



Dances that speak of humanity

Philippe Cohen's Swiss ballet company has made a virtue out of mixing disparate styles, writes Victoria Laurie

BALLET director Philippe Cohen isn't sure what makes the best dancers in the world. He says he has 22 superb dancers at the Ballet du Grand Theatre de Geneve, but that it's hard to describe the precise qualities he seeks from them. All he knows is that he doesn't want his dancers to look, move or even think alike.

"I manage the company like a team, a group made of many personalities and 12 different nationalities," says the Moroccan-born Belgian in his delightful, heavily accented English.

"The dancer must know why they are on stage to defend the artistic aesthetic," he continues. "They have that responsibility. The choreographer is the one who knows what he wants from the piece. They interpret as they feel, sure, but they must have respect for the choreographer and he for their individual personality."

Cohen has made an art form out of bringing together choreographers with wildly different styles. His *Mixed Bill* at the Perth International Arts Festival this week features three works by choreographers Saburo Teshigawara, Andonis Foniadakis and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Says Cohen, "I put these three pieces together because they all speak about humanity."

So what is Cohen's role in all this? Hovering at the back of the rehearsal room, watching, encouraging and, now and then, gently criticising.

"If the dancer is not performing well, I say, 'Last night I really didn't understand: who are you, what you want to say?'"

As for his choreographers, he selects them and then forces himself to stand back. "It's very difficult because I have a so precise idea about what I want to see," he admits. "Sometimes I must stand behind [a choreographer] and I can only say, 'I don't understand what you want to say.'"

Cohen has been credited with injecting new energy into the dance activity emerging from the Grand Theatre, his company's imposing home in Geneva, Switzerland. It was founded in the late 19th century, and has hosted a procession of visiting ballet idols such as the Ballets Russes, Nijinsky and Isadora Duncan. In 1962, after a devastating fire and a nine-year refurbishment, the Grand Theatre got its own resident ballet company.

It has worked with headline acts such as Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, Jiri Kylian, William Forsythe and George Balanchine (who acted as the company's artistic adviser for eight years.) In 2003, Cohen took up the artistic director job.

Cohen is a former dancer who only started

dancing at age 19. "When I was young my family used to take me to the opera house and I loved that. But I hated ballet," he says. It was only when he saw the ballets of French-Swiss choreographer Maurice Bejart as a teenager that he became hooked on dance.

He took classes to learn classical ballet technique. But these days, only certain classical pas de deux and the second act of *Swan Lake* thrill him. "I still mainly get bored watching classical ballet," he says. He later studied under French movement exponent Dominique Baguot and American dance pioneer Merce Cunningham.

He's not keen on some modern versions of classical ballets, such as Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* with its male swans. "For me that aesthetic is too precious, kind of like a Broadway show," Cohen says. Yet he talks often about the importance of reinventing and reinvigorating traditional ballet.

He has done it himself. When he saw the avant-garde style of Catalan choreographer Cisco Aznar, Cohen invited him to create a new version of *Coppelia* for his company. It had its premiere last October, and included dancing eyeballs in tutus and garish, surrealist costumes. "I love how [Aznar] made spectacle," Cohen says.

Perth audiences will see the contemporary side of Ballet du Grand Theatre de Geneve. The three works in *Mixed Bill* are elegant, energetic and not overloaded with gimmickry.

Para-Dice, by Japanese choreographer Teshigawara, is a refined affair: eight dancers in gorgeous black and lemon-hued costumes dance fluidly through a routine as finely calibrated as a decorative clock.

According to Teshigawara, who designs his own costumes, sets and lights, "dance is a sculpture of air, space and time. I dance to make time disappear and I dance to create time." The title alludes to paradise and a game of chance, although the themes seem rather elusive in the piece.

Cohen says *Para-Dice* is "pure and light, like in the clouds. It's minimalist, and some people will take and some will leave alone." Former *New York Times* dance critic John Rockwell called it dance art installation, and noted that Teshigawara "has nothing to fear from (theatre directors) Robert Wilson or Robert Lepage or any other modern-day master of stage beauty".

Athens-born Foniadakis has created *Selon Desir*, which is set to the stirring strains of baroque music. In a dazzling display of perpetual motion, the dancers swarm over the stage like fevered converts to a faith, their bodies pulsating to the opening choruses of Bach's Passion settings of *St Matthew* and *St John*.

"It is just an enthusiastic piece about



Australian
17/02/2009
Page: 13
Section: Arts & Entertainment
Region: Australia Circulation: 140000
Type: National
Size: 287.00 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTF



energy,” Cohen says, “how with my body, my feeling, I can catch the sky and approach God’s music. It’s maximalist.”

The third and longest piece, at 50 minutes, is *Loin* by Cherkaoui. It is set to the *Mystery Sonata* series by Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber. *Loin*, meaning far in French, deals with the sometimes uneasy rapport between different cultures, a fitting theme for a choreographer born in Antwerp to a Tunisian father and a Belgian mother. Dancers mime comic episodes that have occurred on their individual travels, including an outbreak of cockroaches while on tour.

The text is spoken in English, Chinese and French, and the dancers wear exotic, albeit scruffy, ensembles: leggings, ragged skirts on men and women and the odd Japanese-style

obi.

Cohen was thrilled when a New York patron described *Mixed Bill* as the feeling of humanity on stage. He also loved a critic’s use of the words fresh and unaffected.

His own summary? “It talks to everybody in the world, and I can say that now it’s toured everywhere in the world,” he says proudly.

Ballet du Grand Theatre de Geneve is at His Majesty’s Theatre, Perth, until Friday. Philippe Cohen gives a talk at the Dress Circle Bar tomorrow, 6.30pm.

More Perth Festival reports:



www.theaustralian.com.au



Catching the sky: The three works in *Mixed Bill* are elegant, energetic and not overloaded with gimmicky