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DANCE

From
Russia,
With
Love



Vera Arbuzova of Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg in "Who's Who," based on the film "Some Like It Hot."

By ANNETTE GRANT

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia
"YOU must realize that this is just a run-through," Boris Eifman cautioned for about the 10th time in strongly Russian-accented English. "It is a rehearsal, not a performance. And just Act I."

Mr. Eifman was reluctant to let an American preview his new ballet, "Who's Who," partly because no artist likes to present a piece before it is finished, but also because it is a Russian gloss on an American comic masterpiece, Billy Wilder's 1959 film "Some Like It Hot."

Even more provocatively, Mr. Eifman had set "Who's Who" to quintessentially American music: Duke Ellington, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Scott Joplin and Billy Strayhorn, among others. What's more, he was planning to take it to Boston, Chicago and, finally, New York, where it will be performed (followed by "Pinocchio") at City Center, starting on Friday.

On a hot day in July at the studio of the Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg, dancers lazed angularly in leotards, looking much more Picasso than Degas. Mr. Eifman strode down the corridor, bearded and fit, to greet his guest, radiating the kind of magnetism usually found in people who have been stars onstage, which he has not. From the first he has been a maker of dances, not a performer of them.

In his office he sat surrounded by photographs of his earlier productions, which have made him, at 56, a celebrated choreographer in Russia, Europe and, since 1998, the United States. Here were "Don Juan and Molière," "Tchaikovsky," "Russian Hamlet," "The Karamozovs," "Don Quixote" and "Red Giselle," full-evening works that show off Mr. Eifman's talent for making theatrical, dramatic and sometimes outrageously over-the-top narrative dances brimming with angst and spirituality.

Since founding his company in 1977, Mr. Eifman has created many ribald scenes and humorous or cartoonish characters; but psychodrama, not farce, has been his

**Can a St. Petersburg
choreographer come up with a
Slavic 'Some Like it Hot'?**

métier. Yet a man who has no fear of Dostoyevsky would not tremble before Wilder, especially if he had an idea, which Mr. Eifman did: he would change Wilder's 1920's American musicians who dress in drag and join a female band to escape Chicago gangsters to Russian émigré ballet dancers of the Revolutionary period who dress in drag and join a female nightclub act to escape New York gangsters.

"You understand," Mr. Eifman said, "that I am not trying to make a copy. I'm trying to tell a story with a Russian soul in an American idiom."

Can Russians do jazz dance? This was more than a theoretical question, because Mr. Eifman's company is classically trained. And while they can career through everything from folk to modern dance, they haven't had much exposure to jazz. Could the magnificent dancer and actor Igor Markov swing? Could the powerfully emotive Vera Arbuzova tap? Was there a credible shimmy in the house?

Mr. Eifman had definitely done his research, seeing movies and reading books about early-20th-century New York, notably "Call It Sleep," Henry Roth's poetic novel about immigrants on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and listening to popular music of the era. When his company performed in New York he took the opportunity to visit Ellis Island or to see Broadway shows like "Chicago," "Guys and Dolls" and "42nd Street" to study their style. Bob Fosse entered his pantheon of great choreographers, though not equal to George Balanchine. The influence of both men turns up in "Who's Who."

In the studio the dancers had warmed up and the action began. The piece unfolded like a wordless play, the plot acted as much as danced. New arrivals to America crept onto Ellis Island, gateway to the land of promise. Momentum built quickly as the two heroes, pursued by the villain, pulled on and threw off women's clothing with perfectly controlled frenzy. Ms. Arbuzova, as the lead

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