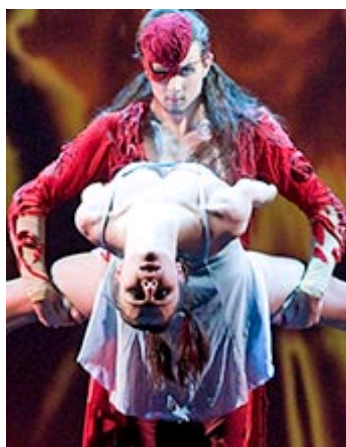


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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Eifman Ballet**'Onegin'**May 2009**Boston, Cutler Majestic**by Alan Helms*

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For some, Boris Eifman is the Russian Béjart, a crowd-pleasing vulgarian, a Las Vegas Diaghilev given to the sensational and meretricious. They see him as representing the worst of two worlds: the musty conservatism of 19th century story ballet and a vapid contemporaneity which is all flash and dazzle and no substance. It's true that in his over-the-top theatricality Eifman occasionally approaches Las Vegas spectacle, but his large ambitions stem from an unabashed idealism. This is a man who speaks of "the evolution of the Russian soul" and "the perfection of society." He is determined to paint with bold strokes on a huge canvas.

Eifman brought his 55 member company to Boston recently with a new production of Pushkin's "Onegin." Having treated many monuments of Russian culture in the past, Eifman has now choreographed the masterpiece of the man credited with creating modern Russian literature and of producing in this verse novel "an

encyclopedia of Russian life."

The main outline of Pushkin's story remains clear. The bored dandy Onegin meets the naive Tatyana, sister of Olga who is the fiancée of his friend Lensky. Tatyana falls hopelessly in love with Onegin and offers herself to him, but he rejects her. Because Onegin flirts with Olga, Lensky challenges him to a duel in which Lensky is killed. Onegin leaves Russia for years of aimless wandering throughout Europe, then returns to St Petersburg where he meets Tatyana at a ball. Tatyana is now a mature, married woman, but her old passion revives and Onegin is inspired with a new one. Confessing that she still loves him, Tatyana nevertheless rejects him out of



duty to her husband, and the story ends with Onegin overwhelmed with despair, having learned the hard truth that we rarely value things properly until they're gone.

In transforming Pushkin for the stage, Eifman has made interesting changes. He sets his ballet in the present with scenes alternating between enclosed nighttime spaces (a punk rock club, a disco, perhaps a prison) and a sharply raked suspension bridge silhouetted against various backdrops: a red curtain, a lurid sunset, a nighttime sky with a gigantic moon. We're in a kind of Russian West Side Story in which the air crackles with the threat of violence. In the first scene, Onegin, Lensky, and the man who will marry Tatyana are carousing while overhead we see a film of the 1991 coup in which hard-line communists tried to oust Gorbachev. (The coup failed and soon after the Soviet Union collapsed.) The second scene takes place in a disco where the corps explodes onto the stage, stomping and kicking and pumping its fists to pulsating acid rock. We're in the presence of potential revolution, poised between conflicting worlds.

The structure of the ballet plays off this conflict in being composed of 20 scenes that mostly feature pas de deux: Onegin and Tatyana, Onegin and Lensky, Lensky and Olga, Olga and Tatyana. Nearly everyone is in erotic tension or emotional conflict with someone else. (The notable exception is the meltingly tender pas de deux between Lensky and Olga in Act I.) Even in the crowd scenes—elegant and powerful, never muddy or cluttered—we see fundamental oppositions between men and women whose erotic attractions are mostly antagonistic. The music provides still another conflict, alternating between Tschiaikovsky and the contemporary composer Alexander Sitkovetsky, classical versus disco. Eifman's "encyclopedia of Russian life" is a tense and turbulent one.





Boris Eifman's *Onegin*
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The main dancers in the two performances I saw were all excellent actors and technicians. Oleg Gabyshev as Onegin conveyed the requisite angst, and Maria Abashova was a convincing Tatyana, a superb dancer who gives promise of future distinction. Natalia Povoroznuk made a winsome Olga, and Dmitry Fisher brought youthful ardor to Lensky, providing a perfect foil for the callow Onegin. And what an amazing corps: handsome, enthusiastic, crisp as starched linen.

Back to that comparison with Béjart, which in my view is unfair if only because Eifman is far more intelligent and talented. His intelligence shows in “*Onegin*” in several ways, not least in that he has preserved the combination of drama, romance, and satire found in Pushkin’s novel. Many in the audience won’t recognize this debt, but no one will be unaware of the rich, heady experience that results. As for talent, Eifman is unfailingly choreographically inventive (his lifts alone, so difficult to do well, are dazzling), he’s superb at conveying all forms of erotic experience, including the homoeroticism between Onegin and Lensky (who today is more sexy?), his movement is always expressive and extraordinarily fluid, and his work is always visually arresting. (In “*Onegin*,” visual highlights included Tatyana’s nightmare vision in which she’s pursued by demons out of Bosch and ravished by a satanic Onegin, the echo of “*Giselle*” in Act II when Onegin keeps reaching for but missing Tatyana, and the moment near the end when Onegin laboriously rolls over and over across the stage under the dead weight of Lensky’s corpse.) Finally, Eifman is never less than wholly entertaining. What’s to dislike?

Eifman has from the beginning been aiming at a different kind of ballet from that favored by people who dislike him. Not for nothing was his company originally called “The New Ballet.” His goal throughout has been a new form of ballet theater shaped by deep psychological analysis, philosophical ideas, and audacious movement. He IS over the top but that’s part of his goal. Goethe’s three rules of criticism are a) What’s the aim? b) Has it been achieved? c) Is it worth it? People who dine out on disdaining Eifman tend to skip the first two rules.

If much of Béjart’s oeuvre were to suddenly vanish, none of us would be the poorer, but I for one would be severely disappointed to learn that I could never again see Eifman’s “*Tchiakovsky*” or his “*Red Giselle*” or his “*Hamlet*.” If comparisons must be made I’d say Eifman is more like a Russian Matthew Borne, producing large-scale, fast-paced, narrative ballets that are superbly performed and audience-friendly. Those critics dismissive of Eifman because he is “merely” popular might do well to remember that many of the greatest accomplishments in Western culture have been extremely popular, including Greek tragedy, Elizabethan drama, and the Victorian novel. What’s so wrong with being popular?





Boris Eifman's *Onegin*
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I suspect that in time people will come to see Eifman as someone suffering the fate of Jerry Robbins in his own lifetime: dismissed as lightweight compared to Balanchine and altogether too Broadway. I certainly hope Eifman enjoys a different fate. There's a lot of Broadway in Eifman, it's true, but the more the merrier as far as I'm concerned. I don't know if Eifman will come to be seen as a major choreographer making permanent contributions to dance, but while history is sorting that out, he's providing entertainment of an extremely high order, and I for one am delighted. Maybe Blake was right in claiming that "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

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