

From Russia, With Love

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dancer in a club act, delivered a fine bump and grind in between executing a flurry of acrobatic ballet steps.

The energy of the company was so great and the ensemble so coordinated that it was hard to think of this opening half of "Who's Who" as just a rehearsal. It lacked only costumes and sets to be a full-blown performance.

Nine months later that performance almost didn't happen for the world premiere in Boston. The costumes (some 300 of them) and sets were still missing, but this time they were stuck, detained by customs in the port of Elizabeth, N.J., for security reasons. One of thousands of packages on board a cargo ship, the company's huge container had been picked at random by a computer to be X-rayed. No one could say how long it would take. Land lines and cellphones chimed and chirped from St. Petersburg to Washington to New York to Boston. Someone said, "If we were home, we'd just figure out who to pay off — or give tickets to."

Finally word came that the goods were on the truck; the truck, however, was stuck in a snowstorm. It arrived less than 24 hours before show time.

When the curtain rose at the Wang Center in Boston, a crowd of immigrants, now dressed in early-20's garments, disembarked again on Ellis Island. The dancers, young and many of them new to the company, moved with Rockette-like precision.

But wait. Where was Mr. Markov, who had created the role of Alex, the more serious of the two heroes? The part was now taken by another Eifman star, Aleksei Turko. Alex's

carefree sidekick, Max, was played by Igor Siadzko, 24, a classical dancer from Kiev who had arrived in December and learned the part, including a bawdy wiggle, in one month. At intermission, word came that Mr. Markov had joined a Polish company, where he hoped to choreograph as well as dance.

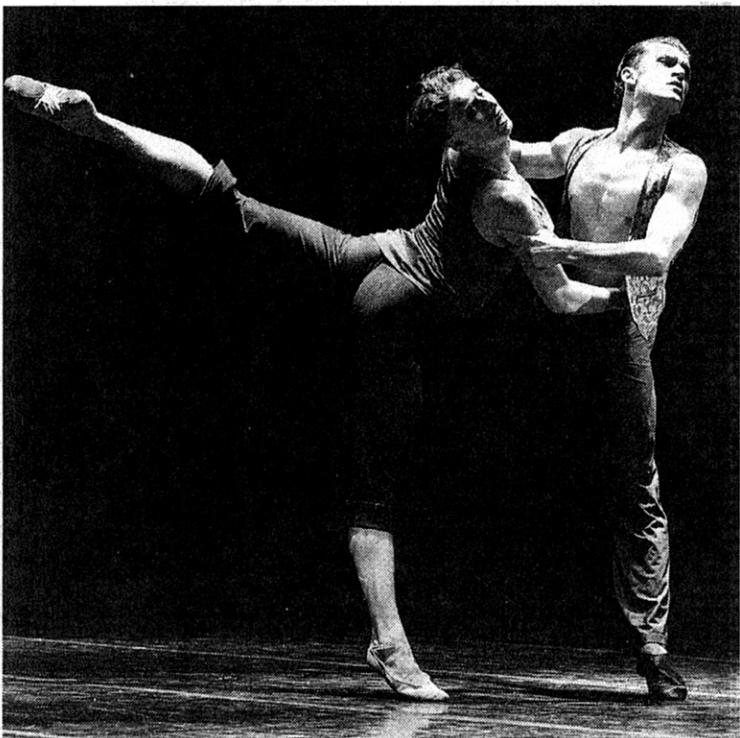
Act II, at last. Ms. Arbuzova, as the love interest, Lynn, did a movingly sad little tap number in silence (the only silence in the show), made more poignant in retrospect when it turned out that a spotlight had been in her eyes and she hadn't been able to see the edge of the table she was dancing on. (Mr. Eifman said she found tap hard to learn since ballet feet arch upward while tap feet push into the floor.)

The evening then moved pell-mell with cinematic quick cuts through a floor show, a love duet (on toe), a mock seduction, a nearly fatal brawl, a Jewish wedding (don't ask), Max's decision to return to the old country, Alex's decision to start his own dance company in the new world and the touching farewell of the two men. In the finale, showing that what goes around comes around in Mr. Eifman's choreographic vocabulary, Alex's company performed a ballet in the style of Balanchine, in neon-colored leotards.

The next morning Mr. Eifman pronounced "Who's Who" finished. "It belongs to the dancers now," he said.

Why a comedy, a deliberate break with his past works?

"I wanted to make a ballet of Fitzgerald's 'Tender Is the Night,'" he said. "But after 9/11, I decided to make something light, not another tragedy. I wanted people to be entertained, to smile. It's my love letter to America." □



Farnsworth/Blalock Photos for The New York Times

Igor Siadzko, left, and Aleksei Turko in "Who's Who" in Boston.