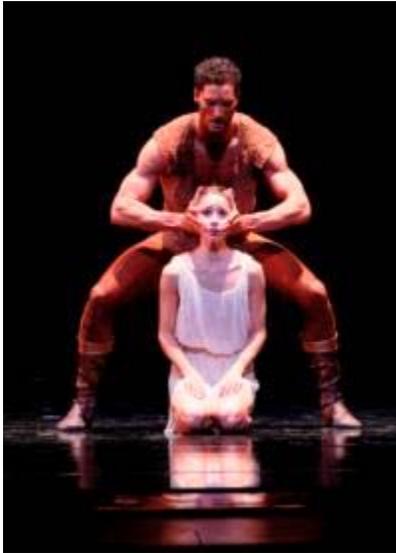




BWW Interviews: Lar Lubovitch of Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

Saturday, April 13, 2013; 12:04 PM by Barnett Serchuk



One of America's most versatile, popular and highly acclaimed choreographers, [Lar Lubovitch](#) leads the [Lar Lubovitch](#) Dance Company in New York City, which he founded 44 years ago. Lubovitch's dances are renowned for their musicality, rhapsodic style and sophisticated formal structures.

Born in Chicago, Lubovitch was educated at the University of Iowa and the Juilliard School in New York. His teachers at Juilliard included Antony Tudor, [Jose Limon](#), [Anna Sokolow](#), and [Martha Graham](#). Lubovitch made his Broadway debut in 1987 with the musical staging for the [Stephen Sondheim/James Lapine](#) musical, *Into the Woods*, for which he received a Tony Award nomination. In 1993, he choreographed the highly-praised dance sequences for the Broadway show *The Red Shoes*. In 1996, he created the musical staging (and two new dances) for the Tony Award-winning Broadway revival of *The King and I*. Most recently he

devised the musical staging for [Walt Disney](#)'s stage version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in Berlin. In addition to his work for stage, screen and television, Lubovitch has also made a significant contribution to the advancement of choreography in the field of ice-dancing. He has created dances for Olympic gold medalists [John Curry](#), Peggy Fleming and Dorothy Hamill, and has choreographed a full-length ice-dancing version of *The Sleeping Beauty*, starring Olympic medalists [Robin Cousins](#) and Rosalynn Sumners.

In 2007, to supplement the activities (creating, performing and teaching) of the [Lar Lubovitch](#) Dance Company, he founded the Chicago Dancing Company, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to present a wide variety of excellent dance and build dance audiences in his native Chicago. Lubovitch has choreographed over 100 dances for his own company, as well as companies around the world.

Broadwayworld Dance recently interviewed Mr. Lubovitch about his ballet, *Othello, A Dance in Three Acts*, which will be presented this month by the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago.

Q. Why did you pick *Othello*? What did you see in the play that could be performed in dance without speech?

A. *Othello* is a story that I believed could be told in pictures and by actions. Its themes of envy, obsessive love and tragic misunderstandings are universally understood. Dance, as a mode of storytelling, works best as a vehicle for describing or embodying the emotional conditions that are drawn by Shakespeare. There is nothing subtle in the actions these characters take, or the consequences of those actions. In addition, it's a story that a majority of people already know, very much like *Romeo and Juliet*, another Shakespearean play that has been told in dance.

Q. An original American full-length ballet is exceedingly rare and almost prohibitively expensive. In 1997, when you created *Othello*, it took two major companies teaming up as sponsors (along with your own company): [American Ballet Theatre](#) and the San Francisco Ballet. Was it purely economics?

A. At the time *Othello* was conceived, no new full length story dance with an original score had been created in America for several decades. Such an idea was not in vogue in an era where dance had become more abstract. The cost alone was the more prohibitive factor. [Michael Kaiser](#), at that time Executive Director of American Ballet Theater, originated the idea of two major companies sharing the cost (along with my own company) and sharing the finished dance. So it was Kaiser who developed the partnership between ABT and San Francisco Ballet, and made *Othello* possible.

Q. You had never met [Elliot Goldenthal](#) when you commissioned him to write the music for *Othello*. But you had heard the music for the film, *Interview with the Vampires*, a score rich with tarantellas. You said that you envisioned the music of the second act being based on tarantellas. Is that why you chose Goldenthal?

A. I had been searching for the right composer for a while. Elliot was recommended to me by [Jack Everly](#), the orchestra conductor for ABT at that time. He knew that I was going to base the second act on the tarantella, a dance that was thought in late medieval times to cause insanity. It was also labeled satanic and forbidden by the Catholic Church. It was an ideal accompaniment to Iago's "perfect evil." It was the tarantellas that Elliot had written for *Interview* that captured my interest, and appeared to make it a very good fit. Though we had never met before, we struck up an understanding immediately.

