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If Giselle – why not *Esmeralda*?

A close look at the Bolshoi Ballet's *La Esmeralda*
By **Ivor Guest** and **Ann Hutchinson Guest**

New choreographic works should always be balanced by gems from the past. Access to our dance heritage is vital if we are to know where we are and why we are there. Without a history we are swimming in an unknown sea. Looking at our dance heritage we give thought to how each work has been passed on. How much is it like the original? Have there been changes? And, if so, then how, when, why and by whom?

With sculptures we can be sure enough that we are seeing the real thing: did someone hack away at the stone, deciding it needed improving? Modernising? With paintings, who dares to apply brush and paint to improve on the original? True that with paintings there is always the chance that it is a copy, rather than the original, but there are means for testing this. In listening to music we can know the genuine article even though the presentation may have a very personal interpretation. Music notation has provided a preservation framework, the notes are there, recorded, variation comes in the performance and such variation in interpretation is usually welcome. But what of dance? How do things stand there? How are ballets handed down, generation to generation?

When ballets of the past are presented there is always the question of its source. Had the work been recorded? Did an old dance notation score exist?

If so, how closely did the present day performance adhere to what was written? Were liberties taken, to give the work a contemporary look, or were changes made because today's dancers have greater technical abilities and these need to be featured? Was the original music used, or were there interpolations?

With works such as the pas de six from *La Vivandière*, recorded by Arthur Saint-Léon in his system of notation, published in 1852, there is sufficient detail to authentically present it as it is, bringing it to life without changes – a “revival” rather

than a re-working. Because Vaslav Nijinsky recorded in detail all of his first ballet, *L'Après-midi d'un faune* in his own dance notation system, we have a clear, authentic choreographic record for revivals; all other versions are memory-based and, compared with what Nijinsky notated, much distorted.

Important ballets have also been made available through painstaking reconstruction, all possible sources of information being used to re-create the work. An example of this is the reproduction by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*. The consensus is that no one can get closer to the original than they have, their research was admirable. However, in later reconstructions of other ballets, the Hodson-Archer team have had much less material to work with: thus the piecing together required the creation of many new movement passages.

The 1844 ballet, *La Esmeralda*, has recently been reproduced by the Bolshoi Ballet. Why is *La Esmeralda* important?

As Ivor Guest states in his biography of the choreographer, Jules Perrot, “The distinctive feature of *La Esmeralda*...

was not that it had been produced with extraordinary attention to detail... but the fundamental originality of its conception, the prominence which Jules gave to the secondary characters resulted from the new formula on which the whole production was based. For the ballet had been conceived as a dance drama, opening up new possibilities in the use of dance to express dramatic narrative, background atmosphere and the study of character. Of all his works, *La Esmeralda* >



Natalia Osipova as Esmeralda
and Denis Medvedev as Gringoire
Photograph: Marc Haegeman.

