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Escape from the flood

The Mikhailovsky Theatre première of the ballet *I Love You, Peter's Great Creation...* is dedicated to the anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg. American choreographer Lar Lubovitch, who has half a century of experience on the stage, is working in Russia for the first time, inspired by Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*. Lubovitch, a Benois de la Danse laureate who has staged more than 100 ballets in theatres around the world, told us about the ideas which went into his latest production.



- *I Love You, Peter's Great Creation...* is quite a strange name for a ballet, don't you think? It's a line from *The Bronze Horseman*. Is the ballet about the flood?

It's a ballet about man, in the broadest sense of the word. It's about a little man faced with something very big — a common occurrence these days. We are all little people surrounded by a big, complex world. So in the final analysis, it's a ballet about all of us.

- What do you mean by "something very big"?

- Since there are no words in ballet, we have to resort to metaphors. There is something

out there so big that it cannot be controlled. In ballet, we use pictures to arouse the emotions we are seeking to create. In this case, it is the fear of a little man surrounded by gigantic phenomena, with enormous power pressing down on him. There is an episode about tyranny, but in the form of a

metaphor. My ballet is not about the Bronze Horseman statue — it's about Pushkin. Pushkin is writing *The Bronze Horseman* and the lines of his poem come to life on stage. He's thinking about the flood, he's thinking about Yevgeny, and at that moment his character comes to life. So at the end of the day, this ballet is about Pushkin as an artist.

- But is there still a confrontation between the little man and the all-powerful tyrant?

- Everyone used to think that this was purely a Russian problem, but it is now clear that it is international. We all feel helpless when something happens in the world over which we have no control. So in fact we are all now trying to save ourselves in this flood. I am an artist and probably shouldn't talk about politics — it's not my subject. But people are now experiencing something very similar everywhere, including in America. We cannot control what is happening around us and we feel helpless.

- Can art help to overcome that feeling of helplessness?

- Art inspires people, makes them think, and helps to raise their spirits. Art shows us that there are higher things in life. Without art, there would be only a flood washing us all away.

- Did you study Russian history when you were composing this ballet?

- I studied Pushkin's life, who he was, when he wrote the poem, what his relationship with the imperial court was like. Pushkin understood only too well that he was not free, and an artist has to be free. But Pushkin was not free and could not see any free people around him. Through the poem he showed how helpless man can be in this "constant flood". And, as we know, it had unpleasant consequences for him.

- As an artist do you feel an affinity with Pushkin?

- Yes. I understand his train of thought — I'm also a poet, after all, just not with words but with movement. I am inspired by music and dancers. I guess maybe you would like to hear that I am inspired by Pushkin and that I want this ballet to appeal to Russians. But I'm 73 years old now and I've simply stopped thinking about such things. I just want to create dance — I believe in its power.

- There is already a ballet based on *The Bronze Horseman* with music by Glière. You have chosen music by the same composer for your ballet, but not the same piece. Why?

- Because I am creating an original work of art. Why should I use what someone else has already created? That's already been done. I don't think I need to repeat it. I am doing something that is quite new, and everything has to be new: the music, the choreography, the idea.

- You have been working in St. Petersburg for several weeks now. Has the concept of the ballet changed in that time? Has the city influenced you?

The Mikhailovsky Theatre dancers have had a great influence on me. After all, I am creating a ballet especially for the people I am working with, to suit their potential. I have found some outstanding dancers here — they are simply astounding.

- Russian dancers are said to be the best in the world...

- Yes, it's true, they are the best.

- And if, for example, you compare Russian and American dancers, what is the difference?

- Broadly speaking there is no difference, because dancers are one nation, everybody in the world

of dance speaks the same language, and everyone is devoted to the idea of dance. Not Russian, not American, not French — it is a world of dance and each of us is part of it. But from a technical point of view, the Russians are more advanced, their physical effort during rehearsals is greater — in America, rehearsals are gentler. What impresses me is the intensity with which Russian dancers work — they put themselves wholeheartedly into what they are doing. They work all day, perform in the evening, then come back in the morning and start working again.

From Mikhailovsky Theatre website
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