Q. Your reputation is with modern dance works, not ballet. You said that you approached the task as an innovator who wanted to create a contemporary version of a classically shaped ballet, but using one contemporary language. Could you elaborate on this?

A. I have always admired the shape of classical story ballets: the clarity, the economy of the story telling, and the requisite inclusion of pure dance variations that in classical form do not move the story forward, but make it clear that we are watching a ballet, not a play. Often the story could move forward only through elaborate use of pantomime. I wanted to clear out these gestures and stick to pure dance. By almost entirely eliminating the use of mime, I wanted to let the story unfold in dance language alone. In this way, I hoped to honor ballet form but modernize its application. The entire dance is a series of variations, but unlike those in a ballet, they are not separated by endings which stop the story to take applause but meld into each other in an ongoing flow. In this way, it becomes a contemporary dance based on ballet form. As to the language, I have always worked in a totally non exclusionary vocabulary, neither specifically modern, balletic. I use whatever steps I can think of that are appropriate to the music and the moment. In lieu of all the above, the title is *Othello, A Dance in Three Acts*, to emphasize that it is first and foremost a dance, not a ballet and not a play.

Q. How did you work with Goldenthal? Did he compose music and then you choreographed steps, or vice versa?

A. Because of Elliot's experience with film scoring, I wrote an elaborately detailed story board version of the dance, spelling out what was happening with the variations story-wise, what emotional texture the sound should embody, and exactly how many minutes and seconds the variations should last. Because of the intense time pressure (a room full of dancers is a very expensive luxury), we had to work simultaneously. Elliot advanced the music nightly, and I advanced the dance daily, more often than not choreographing music delivered to me on a cassette tape, the moment before rehearsal began. Was there friction?

There is always friction in the creative process.

Q. The three-act story ballet follows the outlines of Shakespeare's familiar story in conventional fashion, and hews to the original's time period with Elizabethan-style costumes. The sets are, however, starkly contemporary green-glass sculptures and giant moving screens. Why was this done?

A. The set by [George Tsypin](#) is a series of traveling panels that look like cracked glass. This is an allusion to the Venetian glass for which Venice is famous. Inside the glass are transparent images of African Kente cloth, referring to Othello's origins. The very spare contemporary look of the set, in contrast to Anne Hould Wards inspired spin on late medieval dress, is meant to say that a very ancient story is being told in a very modern way.

Q. You change the ballet. In the opening scene, after Othello's introductory solo, he turns to greet the court, the ballet's main characters, and his bride. The lights brighten, the screens open in the middle, and the crowd advances in jerky, robotic gestures and steps, like a dream out of whack. The vision of Desdemona in a shimmery wedding dress brings softness and clarity back to the picture. This is not in Shakespeare's play. Why did you introduce it?

A Shakespeare did not originate the story of his play. *The Moor* was written 100 years earlier by an Italian short story writer, Gerardo Cinthio. Shakespeare added psychology to Cinthio's characters and took liberties with the story. Verdi, in his opera adapted from Shakespeare's play, took his own liberties. As I have hoped to make clear in my title, *Othello, A Dance in Three Acts*, it is not Cinthio's story, Shakespeare's play, or Verdi's opera. I have adapted from all these sources and taken my own liberties to adhere to my premise of following the form of classical ballet and the tenets of contemporary dance.

Q. How does your ballet differ from the famous Limon piece?

A. The exquisite and perfect one act dance by [Jose Limon](#), *The Moor's Pavane*, is a tone poem. It does not seek to tell a story, but to create, in abstract dance terms, portraits of the four main characters of *Othello*, and to do so in the form of an ancient court dance, drawing a line between the essence of the characters and the dance. In this way, it is a dance about a dance. Limon's use of a pavane inspired my use of a tarantella, and I stick philosophically in my piece to the idea of a dance about a dance.

Q. Were you looking for certain types of dancers for the ballet?

As I can't bear bad ballet acting, which looks like pretending to me, I look for dancers who can capture the drama through a shifting range of physical dynamics and expressivity. This does not mean acting is forbidden, but it has to come from the dancer as a result of finding the correct physicality of the emotional condition they seek to embody. This is the unique domain of dance that cannot be captured in any other performance form.

Q. What can we expect from you in the future? Will we be seeing any more full length ballet?

I would absolutely love to make another big ambitious full length story dance. All I need is a million dollars.

Photograph: Herbert Migdoll