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DANCE

# A Classicist Preserves Tradition by Retouching It

By ALAN RIDING

**T**HIERRY MALANDAIN evidently has no need to apologize for his neoclassical approach to ballet, yet for many years it also made him feel isolated in a French dance world dominated by avant-garde choreography. Indeed, two decades after he created his first ballet, this 43-year-old Frenchman has still to see any of his work performed in the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, France's main showplace for contemporary dance.

Now, however, having broken free from what he calls "the dictatorship of good taste," fortune — or is it changing taste? — has at last begun to favor him. Since 1998, when he became the artistic director of the new Ballet Biarritz, the 14-member troupe has been performing his works in France and elsewhere to audiences that have embraced his rereading of classical ballet. His dances are fresh, sexy and often funny, yet their inspiration is unmistakably rooted in the past.

On Tuesday, the Ballet Biarritz makes its New York debut, with eight performances of "Un Hommage aux Ballets Russes" through Sunday at the Joyce Theater. The program, which will also be presented in Dallas on Nov. 15 and 16 and in Pittsburgh on Nov. 20, consists of Mr. Malandain's reworking of four works commissioned by Serge Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes between 1911 and 1928: "Pulcinella," "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune," "Le Spectre de la Rose" and "Boléro."

Why the Ballets Russes?

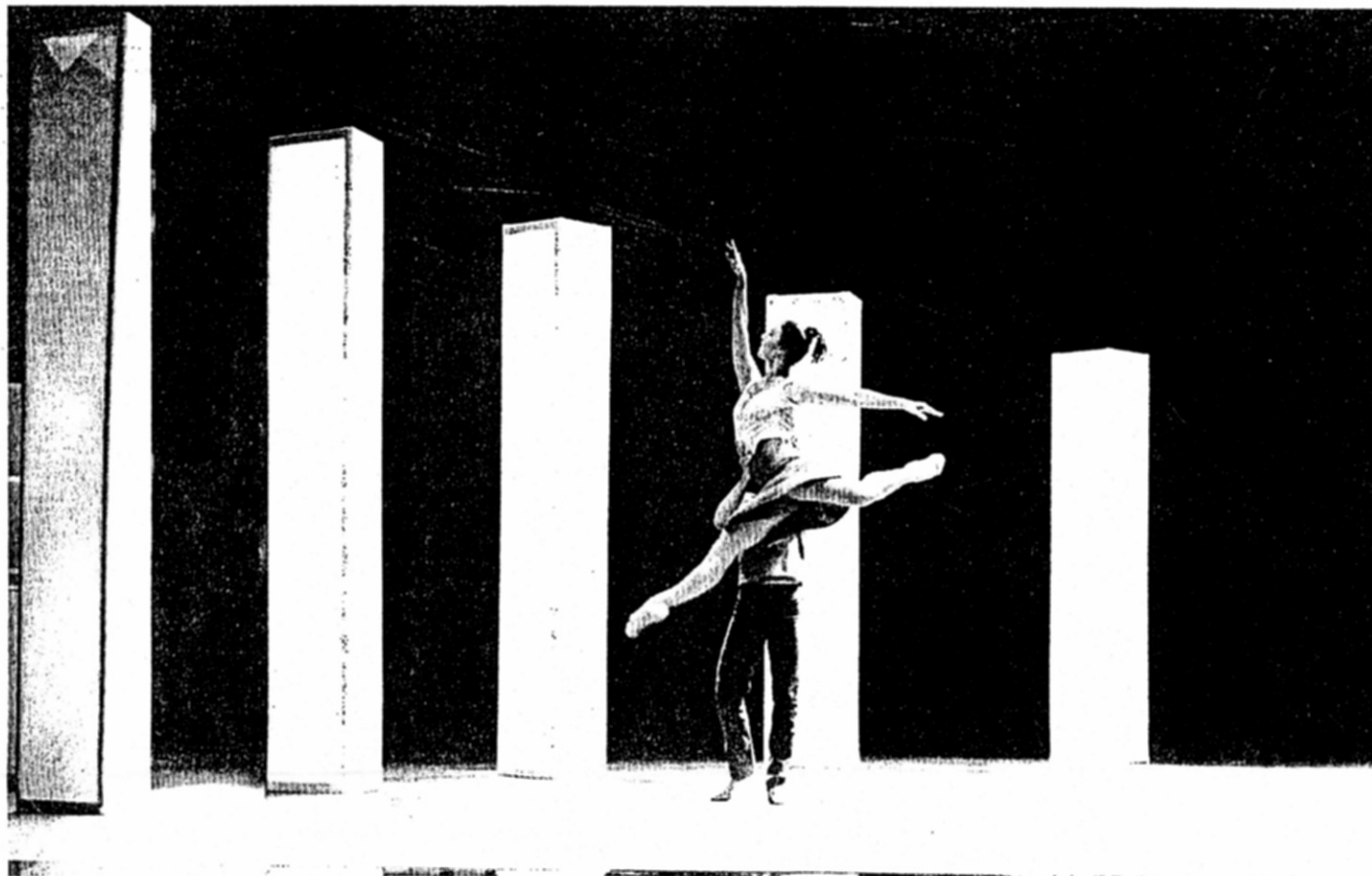
"I like history," Mr. Malandain, himself a former dancer, said in an interview after a recent Ballet Biarritz performance in this southeastern French city, its last before flying to New York. "In history, things feed off each other. For me, this period was extraordinary, not only for dance, but also for music and art. And to confront these essential works of the early 20th century in a new way today is to present them to a public that knows little about them."

