

## PLAYBILL ADS 17-18

# THE ONSTAGE STUDIO

ALEXEI RATMANSKY'S *SCUOLA DI BALLO* IS THE LATEST INCARNATION OF A PERENNIAL AUDIENCE FAVOURITE, WRITES VALERIE LAWSON



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A rustic cottage or palatial palace. A mysterious forest or magical garden. A balcony by moonlight or a chandelier-lit ballroom. The settings for traditional classical ballets may range from the simple to the grand but they're seldom as prosaic as a workplace, with one exception – the classroom ballet. The ingredients are simple enough: a studio, a barre, a mirror or two, and often a dominating teacher. Classroom ballets have retained their charm and appeal for audiences since Danish choreographer August Bournonville created *Konservatoriet* in the 19th century. *Konservatoriet* is an idealised version of what really takes place in a ballet studio. It's all sweetness, neatness and pastel perfection, an animated Degas painting set in the Paris conservatoire of Bournonville's former ballet teacher, Auguste Vestris. But in Bournonville's original version, the ballet hinted at the other side of a dance classroom: the rivalries, machinations, love trysts and the antics of a character described as an 'inspector' of dance. *Konservatoriet* is the prototype for a sub-species of the classroom ballet, the comical or farcical version, featuring a studio, bickering students, a teacher and in one case – in Maurice Béjart's *The Competition* – a sextet of posturing ballet judges.

*The Competition* is a whodunit set within the highly charged atmosphere of a big international ballet competition, such as the Prix de Lausanne. It entered The Australian Ballet repertoire in 1989, when the company's Artistic Director was Maina Gielgud. She knew the ballet well and was a friend of Béjart's. Gielgud's mother, Zita Gordon-Gielgud, created

the ballet's cameo role of La Dame au Petit Chien, a proud and interfering parent of the star student, striding through the action with her little dog by her side.

*The Competition* is full of dance jokes. The leading man, a detective who investigates the murder of the star, makes his entrance in a trench coat, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, to the music of Albrecht's entrance in act two of *Giselle*.

Murder is also central to the sinister *The Lesson*, choreographed in 1963 by Flemming Flindt and based on a play by Eugène Ionesco. In this case, it's the teacher who murders the student. The 1933 classroom ballet *Scuola di ballo* was also inspired by a play, written by the Italian writer Carlo Goldoni. Choreographed by Léonide Massine, the ballet was set to music by Luigi Boccherini, orchestrated by Jean Françaix. Once more, here are all the ingredients of the humorous classroom ballet – the head of a dance school, an impresario, and students of various abilities representing a microcosm of the tensions in any ballet studio. Massine's biographer Vicente Garcia-Marquez pointed out that the choreography drew on the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. *Scuola di ballo*, he wrote, featured Massine's depiction of characterisation through movement and gesture, with the gesture corresponding to the recitative in an opera and the movement to the arias. The ballet was performed in all three of the Ballets Russes tours to Australia of the 1930s and Massine's popularity in Australia continued throughout

the lifetime of the Borovansky Ballet. Massine himself came to Australia in 1971, when he staged his *Mam'zelle Angot* for The Australian Ballet. It's one of only two Massine works in the company's repertoire, the other being *Les Présages*.

Now, Russian choreographer and former Artistic Director of the Bolshoi Ballet Alexei Ratmansky, a great admirer of Massine, has created a new *Scuola di ballo*. He loves the storytelling aspect of Massine's ballets, recognising that "his style is very deeply connected to the dramatic traditions of the Bolshoi Theatre. Massine used the three main aspects of dance in the theatre: classical ballet steps; folk and character dancing; and mime and grotesque ... all combined. I can't think of a contemporary choreographer who did the same. Maybe Frederick Ashton a bit, but not as consistently. I came to the story after my interest in the music. I am interested in the composer. I knew he wrote much ballet music, but very little is recorded. Just a few years ago a recording appeared and that piqued my interest with its intricate rhythms and romantic melodies," Ratmansky says. "I like doing comedy ballets, so that intrigued me as well".

