



The Latvian National Ballet - Alexandra Fedorova and Lev Fokine (Lvov) in *The Sleeping Beauty* (1929) © Courtesy of the LNOB Archive

# Tchaikovsky in Riga

GONZALO PRECIADO-AZANZA, a dancer with the Latvian National Ballet, looks at the company's historical links with Tchaikovsky's ballets and talks with soloist Jolanta Lubēja about her thoughts about dancing Odette/Odile

**L**atvian National Ballet's *Swan Lake* performances in Riga marked the beginning of its season and were the first shows since the Covid-19 outbreak locked down theatres worldwide. Even though the opera house could only sell less than half the number of seats, the performances were a significant milestone, not least considering the current situation on the international dance panorama. Staged by artistic director Aivars Leimanis, the new production is firmly based on the choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. The Latvian National Ballet was founded in 1922 and its first full-length ballet, Peter Ludwig Hertel's *La Fille mal gardée* after Petipa's production, was

staged by Nikolai Sergeyev through his choreographic notations. Later on these records were used extensively in many countries.

Tchaikovsky's ballets have been in the Latvian National Ballet's repertoire for decades, ever since Alexandra Fedorova-Fokine, former ballerina at the Mariinsky Ballet and Mikhail Fokine's sister-in-law, took over the company in 1925. She has staged around twenty productions, most notably the classical ballets, including *Swan Lake* (1926), *The Nutcracker* (1928) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1929). Jolanta Lubēja, one of the leading soloists of the Latvian National Ballet, has danced the ballerina roles in all three ballets. Although all draw on

popular fairy tales or myths, their stories are very different. "Aurora is the most technical role, the Sugar Plum Fairy, full of childish enthusiasm, and Odette, the princess locked up in a swan's body, offers a unique opportunity to showcase different sides of feminine strength," she explains.

*Swan Lake* has been performed almost a thousand times at the Latvian National Opera, and has already been revisited eight times in the Baltic capital since Fedorova-Fokine's 1926 version. In fact, it has become a symbol of Latvian ballet, especially, during the Iron Curtain, through its numerous European, American and Asian tours. As Lubēja says, "We have a strong Russian school. We are proud that we are dancing all the classical ballet gems every season and with them we can be a competitive company."

Every production has had a different approach, including different endings or assigning the roles of Odette and Odile to two different ballerinas. For the current performances in Riga, the dual role of Odette-Odile has been performed by Yuliya Brauer, Alise Prudane and Annija Kopstale as well as Lubēja, who explains the challenges of portraying the characters of the two swans. "To dance both roles in this ballet is an inner discovery of myself. As, in the previous production, I had already danced Odile for eight years, for me it was quite interesting to prepare Odette, a more lyrical and fragile role. So it was an exploration of my performing skills, to see how far I could get between the range of both swans." In turn, Prince Siegfried was danced by guest artist Vadim Muntagirov, Viktors Seiko,



The Latvian National Ballet - Jolanta Lubēja and Viktors Seiko in *Swan Lake*. © Andris Tone

Zigmars Kirilko and Aeden Conefrey.

The process to get the company back on stage in a full-length ballet has not been easy. Set in the court of Ludwig II at the Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, the new production, with costumes by Robert Perdziola and scenery by Juan Guillermo Nova, was initially scheduled to be premiered in April but postponed until September because of the pandemic. For Lubēja, "All of this time gave me the opportunity to explore other facets of my life, which I didn't have time for during my busy performance schedule. So in a way, this resting period for the body made a stronger mind, which will help me to build more deeply the way I am approaching any characters from now on."

We also spoke about how the company has coped during the months of uncertainty

and classes via Zoom. "These gave us the opportunity to keep in shape as well to keep the collective union of the company. The classes stimulated us and gave hope that we'd be able to return to our workplace," she recalls. "Both singing and dancing are very important in our culture. It comes from Latvian folklore and the Latvian Song and Dance Festival." This event, held every five years since 1873, attracts half a million people and is one of the biggest amateur dancing events in the world. Recently, it became part of UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and it still stands as a key event in Latvia's culture. Actually, it was essential for the development of Latvia's national identity, which ultimately led to its independence as a country in 1918.