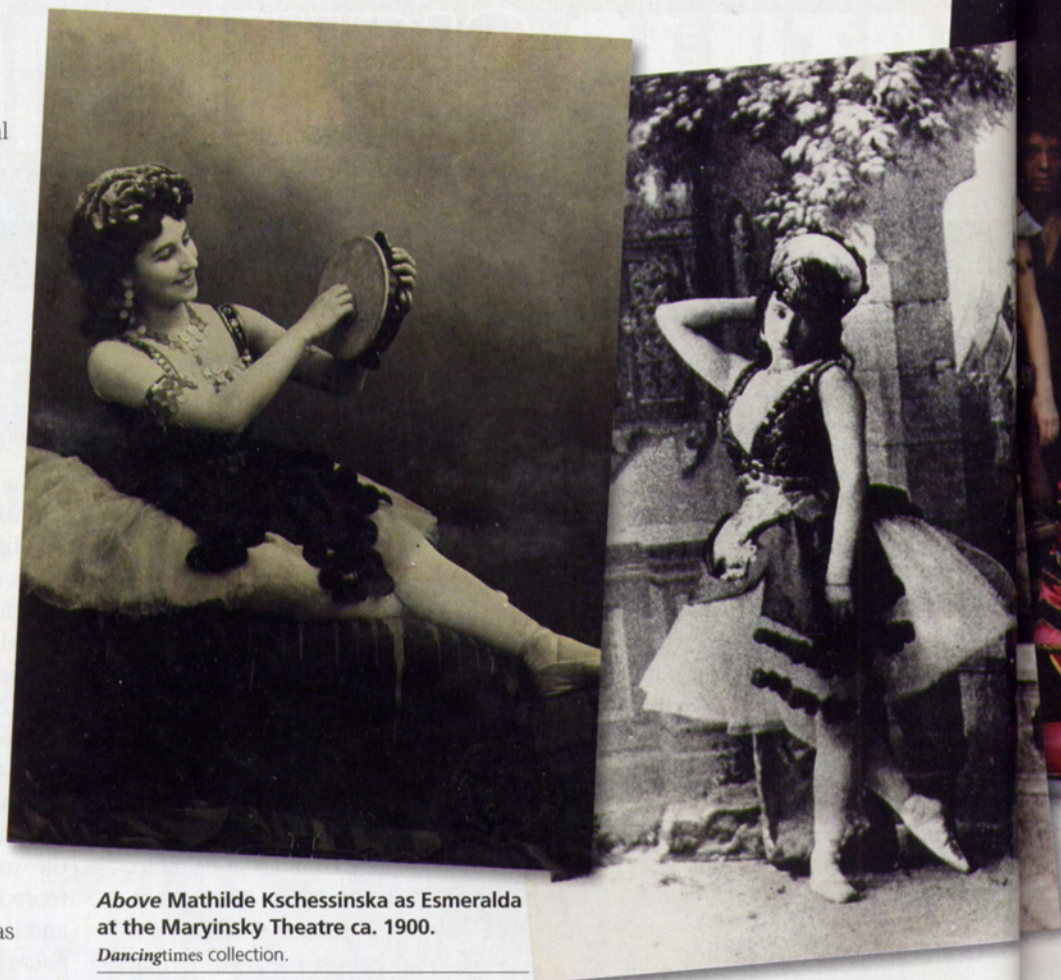
marked the farthest advance in the development of ballet as a theatrical spectacle... There were no great set pieces, every dance having a significance within the context of the situation out of which it arose."

Why did Yuri Burlaka, artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet, undertake this work? After staging *Le Corsaire*, which he had researched and produced for Alexei Ratmansky (the then artistic director of the Bolshoi), Ratmansky asked him what he would like to do next. In looking at the huge Petipa legacy, Burlaka realised that, when Marius Petipa staged Perrot's *Esmeralda*, he had enlarged it, developed its dance element, and imparted to it a classical order while preserving all the best acting pieces. Petipa was aware of developments in ballet technique, in company make-up and audience perception, and made adjustments accordingly. As a result, his 1899 production was very suited to the Bolshoi Theatre.

In deciding on *Esmeralda*, Burlaka saw the benefit of more than one person being engaged on the production of an old ballet. His task was to be one of researching the choreography. Someone else should be in charge of any recreations. Vasily Medvedev is a choreographer with a genuine appreciation of old ballets. He had already been engaged in returning forgotten 19th-century ballet titles to the repertoire of different theatres around the world, and seemed therefore to Burlaka to be the rare person with whom he wanted to work.

To understand the complexity of reproducing this significant ballet, one needs to know its history. First produced in 1844 in London, it was then reproduced by the choreographer in St Petersburg in 1849. In 1890 José Mendez produced *Esmeralda* for the Bolshoi Theatre. Petipa's production took place in 1899. In 1926 Vasily Tikhomirov produced a new *Esmeralda* for the Bolshoi Theatre, and the premiere of Agrippina Vaganova's production at the Kirov occurred in 1935. In 1950 Vladimir Bourmeister produced another version that is still performed (London's Festival Ballet first danced it in 1954).

With this array of productions one is



Above Mathilde Kschessinska as Esmeralda at the Maryinsky Theatre ca. 1900.

Dancingtimes collection.

faced with discovering how much they were alike. What kind of changes had been made and for what reasons? After much sifting, one is also faced with the calibre of today's dancers, the desire to retain the essence of the ballet, and at the same time to produce a theatre piece that will appeal to today's audiences.

The first step in any reconstruction is to locate the music. The existence intact of the original music is a major advantage in working on ballets of the past, particularly where no dance notation score exists or there is no sufficiently detailed information such as verbal descriptions, supported by stick figure drawings and clear floor plans. Music provides the framework, the changes in mood. But what of longer works that, over the centuries, have even involved the use of different composers, different pieces of music?

