

THEATER

Swishing and prancing to fame

Les Ballets Trockadero returns to delight Oregon fans

BY ANDY SIMON

To this day in the United States, a man who dares utter the word *ballet* raises doubts about his masculinity.

You can struggle against such a cruel stereotype by getting angry and sternly denouncing it.

Or you can wallow in it.

And if you are clever and talented, you can get the world to laugh at the stereotype rather than at the emasculated. That is clearly the approach taken by Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. Describe their show as men in tutus and their artistic director will agree.

"That is exactly what it is, but the men can dance, and they're very funny," says Tory Dobrin, who started out as a dancer with the company in 1980. "All-male comedy ballet" is the phrase he uses to describe the Trocks, as they are affectionately known.

Of course, not all the men are in tutus all the time. They dance traditional men's parts, too—and in traditional costumes.

The company's repertoire is vast and encompasses all dance styles and traditions but is heavy on Russian ballet classics. Think Tchaikovsky. Think *Swan Lake*. The Trocks relish the spectacle of broad-shouldered, hairy-chested guys mincing on tiptoe across the stage, wearing frilly little skirts, dancing the parts of swans, sylphs and water sprites.

Classic ballet focuses on traditional relationships and presents them in a context of a formalized etiquette, Dobrin explains. "Put two guys in such stereotyped relationships," he says, "and you shake them up, you open them up." He believes the Trockadero company has helped straight society overcome its hang-ups about seeing two men together.

But he quickly dances away from any attempt to take the Trocks too seriously. "It's a good, fun, entertaining show," he says, and that's reason enough to go see it.

"It's not just a drag show," Dobrin adds. "The humor is very mixed—sometimes subtle, sometimes broad, sometimes slapstick. There's a lot of campiness, but there's a lot of excellent dancing, too."

Classical ballet, with its stylized manners and fanciful story lines, is ripe for parody. The Trocks achieve their comedy by exaggerating the foibles and underlying incongruities of serious dance.

Their goal is to offer an affectionate satire rather than mock the art form. By doing so they manage to delight and amuse both the

The Trocks are very serious (well, almost) about ballet

most knowledgeable members of the audience and those who have never been to a dance performance before.

The group's gender-bending appeals to both gay and straight audiences. "It is not gay theater, by which I mean theater that addresses gay issues,"

Dobrin points out. "But given that 95 percent of the participants are gay, they can't help but bring a gay sensibility to what they do."

On the other hand, gender-bending that helps broaden society's acceptance of difference is a gay issue. In 1980, Dobrin notes, the company's stage crews were visibly hostile to the dancers. "But it's not a problem now," he says.

Les Ballets Trockadero began 28 years ago when a group of dance enthusiasts in New York City got together to present playful parodies of classical ballet. Their first performances were late-late shows in off-off-Broadway lofts.

Within two years the group had hired a full-time ballet mistress and qualified for the National Endowment for the Arts Touring Program. They were off and running and haven't stopped since.

The Trocks have toured the country and the world many times over. Audiences on every continent flock to their shows. They have been on television and in movies and are proud that in addition to their mainstay classic works, they have commissioned new dance performances specifically for them.

In 1999 the company celebrated its 25th anniversary with an appearance at John F. Kennedy Center Honors in Washington, D.C. Their current season includes extended engagements in London and Melbourne, Australia.

Happily, Portland will welcome the Trocks on Jan. 23. They will perform a typically varied program, including Act II of *Swan Lake*, which Dobrin describes as a signature piece. Also on the program is *Paquita*, a good example of French style ballet as performed in Russia in the late 19th century, and a new piece for the company, *La Vivandiere*. [A]

LES BALLETS TROCKADERO DE MONTE CARLO performs 7:30 p.m. Jan. 23 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$15-\$39 from www.whitebird.org or Ticketmaster.

ANDY SIMON is a free-lance writer who wouldn't be caught dead in a tutu.

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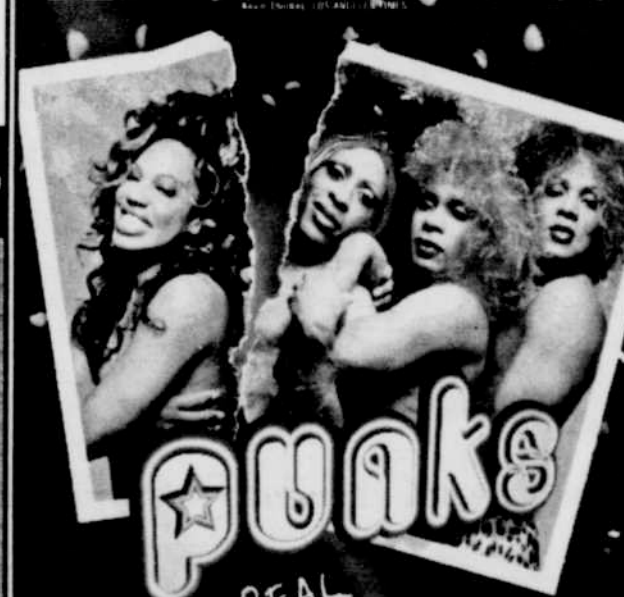
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