

# VOGUE

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## People are Talking about

### dance



YELENA KUZMINA'S RACY PERFORMANCE IN *RED GISELLE*.

Boris Eifman has high expectations for his 50 young dancers—and they do not disappoint.

occasionally lurid tale of a Soviet-era ballerina going mad—and in the process demonstrating some drawbacks in the Communist view of art—wasn't a fluke.

With works based on the life of Tchaikovsky, on Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and on Mozart's *Requiem*, the Eifman kept pulling off surprise hits and getting the enthusiastic reviews and box-office numbers that have landed it a nine-city American tour beginning March 24 in Boston. The bearded, bushy-haired imp behind these odd-ball ballets turns out to be 53-year-old Boris Eifman, born in Siberia, trained in what was then Leningrad as a choreographer and completely unwilling—perhaps unable—to conform to the expectations of the Soviet ballet world. A Jew, an artist, a renegade, he began his own company in 1977, hanging on in the face of governmental obstruction and winning the loyalty of audiences thrilled to have an alternative to the Kirov and Bolshoi.

If not for Eifman, says the jet-haired, eerily flexible Yelena Kuzmina, who created the agonized lead in *Red Giselle*, "I would have had an ordinary fate of the classical ballerina." Certainly there's nothing ordinary about her *Red Giselle* character, who gets to writhe on the floor, dance a Charleston, and even do a duet with the head of her executed lover in one of Eifman's more outrageous stage illusions. Through an interpreter, Kuzmina says she savored the opportunity to dance "choreography that is designed for me personally" rather than for the Russian standards. With Eifman, she says, "I have a unique chance to reveal my feelings and character. He always responds to my ideas."

For the latitude he gives his dancers, Eifman exacts a high price. A perfectionist who needs to steep himself in his creations, Eifman abandons normal life when he is in the midst of a new piece. "I cannot go home, relax, speak with somebody, and after come back and make ballet," he says in his quirky but serviceable English. "The approach to work in Eifman's company is unique," says Igor Markov, the charismatic blond star of the choreographer's newest export, *A Russian Hamlet: The Son of Catherine the Great*, which will have its American premiere during the three-week City Center engagement that begins March 29. With awesome technical abilities and matinee-idol looks, he's been approached by other companies. But he sticks with Eifman despite Eifman's "extraordinary and even fanatical" work ethic. "You get so deeply involved in all the ballets," he says through an interpreter, "as if they were your own children. You can't imagine life without them."—SYLVIANE GOLD

**t**he handful of dance critics that showed up at New York's City Center in April 1998 for the first American performance of the little-known, little-hyped Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg found itself surrounded by an excited, expectant crowd of Russian immigrants. The buzz, even in Russian, was unmistakable; this audience could hardly wait for the curtain to rise on the starkly named *Red Giselle*. It didn't take long for the unenlightened to figure out why: With exuberant theatricality, boldly expressive movement, and extraordinary dancing actors, the Eifman was a jolt of fresh energy for the hoary genre of narrative ballet.

Subsequent performances in New York proved that the punchy,