Late last year, Ratmansky ended a five-year term as Artistic Director of the Bolshoi Ballet where he choreographed more than 25 ballets, among them was his re-working of *The Bright Stream* and *The Flames of Paris*. Ratmansky is now into a new five-year appointment as artist in residence at the American Ballet Theatre.

He has recently choreographed another story ballet *On the Dnieper* and a solo for Mikhail Baryshnikov, who said: "He (Ratmansky) always has an aggressive agenda as to what a piece is about. It's always about something, even when there is no story. He's a Russian man with a very Western grip on movement." Ratmansky described his collaborative style to a journalist: "I'll ask the dancer, 'What would you do as this character in this situation? How would you finish this lift? What is more comfortable?...' Sometimes I have no more steps in my head, so I ask them for more." Classroom ballets, Ratmansky believes, are always "audience favourites, but one should add something unique to the exercise, especially with such lovely music", such as Boccherini's for *Scuola di ballo*. So why does this genre of ballet charm audiences? Perhaps for the glimpse it gives into the dancers' private world or the way in which the ballet progresses along an exhilarating path from the first slow plié to the final virtuoso steps. And if children are used as well, as they are in *Class Concert*, choreographed in 1962 by Asaf Messerer, there is pleasure in seeing the way a child's first steps can grow with practice and commitment, into brilliance.

In 2007 the Bolshoi Ballet, while on tour in the UK, impressed the critics with a performance of *Class Concert*, staged by the choreographer's UK-based nephew Mikhail Messerer. The Guardian's Judith Mackrell found that the Moscow-based company had "blossomed almost beyond recognition" under Ratmansky's direction. "*Class Concert* is not new to the company. But

it has been decades since the Bolshoi [Ballet] felt inclined to expose itself in this 40-minute showcase of pure *danse d'école*. Now, in Mikhail Messerer's meticulous revival, the company's collective technique is on proud display, and all of the ranks rise to the occasion with dancing that is impressively clean, buoyant and fast."

The most enduring example of a plotless, *danse d'école* ballet is *Etudes*, created in Denmark in 1948 by choreographer Harald Lander, and later taken into repertoires around the world. It begins with dancers shown in silhouette as they practice at a barre and a thrilling climax of batterie and grand allegro builds.

For decades, *Etudes* was a staple work for the American Ballet Theatre's repertoire, and was later seen by a wider audience when an excerpt was shown in the movie *The Turning Point*. Once again, a movie will bring a classroom ballet to the wider world with the premiere of *Mao's Last Dancer* this year. The film adaptation of the memoir of former principal of The Australian Ballet Li Cunxin features an extract from Ben Stevenson's *Three Preludes*, a pas de deux created for the Harkness Youth company in 1969 and danced in the movie by the Birmingham Royal Ballet principal, Chi Cao and Hong Kong Ballet Soloist Camilla Vergotis. These dancers, playing the roles of Li and his wife-to-be, Mary McKendry, move around a ballet barre against the background of piano music by Rachmaninoff. The pas de deux, once described as 'classroom-duet-as-love metaphor' extends into a demonstration

of ballet partnering unlike Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun*, in which the dancers in a studio briefly gaze at one another but are more concerned with their own reflections in the mirror, which is represented by the audience.

In Graeme Murphy's *Nutcracker – The Story of Clara*, the dancers emerge from mirrors upstage. The scene takes place at a ballet conservatoire in St Petersburg, where the young Clara practises with other little students who evolve into graduation-year dancers. In this case, the studio-setting gives way to a scene depicting the stage of the Maryinsky Theatre. It's a beautiful example of the studio-to-stage idea behind most classroom ballets and a reminder that everything we see on the ballet stage begins in the classroom: a workplace. It might not be as romantic as those balconies and cottages, but it is the one constant in the life of every dancer, everywhere in the world.

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