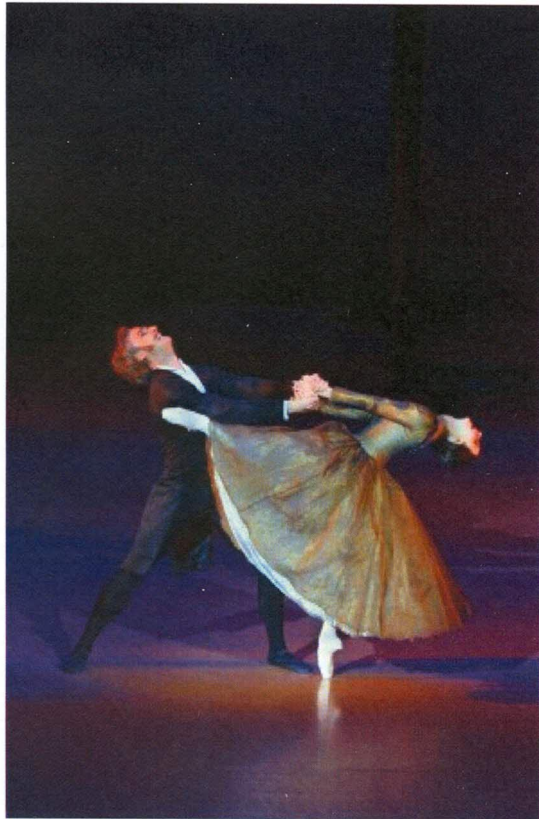


Ballet (Europe), Reviews

Onegin comes to Tallinn



Jonathan Davidsson as Onegin and Luana Georg as Tatyana in John Cranko's *Onegin*.
Photo © Harri Rospu

Estonian National Ballet, Opera House, Tallinn; March 19 & 22, 2015

Stuart Sweeney

In March 2015 Estonian National Ballet premièred John Cranko's *Onegin*. Dating from 1965, the ballet is currently in the repertoire of around twenty of the most prestigious companies worldwide. What makes it so attractive for them? Easy. Pushkin's famous love story is told in a clear, succinct manner and the narrative provides the framework for a series of duets expressing as wide a range of relationships and emotions as any I have seen.

Cranko, born in Rustenburg, South Africa in 1927, studied ballet at Cape Town University before completing his training at London's Sadler's Wells School. Even in Cape Town he was making work, and from 1949 devoted himself exclusively to choreography. In 1961 he took over as Artistic Director of Stuttgart Ballet, transforming the company and achieving international success with a superb, distinctive repertoire including his versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. It is surely one of the tragedies of dance that he died unexpectedly in 1973 aged only 45 on the return flight from a very successful tour of the USA.



Estonian National Ballet in *Onegin*.
Photo © Harri Rospu

The ballet was staged in Estonia by Jane Bourne who has set it some fifty times, including six times with the Royal Ballet. She says she never tires of it, partly because of the quality of the choreography, but also the way each dancer brings something new to their role. She always starts with the pas de deux, so that the steps can be learned and then performed without thinking, allowing the dancers to focus on the characterisation crucial to ensuring the ballet reaches its full potential.

In Tallinn, Bourne started rehearsals on-stage early as only once before had she set *Onegin* on such a small stage. However, with the help of Thomas Mika's stylised and effective sets, there was just enough room for the ensemble sections, although you could see great care was exercised in some of the more complex crossings. The corps were excellent throughout and I particularly enjoyed the bold, well synchronised men's Slav dance in the first Act.

To the surprise of some opera lovers, the score by Tchaikovsky features none of the music from his opera *Eugene Onegin*. Instead Cranko commissioned German composer and arranger, Kurt-Heinz Stolze, to select music from a range of other compositions by Tchaikovsky and this attractive patchwork not only matches the action, but gives the impression of a single opus. The orchestra of the Opera House under conductor Vello Pähn brought the music to vivid life.

I had the chance to speak with several of the outsiders who had worked with the Estonian National Ballet on the production and they were uniformly impressed by the quality and cohesive atmosphere established. I always expected Thomas Edur and Age Oks (Agnes Oakes at ENB) to inspire and mentor the dancers to the highest standards and with the introduction of works such as *Manon*, *Onegin* and Edur's own *Sleeping Beauty* the repertoire has some fine additions. I was also impressed that they were able to bring Wayne McGregor's exciting *Symbiont(s)* to the Tallinn stage last season. I hope this latter work will lead the way for the inclusion of additional contemporary ballet works, alongside the classical and neoclassical, to provide fresh challenges for both dancers and audiences in post-modern Estonia.

Thomas Edur, Director of Estonian National Ballet, danced the role of Lensky in his early days at English National Ballet and found it an inspiring experience. He was keen to bring the ballet to Tallinn, but the work is only made available to a privileged few. On his second attempt to obtain the rights to perform, Estonia's production of *Manon* impressed the right people and it was agreed the company could have *Onegin*.

Of the two initial casts, the second tackled the drama of the work in exemplary fashion. Svetlana Danilova as Olga established a mischievous nature in the first scene, so that her teasing at the party that leads to the challenge and the fatal duel all made sense. As Lensky, Sergei Upkin displayed a confident, warm character from the opening and paced the party as well as I have seen. He began accepting and even half-smiling at Onegin and Olga's antics, but slowly raised the temperature of his outrage to boiling point. In the duel, Upkin again was convincing in his refusal to back down, despite a premonition of disaster. With the concepts of honour and duelling so remote from our age, it is not the easiest task to make these scenes believable, but this cast pulled it off admirably.



Luana Georg as Tatyana.
Photo © Harri Rospu

In the central roles, Luana Georg and Jonathan Davidsson forged a powerful bond. Cranko's opening duet with a distant Onegin and an already infatuated Tatyana is unique and these two artists combined Onegin's courtesy, overshadowed by ennui, and Tatyana's unrequited need to comfort him. Only some ten minutes later there is the sharp contrast with the passionate dream pas de deux. Georg and Davidsson achieved the necessary abandon as she swirled around him and if one or two of the lifts didn't go entirely to plan, it only added to the tension – it's theatre after all not an ice-skating competition.

After killing Lensky, Georg slowly stands and confronts Davidsson and as the scale of the disaster dawns on him, he staggers across the stage to close the second act in dramatic fashion. As the tables are turned in the final scene, again the two leads convincingly portray the exhilaration of love with Tatyana's deep love conflicted with her dedication to duty and the memory of his harrowing impact on her family.

The cast for the première excelled in highlighting the beauty of the choreography. Both Alena Shkatula and Denis Klimuk are tall dancers with exquisite line and technique, and they impressed with their performances of the often complex steps. While their bedroom scene's mighty catches and lifts showed preparation a little too studied, I'm confident greater spontaneity will come later in the run. At the end, both dancers pulled out all the emotional stops for a heart-breaking finale. Throughout, Shkatula combined both elegant dancing and fine expressive qualities.

Abigail Sheppard and Jonathan Hanks as Olga and Lensky established the sweetness of their affection for each other in a memorable performance of the Act I duet and executed Cranko's steps immaculately throughout. However, I wasn't as convinced by their party and duel scenes, but again it's early days and their characterisations will develop further.



The duel.
Photo © Harri Rospu