What were the choices in use of music for *Esmeralda*? From the start Burlaka, working with dance researcher Sergei Konaev, had the advantage of an *Esmeralda* 1844 printed piano score, produced soon after the premiere and found in Vienna when working on the Nikolai Berezov archive. Searching online catalogues of Italian music

libraries, they also found the 1852 score of Cesare Pugni's ballet *Zoloé*. It was previously known that the *Zoloé* music was a pastiche from various ballets by Pugni, perhaps there was *Esmeralda* material in it? When studying this Italian score and comparing it with other available material, however, they realised it had been made for a small theatre, hence a small orchestra. Thus it could not be used "as is" for the Bolshoi. In addition, they were sent the violin rehearsal score for the Maryinsky's 1899 production from the Harvard Theatre Collection in Cambridge, Massachusetts. These three documents were invaluable for arriving at an understanding of the original structure of the ballet and the changes it underwent. Not one of these scores could be used as it was, for each lacked some number or other and each one needed to be reorchestrated. Pugni virtually never produced an orchestrated score; his violin part, usually with indications of the use of other instruments, served as a basis for the music department to develop the orchestral score. An orchestration by Reinhold Glière was made for Tikhomirov's production, and of special importance to Burlaka was that this



Left Virginia Zucchi as Esmeralda in St. Petersburg 1886. *Dancingtimes* collection.
Above Gennady Yanin as Quasimodo and Natalia Osipova as Esmeralda.
Colour photograph: Marc Haegeman.

did not conflict with the structure and stylistics of the Petipa ballet.

From the very beginning Burlaka wanted to use historical female variations composed for *Esmeralda* by other composers and to find new music for the male variations in the second act and the duets in the third. In the latter case, Burlaka made his decision following two basic principles: there is a lot of beautiful music from rare ballets worth being heard today by a wider audience, and there is the musical dramaturgy of performance which demands the use of musical pieces in a certain mood and character.

A prime source of information is the collection of dance scores, written in Stepanov notation, housed at the Harvard Theatre Collection. This notation system was adopted by the Imperial Ballet School in St Petersburg, and, as a result, many scores were written by Nicholas Sergeyev and his pupils, particularly of Petipa choreographies. Taken out of Russia following the Revolution, the scores were used when Sergeyev was employed by Ninette de Valois and then Mona Inglesby. They were in her possession when Sergeyev died. When they were offered to Harvard, Hutchinson Guest was consulted as an

expert on systems of dance notation. She found that while some were carefully finished, others were sketchy, more a memory aid, particularly in pas de deux where only the female steps were recorded. Others who have made use of these scores have found the same variation in level of detail. In their restoration of *Esmeralda*, Burlaka and Konaev used several Stepanov ensemble sequences, mainly from the first and fifth scenes, some adaptation being required.

The other important source for the choreography was a black-and-white film of Act I of Vaganova's production, revived in 1948 and filmed in the 1950s. Apart from the choreography, Burlaka and Koneav gathered a huge amount of archive documents: staging plans, listings of set-designs, sketches and technical descriptions of costumes, and photographs. Together with descriptions of dances made by the directors in the rehearsal violin scores, there was also information given by choreographers and dancers in their memoirs, for instance, Feodor Lopukhov's description of Esmeralda's variation in the pas de six, and, of course, information given by critics in their reviews and articles.

Burlaka and Medvedev made clear that this production of *Esmeralda* is not a reconstruction of Petipa's 1899

production. Some new choreography was needed, but such masterpieces as the pas de six (by Petipa) and the pas de Diane (by Vaganova after Petipa) are reproduced in the most complete version known today. However, the male variations and love duets are almost all newly created. There was the need also to make the action more realistic. How much did Burlaka and Medvedev succeed in fulfilling Perrot's vision for the ballet? And Petipa's?

The first question in seeing such a production is – was it good theatre? Was it enjoyable? Did the combination of classical, character and neo-classical dancing with chorus, mime and pantomime seem like a “pastiche”, or did it “flow” and have a sense of unity in moving the story along? Was there a logical unfolding of the drama, the plot? To our minds Burlaka and Medvedev succeeded in their decisions regarding the questions of music and their handling of the available choreographic information. In their successful casting of the roles, the dancers proved to be not only first class performers, but also displayed a clear understanding of the characters they were portraying, which was essential in conveying the dramatic logic of this ballet and a rewarding experience for the audience.

Compared with music heritage, dance is clearly poverty-stricken. This is largely through a lack of an established, wide-spread notation system, but all those concerned with both dance as an art form and the heritage we are leaving for future generations applaud Burlaka, Medvedev, Konaev and their team for giving us a vibrant production of this significantly important ballet from the past. As a ballet historian and as a researcher and dance notator, we were particularly interested in knowing what problems they had to face during the whole process and how they solved them. The list of questions we sent them was patiently responded to, point-by-point, providing us with important additional information. We extend our personal thanks to them for enriching us, and the dance world, with this revival and our special appreciation for the incredible amount of care and thought that went into it. ■