

# The Bolshoi Ballet: *big bravura dancing*

by Dr Michelle Potter

When an ensemble of dancers from Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet visited Australia in 1959 they caused a sensation. It was the first time dancers from the Bolshoi had been seen in Australia and patrons queued for hours to buy tickets or to secure standing room. Every night when the curtain went up audiences were astonished by the strength and athleticism of the dancers and by the intensity and emotional power they brought to the stage. A reputation for explosive, dramatic dancing preceded them, and they more than lived up to it. The men covered the stage with huge jumps. The women seemed to fly as they were tossed high in the air by their partners. It was big, bravura dancing and unlike anything that had been seen in Australia before.

## Origins

The Bolshoi Ballet can trace its history back to 1776 with the formation of a private company of actors and dancers whose style of performance mixed folk dancing, mime and drama. But it was not until artists following in the footsteps of this early group, and using the same repertoire and performance style, began performing in Moscow's New Bolshoi Petrovsky Theatre in the 1820s that the name Bolshoi (meaning big) was used to describe the company.

From small beginnings the Bolshoi Ballet has come to be recognised as one of the great ballet companies of the world. A major cultural export for Russia since the 1950s, the company has brought to world-wide attention a galaxy of exceptional performers: Galina Ulanova, Maya Plisetskaya, Nikolai Fadeyev, Ekaterina Maximova, Vladimir Vasiliev, Natalia Bessmertnova, Irek Mukhamedov, Nina Ananiashvili and Andris Liepa and many others.

## A changing company

The Bolshoi Ballet has undergone periods of dramatic change over the centuries and for the most part these changes reflect different social and political conditions. At the end of the nineteenth century the Bolshoi Ballet appeared to take second place to the ballet company located in St Petersburg. This company enjoyed the patronage of the Tsar's court and its style of dancing was different. Moscow had its dramatic legacy while St Petersburg had a greater focus on pure dance.

Following the October Revolution of 1917, however, the seat of power and patronage moved to Moscow as the capital of the Soviet Union and, although there were some specific exceptions, ballet was accepted by the Kremlin as an art form suitable for the new regime. Moreover, the Bolshoi Ballet had appointed a new ballet director in 1900, Alexander Gorsky. Gorsky and his successor, Vladimir Tikhomirov, appointed in 1924, were able to consolidate the company's dramatic style and incorporate Communist ideology into the company's works. A new form of ballet for the people developed, exemplified by *The Red Poppy* in 1927.

During World War II the Bolshoi company was evacuated to Kuibyshev on the Volga. On the company's return to Moscow, renowned dancer Galina Ulanova and choreographer and director Leonid Lavrovsky moved from St Petersburg to join the Bolshoi Ballet. Post war revitalisation of the company began. Under Lavrovsky the company made its first appearances in the West, beginning in London in 1956, followed by a major season in New York and then by the momentous Australian visit of 1959.

Lavrovsky was succeeded by Yuri Grigorovich in 1964 and under his direction the Bolshoi Ballet performed large scale, spectacular ballets including a version of *Spartacus* in 1968, *Ivan the Terrible* in 1975 and *The Golden Age* in 1982. Grigorovich also presided over major productions of nineteenth century classics including *Swan Lake*, *La Bayadère*, *Le Corsaire* and *Raymonda*. They were all epic productions on the grandest of scales.

## Into the twenty first century

A series of ballet directors followed Grigorovich. Perhaps the biggest change of all, however, came in 2004 when Alexei Ratmanský was named artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet. Ratmanský had trained in Moscow before dancing with several major Western ballet companies. He came to the Bolshoi with a growing reputation as a choreographer skilled in creating new versions of old works. For the Bolshoi Ballet he made new versions of early Soviet works from the repertoire including *The Bright Stream* in 2003, *The Bolt* in 2005 and the Soviet-era *Flames of Paris* in 2008. He also restaged the nineteenth century ballet *Le Corsaire* in 2007. Ratmanský also introduced into the Bolshoi Ballet the work of contemporary choreographers from the West, including ballets by George Balanchine, Twyla Tharp and Christopher Wheeldon.

Under Ratmanský's directorship a major rejuvenation of the company took place and the Bolshoi Ballet received many accolades for its performances in Russia, England and the United States. Ratmanský left the Bolshoi Ballet in 2008 and his shoes were filled first by Yuri Burlaka in 2009 and then by Sergei Filin in 2011.

Now in 2013 the Bolshoi Ballet is still dancing with that big, bravura style that Australians saw in 1959 and on several subsequent visits. Its dancers are still exuberant performers and, in addition to reflecting a chequered but distinctive history, the Bolshoi Ballet's repertoire is still spectacularly entertaining.

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