

Valentin Dudkevich's code: contemporary music has more drive and intensity



The State Dance Company of Belarus is one of the most frequently touring from our country, and has performed on every continent except perhaps Australia. They have visited Spain and Brazil ten times and have been to the USA and Holland eight times, while being applauded in China, India, Egypt, Lebanon and Italy. They were among the first Belarusian artistes to perform at the Olympia Concert Hall in Paris, and received a great ovation during the opening ceremony of the Formula One competition in Monte Carlo. The folk ensemble with over half a century of history is a calling card of Belarus.

By Marina Kuzmenko

Valentin Dudkevich, the leader of the State Dance Company, was born in Mogilev and has been involved in choreography since early childhood. He graduated from the Belarusian State Choreography College as a 'ballet artiste'. He later studied at the Belarusian State Theatre and Art Institute and finished the post-graduate courses at the Institute of Arts, Ethnography and Folklore at the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. He is a folk art expert and has passed internships in Moscow and Paris. In 2008, the People's Artist of Belarus was awarded the Frantsisk Skorina Order for his personal contribution to the development of national choreographic art and to his significant successes in preserving and popularising the cultural legacy of the Belarusian nation.

The ensemble's repertoire includes over 60 shows, covering traditional genres and new trends. Valentin Dudkevich's 100 artistes are masters of every type of dance. Audiences are filled with spirituality and delight on seeing their performances. Their *Song about the Auroch* is dedicated to great personalities and events in Belarusian history, while lyrical *Areli*, *Ternitsa* and *My Apple Tree*, make us ponder the importance of love and life. They are inspired by international dance, transporting us to far flung places, while *Bulba*, *Wedding* and *Dudalka* give us real life scenes spiced with humour.

In recent times, the State Ensemble has celebrated many festive dates. Audiences still remember the company's 50th jubilee celebrations. In turn, Mr. Dudkevich's fans are already looking forward to his new series of concerts dedicated to his 50th birthday and his 25th anniversary working with the dance group. He is sure to have much to surprise and please us.

The corridors of the third floor of the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society are

filled with bags of costumes and props. "We're setting off on tour," explains Mr. Dudkevich, inviting me to enter the ballet hall to watch a rehearsal.

In your opinion, how is folk dance interesting to contemporary audiences?

Traditional choreographic art, if presented in a 'conservative way', won't arouse much interest among the public. It's

surprised audiences with our 'Kryvichi'. The rhythms of these dances are contemporary while the verses are traditional folk.

Is Belarusian folklore the major source for your choreographic performances?

Authentic folklore is our treasury. I've begun working with the ensemble with 'Two Quadrille-Dance with Stools'. After analysing materials collected from Polesie by the Cul-

ture Institute's Folklore Department, I had the idea of creating a contemporary dance based on folk history. Usually, we just use the plots of folk songs. There have never been such dances in Belarus.

Authentic folklore has its rules, so how do you manage to bring something new without 'damaging' the original?

We recreate a museum exhibit by restoring authentic folk dance but audiences want to see contemporary rhythms and harmony in dance. I remember Igor Moiseev's programmes suddenly including rock'n'roll

in the early 1940-1950s; it was seen as scandalous. Forty years later, rock'n'roll itself is part of dance history and the same can be said of the two-step. In the early 20th century, this dance was forbidden; now, it's viewed as old-fashioned. Dance which is currently considered modern — such as hip-hop and break dancing — will also become old-fashioned one day. Contemporary music has more drive and intensity. When we performed 'Lyanok' in Minsk, no one remained indifferent. I then understood that contemporary Belarusian dance is the path we must take.

How are Belarusian folk dances, encompassing elements of R'n'B and hip-hop, perceived abroad?

Belarusian dance is perceived as truly exotic abroad. The West has long set aside

be interesting if we were like someone else.

Mr. Dudkevich orders his artistes to begin and the young girls begin to tap out the rhythm with their heels. He explains that far more girls want to dance than men, so the competition to join the group is immense. Men no longer view dancing as a profession with prestige, so male dancers are harder to come by.

Half of your repertoire covers international dance.

Belarus is a multi-national state, with over 140 nationalities resident. Jewish people lived here for centuries and, after the wars of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Teutonic Order, Tatars settled here. They were called on by Duke Vytautas to assist him in battle. Meanwhile, many people in Brest and Grodno have

to be 'terra incognita' for us; we have half a million fans there, gathered over our seven previous tours. We're welcomed warmly, with the Belarusian flag flown and our anthem played. As is traditional, we perform at the huge Maracanã and Rodeo stadiums, alongside major municipal halls and clubs. Each seats at least 5,000, as Brazil is a sporting country. Even small towns always have a wonderful football field and a large sports hall, which can be easily transformed into a concert hall if necessary. City authorities usually allocate money for holiday events, so entrance tends to be free of charge. The Brazilian middle class usually gather socially after work — at concert halls, swimming pools, restaurants and clubs... even at hairdressing salons. They like to be entertained rather than going straight home.

