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DANCE

ANNA KISSELGOFF

### A Distinct Style That Knows No Routine

ONE of my favorite French dance companies is the Lyon Opera Ballet. Its repertory is unpredictable, intriguing and even strange, and the company remains true to form on its current North American tour and 12th visit to the United States. After 15 years of watching it perform in Lyon, Paris and New York, I find its very resistance to pat definitions to be its prime appeal. One of the most experimental modern-dance troupes in Europe is actually a ballet company.

The biggest mistake would be to see it as a "contemporary" dance company of the neither-fish-nor-fowl type led by Jiri Kylian and his disciple, Nacho Duato. Their dancers are also ballet-trained, but their signature style is their reliance on a hybrid idiom. By contrast, the Lyon company members resemble modern dancers when they perform works by American postmodern choreographers like Susan Marshall and Bill T. Jones. Conversely, they reveal solid toe work and classical technique in William Forsythe's pieces.

The major change in the Lyon company over the years has been its move from an eclectic ballet troupe occasionally involved with modern dance to a versatile ensemble open to conceptual pieces and willing to train in cutting-edge dance techniques.

Although Yorgos Loukos, its artistic director, says the company gained prestige from having Kylian works in its repertory, they are not the dominant stylistic influence. "Kylian's technique is between classical and modern with a supple upper body and well turned-out classical legs," he said during a recent interview in New York. "But his company is not 'modern' enough to do dance works by Trisha Brown and Ralph Lemon, as we do."

Ms. Brown and Mr. Lemon are among the numerous American choreographers whose pieces — usually premieres — have been added to the Lyon repertory in the last decade. But it is the work of non-American experimental choreographers that will be introduced to wider audiences during this 14-city tour.

Tero Saarinen's powerful masculine minimalism impressed me several years ago in a fleeting New York debut by his Toothpick company from Finland. He tack-



Above, Gerard Amsellem; above right, Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times  
*The Lyon Opera Ballet performing Maguy Marin's "Cendrillon," a dollhouse version of the Cinderella story.*

les Ravel's macabre "Gaspard de la Nuit" on the Lyon triple bill that features a piece by Meryl Tankard, a Pina Bausch alumna from Australia. She gives Ravel's "Bolero" a mixed-media treatment as she combines shadowplay with photographs of Lyon's historical facades.

As things turn out, Mr. Kylian's "Ballo" will round out an all-Ravel program (April 6 at Purchase Center for the Performing Arts, Purchase, N.Y., and April 16 at the McCarter Theater, Princeton, N.J.). A second program features Maguy Marin's "Cendrillon," (April 5 at Purchase and April 11 to 12 at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark).

Although "Cendrillon," an ingenious dollhouse version of "Cinderella," accounted for the company's smashing 1987 New York debut, the dancers at the time complained about performing in masks and in fragmen-

tary movements. This was especially true when producers around the world asked only for "Cendrillon."

Mr. Loukos, a 51-year-old Greek who left Roland Petit's ballet company to work in Lyon in 1984, recalled: "The dancers wanted to show off technique, although most did not come from good schools. Many got fed up with dancing just 'Cendrillon' and left. Later, I started inviting new choreographers to give the company more to dance."

The departures also made room for better-trained dancers open to nonballetic idioms. "Eight years ago, I didn't have people coming to me from New York City Ballet, the School of American Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet and its school," Mr. Loukos said. Today, the dancers are also willing to take workshops from visiting American choreographers or their assistants to assimilate



Yorgos Loukos, the artistic director of the Lyon Opera Ballet.

late the personal style required in a new work. Lance Gries has recently rehearsed works by Trisha Brown and taught classes.

John Jasperse, part of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last fall, has just created a premiere that will be seen when the Lyon Opera Ballet returns to the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Mass. (July 17 to 21). Bill T. Jones was resident choreographer for several years.

When Mr. Lemon and Wally Cardona, from his company, taught class over 10 years ago, some dancers left the studio. "They didn't want to mix techniques," Mr. Loukos said. "Now you have young dancers interested in 'what's happening' and they come to us."

What's happening is that the Lyon Opera Ballet has become known as a creative company. In 1998, I saw a dance piece in Lyon with a spectacular multimedia installation by the architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, who were not so ubiquitously written about as they are now. Their electronic images onstage were inspired by the movement analysis and

photography of two pioneers in these fields, the American Eadweard James Muybridge and the Frenchman Etienne-Jules Marey. The work, "EJMI-EJM2," was devised by Frédéric Flamand, more of a conceptualist than a true choreographer. Certainly, it was something offbeat.

"What has changed in the company is our approach to the dancing," Mr. Loukos said. "And that is because of our relationship to American choreographers. What the Americans have brought is freedom in their bodies, the idea that there are possibilities of choosing different ways of moving. An important element with Americans is their use of improvisation."

"In France, it used to be this way or that way," he added. "The Americans came and asked the dancers to behave like adults. They did." □