Certainly, for a choreographer who believes in continuity rather than rupture, his logic is sound.

"In ballet, you either set out to kill the father or you assume a filial relationship with the past," he said. "I see myself working in the tradition of Serge Lifar, Roland Petit, Maurice Béjart, perhaps even Michel Fokine. I don't see myself as an innovator. To the old, we simply add something new."

Thus, in "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune," created originally in 1912 by Vaslav Nijinsky to music by Debussy, Mr. Malandain has chosen to feature only the faun, to be performed in New York by Christophe Roméro, with the décor reduced to a giant box of tissues and two large piles of white cloth representing more tissues. The fine young dancer's movements still exude the tension of an erotically charged faun, but it is his imagination, rather than a nymph, that now excites him.

With "Boléro," which Bronislava Nijinska (Nijinsky's sister) created in 1928 for Ida Rubenstein to Ravel's famously sensual



Dancers in a Ballet Biarritz production of "Pulcinella," a work that was commissioned by the Ballet Russe and that became famous for having brought together Massine, Stravinsky and Picasso.

music, Mr. Malandain has abandoned the idea of a Gypsy woman dancing on a table surrounded by lustful men. In its place, he has his entire troupe of seven men and seven women dancing inside a space enclosed by four L-shaped transparent screens. In what he describes as a meditation on liberty, the dancers finally break free from their confinement.

At the performance Oct. 22 in Perpignan, "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune" and "Boléro" were accompanied by two other works that form part of Mr. Malandain's Ballets Russes series: "Les Biches," originally created in 1924 by Nijinska to music by Poulenc, performed in Mr. Malandain's version by the full Ballet Biarritz troupe, with 60 pink ostrich feathers as props; and "La Mort du Cygne," created by Fokine for Anna Pavlova in 1907 to music by Saint-Saëns, re-enacted with great lyricism here by three swan-ballerinas.

"Le Spectre de la Rose" was canceled at the last minute because Giuseppe Chiavaro was injured, but he expects to be well enough to join Magali Praud in the piece this week in New York. The dance, created in 1911 by Fokine for Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina to music by Carl Maria von Weber, is recreated by Mr. Malandain around two solos and a wonderfully roman-

## Ballet Biarritz

Joyce Theater, Eighth Avenue at 19th Street, Chelsea. Tuesday through next Sunday.

tic pas de deux as the girl's dreams of love and feelings of desire assume the form of a handsome young man.

"Pulcinella," inspired by the eponymous Commedia dell'Arte womanizer and first performed in Paris in 1920, was famous in its day for bringing together Leonide Massine as choreographer, Igor Stravinsky as composer and Pablo Picasso as set designer. Mr. Malandain has kept close to the original tale, but added still more humor and mischief, with Massine's foolish old man turned into a drag queen. What he cannot match, of course, is Picasso's painted décor.

Striking throughout these dances is Mr. Malandain's commitment to a classical vocabulary, for which, of course, he needs dancers with classical training (in this case, French, Italian, Spanish, Belgian and Swiss). Mr. Malandain's own experience as a dancer was also classical, first when he spent four months at the Paris Opera Ballet in the corps de ballet and subsequently when he danced for two years with the Ballet du Rhin in Alsace and for six years with the

Ballet de Nancy.

In 1983, Mr. Malandain first tried his hand at choreography and, to his surprise, he went on to win several competitions. In 1986, having recognized, in his words, that "I was not a great dancer," he formed his own dance company, Temps Présent, joined by eight colleagues from the Ballet de Nancy. The company settled first at Élancourt near Paris, but it struggled to make ends meet: Mr. Malandain's neoclassicism was decidedly out of fashion.

"When the Socialist Government took office in 1981, it wanted something different," the choreographer recalled. "It regarded classical dance as retro. All the funding went into contemporary dance, forgetting that dance is a whole, that currents feed off each other. For me, classical ballet keeps its roots and enriches itself from the present, but there was resistance. The *ditkat* was, there should be no narrative and there should be a break with music. But my choreography follows the music."

In 1990, Temps Présent became associated with the Esplanade Saint-Étienne Opera near Lyon, where Mr. Malandain acted as choreographer for many opera productions and continued to create his own works, including "Pulcinella" in 1991 and "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune" in 1995. Finally,

in 1998, when the French government decided to create a new Centre Chorégraphique National in a converted railroad station in Biarritz, Mr. Malandain disbanded Temps Présent and brought 12 of his dancers to the new Ballet Biarritz.

**W**HAT is perhaps most surprising is how quickly the new company has made its mark. Although it is the smallest of France's 19 choreographic centers, because it is based in a modest-size city in south-west France, it must frequently go on tour to earn its keep. Thus, in the last four years, it has traveled to Asia, the Middle East and the Caribbean as well as around Europe. As important, in France it has reached out to smaller cities unaccustomed to receiving dance companies.

"Dance has always been a bourgeois pastime," Mr. Malandain noted, "but I'd like it to be popular. Excessive modernity is necessary in dance, but it touches an infinitesimal part of the population. By being between classical and contemporary, I offer people a way of entering the world of dance. When they tell me, 'I didn't know dance was like that,' I feel I have achieved my objective." □

Olivier Huet