



IN PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Michelle Potter

La Bayadère Act III, *The Kingdom of the Shades*: In an opium-induced dream, Solor, an Indian warrior, sees multiple, white-clad visions of Nikiya, the temple dancer for whom he declared his love but whom he betrayed and who has now passed into eternal life. The Shades appear one after the other in ghostly file and slowly and evenly descend a slope as if making their entrance from another world. It is one of the most magical and transfixing scenes in the whole of the classical ballet repertoire and only a truly great ballet company can create the perfection that this scene requires. It needs perfect movement: the Shades must dance as one. It also needs perfect atmosphere: it must seem as though it is taking place in eternity in a state of bliss.

If any company can reach such heights, it is the remarkable Paris Opera Ballet whose dancers have been in pursuit of perfection for three centuries.

The Paris Opera Ballet can trace its lineage back to 1661, when the French monarch Louis XIV, the Sun King, established the Académie royale de danse (Royal Academy of Dance), which he charged with the responsibility of recreating perfection in dance. Louis XIV was an enthusiastic and accomplished dancer himself. His familiar name, the Sun King, is reputed to date from his appearance as Apollo, god of the sun, in one of the sequences in *Les Ballets de la nuit* in 1653. He was just 14 at the time and was dressed in a costume replete with golden rays that fanned

out around him as we imagine the rays of the sun. Legend also has it that he had such slim and elegant ankles that he loved to pose with his heel pushed forward to show the royal ankles in all their glory. Ballet technique, the story goes, has been characterised by a 'turn out' of the feet and legs ever since.

Louis XIV also created the Royal Academy of Music a few years after the Academy of Dance, and then the Dance School of the Opera in 1713. The school has been in continuous existence since that time, making the Paris Opera Ballet the oldest company in the world with an extant dance school from which to draw company dancers. Also in 1713, Louis XIV published his *Règlement concernant l'Opéra* (Regulation on the subject

of the Opera) by which the Opera became a state institution with a permanent company of 20 dancers. No other company in the world can lay claim to such a lengthy and illustrious heritage.

Of course the Paris Opera Ballet has had diverse fortunes since this very regal beginning. Over three centuries it is inevitable that some eras might be regarded as more glorious than others. But today the links with tradition are not only real, even tangible, they are also proudly recognised and fostered by the present company.

Firstly, we cannot help but notice that the dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet display immense technical clarity and purity when they take the stage. They are classical dancers

to the core. They have a deep understanding of the shape of movement, and of how the body moves through space and in time. As we watch we can see the smallest movement unfolding and we sense the calm physical presence of the dancers. They are artists with an inherent knowledge of the importance of what has gone before them and an inbuilt capacity to display the technical perfection that Louis XIV sought when he established his Academy.

Secondly, the company uses the confidence that a strong tradition generates to achieve a refreshingly contemporary artistic outcome. There is nothing conservative about this company as indeed there was nothing conservative involved when Louis XIV, at

the forefront of developments in the arts in the 17th century, set up Academy of Dance. Now, along with the recognised classics, the dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet perform with equal ease works by the most acclaimed contemporary choreographers. The company was staging the works of the American choreographer Merce Cunningham in the 1970s when Cunningham's approach to making choreography through chance procedures was startlingly unfamiliar to most of the world. William Forsythe, whose approach has always been to question unrelentingly what the body can do, how far it can be pushed, has been a regular guest choreographer over many years. Angelin Preljocaj, one of France's most sought after

THE PARIS OPERA BALLET

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contemporary choreographers, created his sensual and erotic *Le Parc* for the company in 1994 and gave the dancers the opportunity to show their fearless approach to movement and their capacity to communicate through that movement at the deepest emotional level. We can add many more names of established and emerging contemporary choreographers, male and female, from Jiří Kylián to Benjamin Millepied, from Carolyn Carlson to Maguy Marin.

Thirdly, the Paris Opera Ballet has a particular approach to coaching its artists and takes seriously the importance of passing on its heritage from one generation to another. Nowhere is this made more obvious than in Dominique Delouche's 2005 film, *Serge*

Lifar, Musagète (Serge Lifar, Leader of the Muses). Lifar directed the Paris Opera Ballet for almost 30 years until 1958 and is credited with an innovative attitude to reformulating traditional technique, especially for women for whom he introduced a number of now well accepted movements and poses on pointe. The Delouche film shows an older generation of Paris Opera Ballet dancers, including Claude Bessy, Nina Vyrubova, Yvette Chauviré and Attilio Labis, generously passing on to current dancers what they learnt from Lifar. And while this approach is not unusual in ballet companies around the world, it is the passionate belief in and understanding of what has passed before that makes the coaching of the older generation

of Paris Opera Ballet dancers so powerful and effective and that allows old works to be imbued with such freshness.

This company understands the nature and importance of its legacy and has a clear ability to build on that legacy and to move forward into the future. Its pursuit of perfection is ongoing and relentless and is what makes it a company of such exceptional achievement.

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