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DANCE

An Escape Artist Trained During the Soviet Circus

By CELESTINE BOHLEN

IN the Soviet Union of the late 1970's, Boris Eifman was an exception — a young, ambitious choreographer who had his own dance company, then known as the Leningrad Ballet Ensemble. That alone made him practically unique in a world of state-controlled institutions. But what made him even more exceptional was his popular success, which stood out like a beacon at a time when most Soviet artistic culture was mired in stagnation.

So how did he do it? Interviewed recently at City Center in Manhattan, Mr. Eifman had to think a bit before revisiting a phase of his life that now seems unreal, bizarre, even comic.

Those years of struggle seem particularly far away as Mr. Eifman, now 55 and considered Russia's leading modern choreographer, prepares to embark on his fifth New York tour. His company, now called Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg, opens at City Center on Wednesday with a program featuring two American premieres — "Pinocchio" and "Don Quixote." In "Don Quixote," as in so many of his ballets, Mr. Eifman portrays the individual trapped in a society in which he has no voice. Such themes, in Soviet times, would never have passed the censors.

"It was a time when it was necessary to waste a lot of time, and nerves, on a war with fools," he recalled with a smile. "Now I

**Keeping a company
alive, and even thriving,
in Leningrad taught
Boris Eifman valuable
lessons in survival.**

can look back and laugh, but at the time, it was difficult, very difficult."

Mr. Eifman's struggle with the cultural bureaucrats in Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was known then) began soon after he founded his ensemble a quarter-century ago. The company had official status under the umbrella of LenKonsert, the local government concert presenter, but it did not receive state subsidies and had no space to call its own: the 25 dancers rehearsed in gymnasiums scattered around the city.

But Mr. Eifman had big ideas. Born in Siberia, raised in the southern republic of Moldavia, he had made a name for himself in Leningrad as the choreographer for the famous Vaganova Ballet Academy and had even staged a production of "Firebird" at the Kirov ballet.

His goal when he founded Leningrad Ballet Ensemble in 1977 was to rock the Soviet ballet establishment — epitomized by the mighty Bolshoi Theater — out of its complacency and create something new and exciting that would appeal to young audiences. "I wanted to use the opportunity to express my ideas about the future of Soviet ballet," he said. "I didn't have negative feelings toward the Bolshoi Theater, but I did have negative feelings against the cultural bureaucrats who were too afraid for their jobs to risk anything new."

And Mr. Eifman didn't want to waste time. "I didn't do things gradually," he said. "I started out with a very direct challenge."

His first ballets were set not to Tchaikovsky but to Pink Floyd, rock music that was practically forbidden in those days. The story lines were provocative, based on the Old Testament or a short story of a soldier ruined by his experience in the Russian Army. The movement on stage was emotional, dramatic, sensuous, even erotic. Predictably, some critics accused him of producing pornography, not choreography.

Also predictably, in those dull times, the

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Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg performing "Don Juan & Molière" by Boris Eifman, below. The troupe will dance at City Center as part of its 25th-anniversary season.

performances were a hit, not only in Leningrad but in other parts of the Soviet Union, particularly Moscow. A performance there by the Leningrad Ballet Ensemble filled the 4,000-seat theater at the Rossiya Hotel.

That popularity was to serve as Mr. Eifman's shield when he came under attack from Communist apparatchiks, who slowly realized what it was they had unleashed. In 1979 Mr. Eifman's work caught the attention of Anthony Austin, then the Moscow bureau chief of The New York Times. He cited the Leningrad Ballet Ensemble as an example of a slight "relaxation" of ideological controls in some cultural spheres. And he noted that Mr. Eifman was allowed to do daring things in ballet at a time when a group of young writers was being expelled from the Writers Union and effectively banned from publishing *Metropol*, an unauthorized almanac.

Admiring notices in the American news media in those days were a mixed blessing for Soviet artists. "It was a great joy, of course," Mr. Eifman recalled, "but also a big problem."

Not long after the article in The Times, Mr. Eifman, who is Jewish, was summoned by "particular organs" — whom he described as cultural officials with obvious commitments to the K.G.B. "They wanted to know about my relations with the American, Americans, with The New York Times," he said. They also proposed that he emigrate. "If you don't want to be a Soviet choreographer, then go to your Israel, and do it there," he said he was told.

Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg

City Center, 131 West 55th Street,
Wednesday through April 14.

But Mr. Eifman stayed, and in one of those strange tales of the late-Soviet period, actually thrived. By the mid 1980's, he was filling the 7,000-seat Palace of Congresses inside the Kremlin in Moscow, and his rising popularity not only protected him but also helped pay the rent and the salaries. Unlike his government-subsidized colleagues, he learned how to manage an independent company and live within his means. His artistic derring-do won him the audience he had wanted in the first place: young Soviets, who, like him, were eager to break loose from the Communist Party's shackles.

HIS story became a manual on how to duck and dodge the punches of a dying regime. He discovered, for instance, that he had to submit a work to the local censorship commission in three successive years before it would pass muster. "It was a big diplomatic game," he said, recalling battles over a ballet based on the Song of Songs and another about army life. "I would make little changes, and they of course would forget. But two times was never enough. Only after the third time would they give permission." Several years after he had been urged by the K.G.B. to emigrate, he was refused permission to leave the country when his

troupe was invited to tour abroad. (His dancers were given exit visas.) That time, the authorities clearly feared that he would emigrate. "It wasn't about me," Mr. Eifman said. "All they worried about was their own jobs and how they would look if I never came back."

But the "biggest joke," as he put it, came in 1987, as perestroika, the reforms begun by President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, was just gathering steam. That year Mr. Eifman submitted a work that depicted a psychiatric ward, a sensitive subject to a regime that had had a habit of declaring its opponents insane. To his utter amazement, the censorship commission accepted the work on the first go-round.

It was at that moment that Mr. Eifman realized that the Soviet system was on the verge of collapse. "The year before, they would have sent me to prison for presenting such a work," he said. "Then suddenly, here I was the hero of the new Soviet ballet. That was when I realized that perestroika had reached the world of the arts."

Looking back, Mr. Eifman said that the Soviet period had taught him some valuable lessons about running a ballet company without relying on government subsidies and about reaching out to new audiences. "Thank God I spent those 10 years keeping the theater alive, and thank God I didn't leave," he said. "But I am very happy that it happened when I had the strength required to survive. Ten years later, I might not have had the strength, and I would not have survived."



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times