



Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo

by Bud Coleman

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Company ballet class has ended and twenty male dancers bound the stairs to their dressing room to prepare for this evening's performance. Some head for the showers, some brandish razors to tame five o'clock shadows, some grab a bite to eat, and others smoke.

The dressing room is a mayhem of activity as the men don pink tights and pointe shoes, affix flyswatter-sized eyelashes on their eyelids, and cajole wig hair into regulation ballet buns. A couple more pliés and leg extensions coax tired muscles into performance mode as the dancers ready themselves in the wings.

An announcer, with a heavy Russian accent imperiously informs the audience, "Ladies and Gentleman, in accordance with the greatest traditions of Russian ballet, there *will* be a change in tonight's program"

Tchaikovsky's famous overture to *Swan Lake* begins and the curtain rises on another performance by Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo.

While the United States has been home to several all-male theatrical groups that employ performative gender illusion--from varsity clubs such as Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club and Princeton's Triangle Club, to professional drag troupes such as San Francisco's Finocchio's (1937-1999) and the touring Jewel Box Revue (1944-1967)--the practice of combining ballet, cross-dressing, and comedy has belonged exclusively to the various companies known as the Trockadero.

Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet Company

In 1972, three members (Larry Ree, Richard Goldberger, and Lohr Wilson) of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company formed their own dance troupe, the Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet Company. Combining a psychosexual mixture of camp, drag, exaggeration, and Ludlum's respect for theatrical history, the aesthetic groundwork was laid for Ree and company to explore the world of dance *en travesti*.

Celebrating the operatic rather than the minimal, valuing artifice more than reality, and privileging the ridiculous over the conventional, the Gloxinia was primed to do with choreographic texts what the Ridiculous Theatrical Company was doing with verbal texts.

Performing in a succession of Greenwich Village lofts and small theaters, the Gloxinia attracted a growing audience base, enough to expand the company to a dozen dancers. But their range was rather limited in that there were no male characters on stage (which made impossible a mainstay of classical ballet, the *pas de deux*) and the entire performance revolved around Madame Ekathrina Sobechanskaya, Ree's stage persona.



The cast of a Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo production of *Humpback Horse*. Photograph by Sasha Vaughn, courtesy Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo.

Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo

Wanting to focus more on choreographic satire than the cult of the drag ballerina, four members of Ree's troupe decided to form their own company in 1974. Thus was born Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo.

With better choreography, more technically trained dancers, and a triumvirate of artistic directors (Peter Anastos, Natch Taylor, and Anthony Bassae), the new troupe was stronger in many ways than its predecessor. While Ree's company continued to perform sporadically in small Village spaces until 1992, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo--affectionately known as the Trocks--garnered the favorable attention of mainstream dance critics. By 1977, the company had performed on Broadway and on national television.

The bulk of the Trocks' repertoire comes from the classical ballet canon: *Swan Lake* Act II, *Giselle* Act II, *Les Sylphides*, *The Dying Swan*, *Pas de Quatre*, *Don Quixote*, etc. As performed by the Trocks, these warhorses are informed by a unique combination of parody and satire. The Trocks not only demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the source material, but also celebrate a wickedly delicious wit. The humor is amplified by the outrageous, faux-Russian-ballerina stage names assumed by the dancers.

Original choreography performed by the Trocks pinpoints specific choreographers: Shawn Avrea's *Phaedra Monotonous #1148* aims a skewed eye at Martha Graham; Natch Taylor's *Gambol* takes Paul Taylor to task; Anastos' *Yes, Virginia, Another Piano Ballet* targets Jerome Robbins; Roy Fialkow's *I Wanted to Dance With You at the Cafe of Experience* dissects Pina Bausch; and Anastos' *Go for Barocco* and Robert La Fosse's *Stars & Stripes Forever* are deconstructions of George Balanchine.

Camp, Drag, and Dance

While early 1970s gay patrons no doubt reveled in the camp drag aspects of the Gloxinia and the Trocks, critics were far more interested in the choreographic mission of the latter than in the gender issues raised by men dancing as ballerinas.

From the beginning of the company's existence, when it performed on a makeshift stage at the Westside Discussion Group (a "homophile" organization on West 14th Street in New York City), General Director Eugene McDougle has held to the belief that after ten minutes the audience will have exhausted any thrill they may have about seeing men dressed in drag, so the company must offer an evening of exemplary dance and witty physical comedy.

The Reasons for Trocks' Success

Part of the Trocks' success is attributable to their lean managerial structure. A non-profit organization, the troupe has not burdened itself with expensive New York real estate or a large operating staff. Moreover, they have survived financially without private or government grants. Their complete dependence on box office income makes them very unusual in the dance world. Indeed, the Trocks are the only professional comedic dance company that has been financially successful.

Another factor in their success is that the identity of the company is not linked to one performer, choreographer, or artistic director. Bassae (Tamara Karpova) left the Trocks in 1976 to form his own company, Les Ballets Trockadero De La Karpova (1976-1983); Anastos (Olga Tchikaboumskaya) left in 1978 to pursue a career as a free-lance choreographer; and Taylor (Alexis Ivanovitch Lermontov and Suzina LaFuzziovitch) was voted out by the board in 1990. (Another spin-off company, Les Ballets Grandiva, was formed in 1996 by ex-Trocks dancer Victor Trevino and currently employs ex-Trocks such as Allen Dennis, Oswaldo Muniz, and Marcus Galante; choreographer Peter Anastos is a regular contributor to its repertoire.)

Tory Dobrin, a dancer who joined the company in 1980, assumed responsibility for artistic matters of the Trocks as its Associate Director in 1991.

The Trocks Today

While parodying the world of dance has been the consistent mission of the Trocks since their founding in 1974, much has changed about the company. No longer appearing in small Village lofts, the Trocks now perform regularly at New York City's Joyce Theatre and tour extensively in the United States and abroad.

Early members of the troupe often acted like ballerinas better than they could dance, but later members of the company are accomplished dancers. Indeed, they often dance with other professional dance companies when not engaged by the Trocks.

As *New York Times* columnist Jennifer Dunning notes, "One of the happier conundrums of dance today is how the Trocks have come to such a perfect balance of tribute and sendup."

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www.trockadero.org

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