How are contacts with remote countries established?

Primarily through personal contacts. A friend introduced me to a Brazilian who heads a large tourist company. He took interest in us and found sponsors, who paid some of our costs (our project is very expensive). We have to work hard to pay for our tour, let alone make a profit. For the first time, we've suffered no loss. Of course, it's prestigious for the entrepreneur to 'host' a group from abroad. It gives him public and political weight.

Previously, the State Dance Company toured seriously through the Soviet Union, constantly performing in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and elsewhere. After the USSR's collapse, a 'touring vacuum' emerged. We found ourselves separated from each other. The Gosconcert and Soyuzconcert organisations were lost and the International Festival and Events Association took their place as the only link.

The dancers' leg muscles are huge; it can't be solely from dancing. I learn that they regularly exercise their abdominal and back muscles and that the members of the company are classically educated. They work from the age of 18 and have to retire at 38. During tours, a single artiste dances 7-8 performances per concert, each of which can be compared with a boxing round in terms of physical exertion. However, in the ring, professionals' fight of 12 rounds takes place once in six months, while the dance company endures eight rounds daily.



Inspired artistes from State Dance Company of Belarus rehearse their concert programme

difficult to attract those used to pop music, so we need to inspire interest among young people by making folk dance more contemporary. The ensemble's repertoire includes shows stylised in ethno-folk and ethno-rock trends. Ivan Kirchuk, the leader of 'Troitsa' ethno-trio works in these genres; his compositions are the basis for our 'My Apple Tree' and 'Oh, Hop'. Fortunately, we've also been liaising with Dmitry Penkrat — a wonderful composer and music arranger; our modern 'Lyanok' show is the result. 'Wedding' is based on Oleg Yeliseenkov's music and we've

its traditional folk dancing, so we're always welcomed warmly. Moreover, any folk dance is a true treasure. We recently performed at a dance festival in Krasnoyarsk, where groups of various nationalities were dancing beautifully. The technicality was extremely high and there was great passion on stage. We performed 'Areli' — a lyrical and deeply dramatic show. Looking around the hall, I could see everyone holding their breath. My Russian colleague admitted: 'You, Belarusians, are different'. These words are essential to our creativity. We wouldn't

Polish blood. Each nationality has a voice here, as our 'Round Dance of Friends' shows, celebrating various countries' dance traditions. The first part is dedicated to Belarusian dance while the second is devoted to that of other nationalities: Russian, Polish, Tatar, Jewish and, even, Venezuelan. We've broken the stereotype that Belarusian choreography comprises only polka dancing.

This evidently forms your repertoire for foreign tours. Where is your group heading to next?

We're going to Brazil soon. It's a place that has long ceased

to be 'terra incognita' for us; we have half a million fans there, gathered over our seven previous tours. We're welcomed warmly, with the Belarusian flag flown and our anthem played. As is traditional, we perform at the huge Maracanã and Rodeo stadiums, alongside major municipal halls and clubs. Each seats at least 5,000, as Brazil is a sporting country. Even small towns always have a wonderful football field and a large sports hall, which can be easily transformed into a concert hall if necessary. City authorities usually allocate money for holiday events, so entrance tends to be free of charge. The Brazilian middle class usually gather socially after work — at concert halls, swimming pools, restaurants and clubs... even at hairdressing salons. They like to be entertained rather than going straight home.

How are contacts with remote countries established?

Primarily through personal contacts. A friend introduced me to a Brazilian who heads a large tourist company. He took interest in us and found sponsors, who paid some of our costs (our project is very expensive). We have to work hard to pay for our tour, let alone make a profit. For the first time, we've suffered no loss. Of course, it's prestigious for the entrepreneur to 'host' a group from abroad. It gives him public and political weight.

Previously, the State Dance Company toured seriously through the Soviet Union, constantly performing in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and elsewhere. After the USSR's collapse, a 'touring vacuum' emerged. We found ourselves separated from each other. The Gosconcert and Soyuzconcert organisations were lost and the International Festival and Events Association took their place as the only link.

The dancers' leg muscles are huge; it can't be solely from dancing. I learn that they regularly exercise their abdominal and back muscles and that the members of the company are classically educated. They work from the age of 18 and have to retire at 38. During tours, a single artiste dances 7-8 performances per concert, each of which can be compared with a boxing round in terms of physical exertion. However, in the ring, professionals' fight of 12 rounds takes place once in six months, while the dance company endures eight rounds daily.