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Modern lovers in a bleak world

Romeo and Juliet has been endlessly reinterpreted by choreographers but no one has succeeded in making Shakespeare's story feel menacingly contemporary - until now. By Ismene Brown

TEXT AS SENT

THEY don't ask questions like this on "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?". Which pair of famous lovers have been portrayed in a ballet as living happily ever after eloping by plane in airmen's goggles? Was it a. Adam and Eve. b. Cinderella and Prince Charming. c. Amy Johnson and James Mollison. d. Romeo and Juliet. The answer is, of course, d. Though in an Ask-the-audience lifeline, a. could well have won some reasonable support.

For once upon a time, back in 1926, an English music student wrote a piece of ballet music called "Adam and Eve", which was ruthlessly hijacked from him by an impresario who retitled it 'Romeo and Juliet', and perpetrated the aforesaid bowdlerisation upon it. The impresario was Serge Diaghilev, the composer Constant Lambert, the choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, and the ballet itself - about backstage romance on the set of Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' - was, sadly, one of the Ballets Russes' many flops.

Eight years later, in Russia, Serge Prokofiev also thought he could improve Shakespeare a bit, when he began composing a new ballet intended for the Kirov. As he noted in his memoirs, 'There was quite a fuss at the time about our attempts to give "Romeo and Juliet" a happy ending... The reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot.'

The composer did, however, reconsider. 'What really caused me to change my mind was a remark someone made to me about the ballet: "Strictly speaking, your music does not express any real joy at the end." That was quite true.' And so Prokofiev rewrote the ending with the high, expiring *rallentando* that echoes the extinction of young love and leaves all who hear it tear-stained.

Until his vividly theatrical ballet score, there had been been just two "Romeo and Juliet" ballets - in 1785 and 1811. But once the Kirov staged the Prokofiev in 1940 with the legendary ballerina Galina Ulanova, there was no looking back. It was this production, choreographed by Leonid Lavrovsky (director of first the Kirov, then the Bolshoi), that shook the Western world when the Bolshoi came to London 10 years later, and launched a torrent of "Romeo and Juliet"s that has never dried up.

Why so many, when Prokofiev's music is so closely depictive of Shakespeare's play that most of them are pretty similar? Just as our hearts vary, so each choreographer had their angle on the lovers. Lavrovsky's had the spectacular social scale, but Frederick Ashton's was more tender, Kenneth MacMillan's had the sexual recklessness of Sixties youth, and the Soviet refugee Rudolf Nureyev's injected a harsher social comment (and made Juliet a surrogate boy).

Symphonic pieces by Berlioz and Tchaikovsky have inspired several less durable "Romeo and Juliets", by Maurice Bejart among others. Then there was Antony Tudor's 1943 one-acter to Delius music, starring Alicia Markova, which very nearly had a balcony comprising a vast set of false teeth on crutches, designed by Salvador Dali. The design was replaced by something more Botticellian.

Though Shakespeare portrayed his lovers as thrusting out of their own time, ballet-makers even today seem generally fixed on those picturesque medieval hose and snoods. Only 'West Side Story' successfully freed them from their period - but that was 1957 Broadway and it had Leonard Bernstein's music driving it.

Next week (Oct 3-7), however, we will see a ballet-maker who has bravely breasted the unspoken convention, and whose 'Romeo and Juliet', to be performed at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, uses the Prokofiev to bring the story bang up to date.

Angelin Preljocaj is one of France's leading modern choreographers, Albanian by extraction, French by upbringing, who was drawn less to Shakespeare ('sublime literature but not much help as ballet') than to another literary milestone, when Lyon Opera Ballet commissioned him in 1989 to create a contemporary 'Romeo and Juliet'.

'I thought of George Orwell. The heroine of "1984" is called Julia...' Ceausescu's nightmarish Romania, much in the news, also came to mind.

'In my story Juliet is the daughter of Ceausescu, if you like, and Romeo is completely outside society, homeless, one of the underclass.' There are military dogs on stage, emotionless police headed by Tybalt, and - most weirdly - the character of the Nurse becomes two identical robotic attendants on Juliet, wearing half-white, half-black costumes.

'The nurses are pre-programmed, like clones, created by the state to do a job,' explains Preljocaj. 'Not actively bad, but an instrument of power - as in Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" people are manufactured for their particular function.'

The visual appearance of the production, which I have only seen on video, is intensely sinister, a world where the imagination is dragooned by fear, in which you can hardly think of love or poetry scratching even an embryonic life. In this black world, his lovers' snatched moments have a feverishness we can instantly identify with, as well as a startling, heady beauty.

'Love is dissident. Love is dangerous to political power, it is politically incorrect. It can undermine a regime,' he says, smiling - he is a very appealing man, a friendly, bearded 43-year-old, married to a French film-maker, and with two little girls. His worldwide reputation has soared in the five years since his company visited Britain last. Two full-length works for Paris Opera Ballet and a ballet for New York City Ballet have sealed his reputation as one of the few modern choreographers who can deploy the large forces of big ballet companies.

We may even get Preljocaj at the Royal Ballet, since he has recently been contacted by Ross Stretton, the next director. 'I feel like maybe a film-maker would who works in Europe as an independent, and then suddenly Hollywood telephones. You laugh enormously and say, "Of course!" I don't have any war to wage with ballet. I defend contemporary dance - I feel like a commando going in.'

I think Preljocaj is an enormous talent. His Ballets Russes triple bill, shown at Sadler's Wells five years ago, had an imaginative 'Spectre de la Rose' and a piercing 'Noces', a precisely realised protest at the kinds of marriages known in his parents' homeland, Albania, from which they fled weeks before his birth.

Despite his social and political interests, Preljocaj trusts in choreography. 'Literature has the advantage in conveying complexity of feeling and psychology - dance needs simpler stories to bear such deep feelings, to show them passing through the body. When you see the pas de deux, you don't think about the psychology, you see bodies that cling, that part, that seek each other. That's what counts.'

The music too is given an unfamiliar dressing - mixed with chilly electronic sounds through which it seems to come and go fitfully like tunes blown by the wind. Why? 'Because I adore Prokofiev! When you listen to a great composer for years, you can hardly listen to anything else. Add something else, and you are so thankful to return to him. But it also helps with the futurist atmosphere, the military cold, the dogs and all.'

Ah yes, the dogs. Does he have his own or is he hiring them in London? 'In London. Every country has a well-nourished source of military dogs. There is never any problem in finding a police dog, funnily enough.'

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