a production of *The Nutcracker*. They did not perform it in Bratislava this season, although they presented some tour performances last winter in smaller towns in Slovakia and also in China. For Bratislava audiences, they brought out their delightful substitute for a children’s ballet, *Snow*

White and the Seven Racers. Billed as a “dance musical for children,” it pulled out all the stops to captivate the very young holiday audience, but with treats for the parents as well. This company has figured out how to attract young children – both boys and girls – to the athleticism and energy of classical dance. The popularity of ballet can be seen in the audience all season, with large groups of young people, both boys and girls, in attendance.

The familiar fairy tale was jazzed up with the dwarves transformed into mechanics in overalls who race, cartwheel, and ride tiny bikes in crazy chases to help their heroine Snow White escape the spell of the evil witch. A lavish revolving set offered an array of contexts for the story. But the most fun came from the use of the entire theater for high-speed chases into the aisles, from ramps off the front proscenium, with the children squealing in delight.

The dancing had enough classical precision and athleticism to engage the parents as much as the acrobatics, karate kicks, trampoline tricks, and vaudevillian slapstick delighted the children. No one could leave thinking dance was for sissies. Although

most productions by this company use live music with full orchestra, this one mixed recorded music with vocals for Snow White, the witch, and assorted other characters. Even the printed program was child-friendly, with large black-and-white cartoon characters filling most of the program. The libretto and choreography were by Václav Patejdl and Libor Vaculík, a prolific Czech choreographer who began his performing career with the Slovak company in 1977.

Another child-oriented production, *Popolvár*, was presented at the new theatre on the Danube. Based on Slovak folk tales, the choreography has enough high-flying pyrotechnics and classical turns to keep the parents happy, with the children entertained by generous doses of drunken fools, peasants, witches, and royalty. Choreographed by Slovak Ján Durovcík, it premiered in June 2007.

Overall, this company mixes beloved classics from



the Russian repertory — along with *Swan Lake*, the company also has in repertory productions of *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Le Corsaire*, and *La Bayadère* — with new works drawing on local cultural heritage and more daring ventures into American and modern dance forms. Talented choreographers from central Europe are given opportunities to create for the company, taking advantage of the travel now possible since the fall of the Iron Curtain. If the dancers are not equally comfortable in every work and local audiences do not yet fully appreciate all these experiments, the production mix is a special delight to visitors who enjoy both the familiar and the daring in contemporary ballet.

The company tours in Slovakia and also performs in Prague in the neighboring Czech Republic. With the fall of Communism and the Iron Curtain, audiences now have many more opportunities to see larger, better-known companies in the classics. Radacovský's

efforts to carve out a special niche for the company, highlighting local culture and young talent, is a bold and promising venture, and his accomplishments after less than two years at the helm are impressive. This is a company to watch and enjoy in the coming years.

For extensive information on the Slovak National Ballet and upcoming performances: <http://www.snd.sk/> Tickets for most ballets can be bought the day of performance, although the classical warhorses typically sell out in advance. The box offices take cash only, but banks at local ATMs provide good exchange rates, and the country expects to transition to the Euro in 2009.

Editor's note: Julie Van Camp resided in Bratislava from September 2007 - January 2008, teaching on a Fulbright Scholar Award at Comenius University. She wrote reviews for [Washington] Dance View from 1980-85, and now teaches at California State University, Long Beach.

L. Mačkova as the Princess in Popolvár. Photo: Ctibor Bachratý.

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Cover: *Nikolaj Hubbe* after his final performance of *Apollo* with the New York City Ballet. Photo by *Costas*.

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