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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Eifman Ballet**'Onegin'**May 2009*
*Berkeley, Zellerbach Hall**by Renee Renouf*

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It's safe to say the Bay Area Russian population is all too happy to fill Zellerbach when Russian companies are dancing. They did so in droves for three performances of Boris Eifman's *Onegin* with its roster of 55 dancers, five women and seven men of which are listed as soloists. The Sunday matinee featured five dancers in the title roles of Pushkin's poetic novel, costumed by Olga Schaishmelaschvili and Pytor Okunev against Zinovy Margolin's striking constructions and lit by Gleb Filschtinsky and Eifman with Video Designs by Vladimir Bystrov. Eifman used a range of Tchaikovsky music, augmented by rock selections by Alexander Sitkovetsky.

These collaborators provide a formidable contemporary ambiance for the incredibly limber, talented dancers to tell this nineteenth century of thwarted love and dueling with a new twist: *Onegin* has the hots for Lensky, a bi-sexual, whose love for Olga causes him to spurn *Onegin*. *Onegin*'s revenge causes Lensky's death by stabbing and *Onegin* eventually abandons his sexual preference, presumably because Tatiana's purity has redeemed him. Tough luck, *Onegin*, you screwed yourself.

Eifmann tells the tale with contemporary grunge for his superb corps de ballet, and fairly good evocation of modern social dancing, eyes forward, heads determined, hamstring stretched in on the ready mode. With a corps over 40, the sequence flooded Zellerbach like the Bolsheviks let loose in Petrograd, transforming itself in the final sequences to smart-as-paint black Nehru-collared jackets and a variety of striking black cocktail dresses. When the Eifman corps de ballet comes front and center to set the ambiance, their theatrical presence and force engages the audience regardless of one's taste or acceptance of the choreographer's premise.



It's a cinch Eifman would never be able to choreograph his theatrics without the totally limber, completely stretched slender Russian bodies he has at his disposal. They can make yoga postures and Pilates stretches look like child's play or the habitual morning cup of coffee. But there does come a time when one more split-like grande jete a la seconde horizontal to the proscenium arch makes you mutter in your mind, "Oh Puleeze!" I can't help but wonder with those fabulous limber reaches, where have nuance and internal truths gone.



Boris Eifman's *Onegin*
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The May 3 matinee featured Maria Abashova as Tatiana to Oleg Gabyshev as Onegin, Dmitry Fisher as Lensky, Natalia Povoroznyuk as Olga and Sergei Volobuev as a blind Colonel winning Tatiana. Eifman uses a waterfront and suspension bridge set to introduce the four characters, where the conflict occurs and Lensky is killed, where the Colonel makes his initial appearance with the rock n'rolling punks. There is an internal set for Lensky and Onegin to solidify and repudiate their relationship, where Onegin agonizes over Lensky's death, and a café scene following Lensky's death where Olga takes on a man, any man, and Tatiana gets sought by and surrenders to the Colonel.

Eifman has a generalized set for ballroom scenes, a multiple entrance from upstage and it appears during Tatiana's transformation, depicted by her being carted by several fawning attendants on a small gurney like contraption as she is whipped into elegant shape, with her spirits moving from protesting to absorbing and finally relishing her transformation.

There is the final Onegin-Tatiana encounter with the latter in her elegant state, but not before Onegin has encountered the soul of Lensky in a Dante Inferno-like setting. The encounter requires lifts and leaps of the usual extravagant Eifman conjuring. The penultimate scene is the blind Colonel attempting to stab Onegin, but not succeeding until Onegin rushes into the blade, surrounded by the well-clad black minions. Down stage right, one sees Onegin writing furiously, the wisps of



paper floating from his desk, the scene illumined by lights at an angle similar to prior intimate episodes.

There is no gainsaying that Eifman's Onegin has impact; all the ingredients are there - story line, sets, costumes and those remarkable dancers who seem to be cloned to the splits, a la secondes to the ear with a back bend wrap around the partners like pretzels. The sheer magnitude of the combination leaves me wondering if the sum will ever include nuance, let alone subtlety.

In the lobby, the Ardani management was selling a coffee table adornment about Diana Vishneva for \$100, a rehearsal DVD of Eifman for \$20.

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