

A lovely cultural export

The Slovak National Ballet is staging The Nutcracker that Fernand Nault created 46 years ago for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. It's under the direction of a former principal dancer for the Montreal company

BY ANDRÉ SWOBODA, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 12, 2009

Fernand Nault's beloved version of The Nutcracker, now entering its 46th season with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, has found an unlikely second home in Central Europe.

The Slovak National Ballet is staging the late choreographer's version of Tchaikovsky's Christmas classic in Bratislava's new National Theatre. Headed by artistic director Mário Radacovsky, a former principal dancer at Les Grands, the company opened its second season of Nault's Nutcracker - Luskáčik in Slovak - on Sunday to a rapturous reception

"It is a gorgeous, powerful production, and really playful," said Radacovsky, who also danced on opening night opposite Klaudia Bittererová's Sugarplum Fairy. "I think it is the most beautiful Nutcracker in the world."

Radacovsky, who performed alongside Anik Bissonnette in the Montreal Nutcracker from 1999 to 2004, was eager to bring Nault's choreography to Bratislava. Though Les Grands frequently takes the show on tour to Ottawa, this is the first time that it has been produced by another company.

"Mr. Nault never thought his Nutcracker would be performed by another company," said André Laprise, rehearsal master for both the Montreal and Bratislava productions, the choreographer's former assistant, and the trustee of the Fonds chorégraphique Fernand Nault. "As the trustee (of his foundation), I was getting ready for it."

Audiences in Bratislava have responded enthusiastically. All 10 performances sold out last year, and Radacovsky expects this season's 14 performances to do equally well. "People are even coming from Austria to see the show," he said.

For many years, the Slovak National Ballet used the Berlin Staatsoper Ballet's version, which is completely different and, according to Radacovsky, rather less fun. "One thing (about the Nault version) is that kids never get bored."

To help bring the production to life, Radacovsky brought on-board renowned set designer Peter Horne, who recreated the magical scenery of the Montreal production. The company managed to put the show together with incredible speed.

"Usually, it takes nearly two years to get such a production ready," Laprise said. "They did it in only a few months. Hard-working people, the Slovaks!"

With the exception of Horne and Laprise, nobody else from the Montreal production was directly

involved in the Bratislava staging.

Laprise and Radacovsky agreed that it was necessary to stay true to Nault's vision, while also creating a distinctly Slovak Nutcracker.

"There's definitely a European flavour to the production, especially in the costumes designed by Ludmila Várossová," Laprise said. "The colours are less vibrant than in the Montreal version; they are more subtle and come out of a completely different tradition of costume design. I loved them from the first moment I saw them."

Besides the costumes, the biggest variations between the two productions are in dancing and acting styles, which derive from very different conventions and training. According to Laprise, working with children is basically the same in both countries, although the Slovak youngsters are better equipped to create the illusion of being in the 18th century, because they are still exposed to European traditions. On the other hand, he laments that Slovak kids are "too tall."

Overall, the dancers took on their roles with enthusiasm and panache. Kyohei Yoshida was particularly noteworthy in his turn as the high-flying, paper-busting Russian dancer. There were some typical opening-night jitters, and a few instances of crashing into scenery, but any major kinks probably will be ironed out with time.

"It's such a big production. ... It will take two or three years before (the dancers) settle into their roles," Laprise said. By which time it is hoped that the Bratislava production will become as popular as the Montreal one.

Radacovsky is already planning to increase the number of performances next year to 18. He also hopes that, like in Montreal, this lively and accessible version of The Nutcracker will encourage more children to take up ballet.

"I'm really proud to be the first company in Europe to do this production," Radacovsky said. "And I'm glad to keep that Slovak-Canadian connection."

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens performs Fernand Nault's Nutcracker today, tomorrow and Dec. 17, 19, 20 and 26 at 7:30 p.m., and today, tomorrow and Dec. 19, 20, 26-30 at 2 p.m. in Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier of Place des Arts. Weekday tickets \$35-\$105, children \$20-\$55. Weekend tickets \$43-\$114, children, \$25-\$60. Call 514-842-2112 or see www.pda.qc.ca

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