

Modern Marvels

France's Lyon Opera Ballet embraces distinctive and challenging contemporary works.

Lyon Opera Ballet prides itself on not having a trademark style. It is the company's ability to adapt to many styles that makes it unique. When looking for a new ballet, Artistic Director Yorgos Loukos says he simply looks for quality of movement and a convincing concept.

In his quest for dances, Loukos has become a connoisseur of modern ballet, cultivating a repertoire that has been called innovative, experimental and even avant-garde. He takes his job very seriously, devoting each weekend to searching throughout Europe for the next choreographic treasure.

"I am practically out every night watching performances," says Loukos, who has been in LOB's top spot for 10 years. "You have to see a lot, because you can see 20 works and only like one. So if you want to find five good ones, you have to see 100 works."

Founded in 1969, LOB was reestablished in 1984 with a new commitment to contemporary ballet. Since then, the company has commissioned ballets from a range of international choreographers—from Nacho Duato to Trisha Brown to Angelin Preljocaj. Maguy Marin and Bill T. Jones have both served as resident choreographers.

The 2002-03 season promises ballets by William Forsythe (*The Second Detail*), Jirí Kylián (*Symphonie de Psalms*), Russell Maliphant (*Critical Mass*) and Dominique Boivin (*Casse-Noisette*). An entire evening dedicated to the works of Mats Ek is also planned.

"The versatility is what is interesting," says Russian-born Ksenia Kastalskaia, one of LOB's 32 dancers. "It's very varied in style. If you are in the company, you should be able to adapt to this."

To ensure that he finds versatile artists, Loukos no longer holds auditions. Instead, he gives dancers at least a week with the company to learn sections of the repertoire and work with the ballet masters. "They really have to be confronted with our repertoire to realize if what they've learned can be used and so I can see how comfortable they are with Kylián and Forsythe or if they can learn something of John Jasperse or Maguy Marin," says Loukos.

The result is a company of dancers representing 16 nationalities. Perhaps more importantly, Loukos says, "they are curious. They want to learn new things. They are open to new ideas." And all of them are classically trained.

"Jorgos Loukos appreciates very much if you can do both [classical and contemporary]," says Kastalskaia. "Like *The Nutcracker*, for example, we have a modern version, and when we present it to show the public the difference, he asks us to also do the classical version. It's fun for the public and for us. We get to use our old capacity."

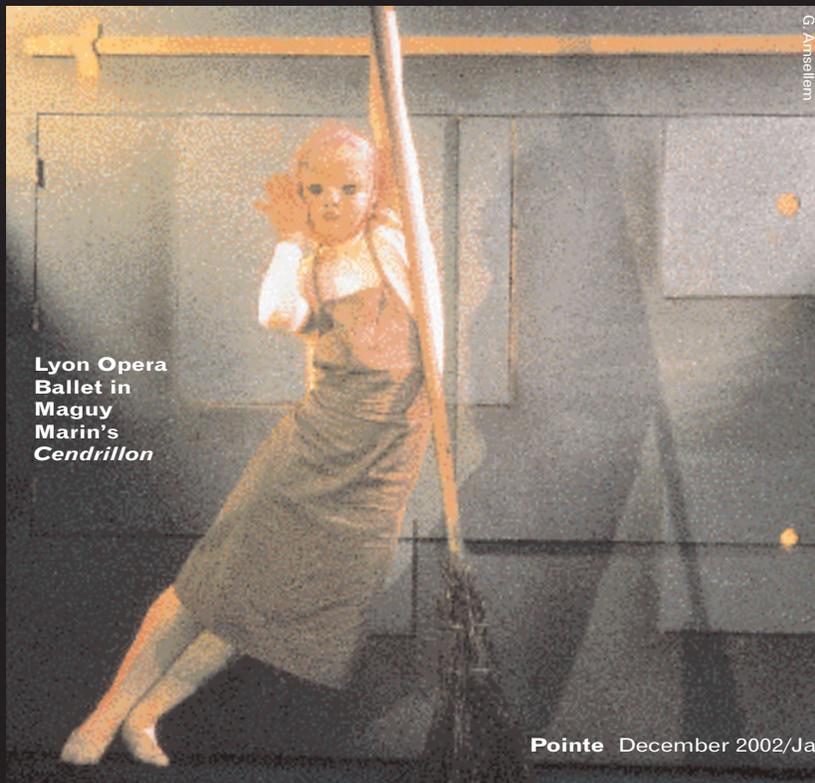
LOB operates year-round, giving 100 performances a year. Tours have been especially important to developing an international status. This spring the company embarked on its 13th American tour in 15 years. The dancers prepare to be on tour for three to four months per year.

"When you have months of touring, you become close," says Misha Zostrzewski, a dancer from Poland. "It's like in a family. It's not always easy."

Still, this year's tour was one of the most successful yet. LOB brought back Marin's *Cendrillon*, which has become a signature piece, with the dancers dressed as dolls for a futuristic and highly stylized take on the fairy tale of *Cinderella*.

It's this new take on dance that Loukos is looking for, and for him, it isn't about classical vs. contemporary. "I don't think we should continue separating ballet from modern dance," Loukos asserts. "I think when classical ballet dancers go into modern they dance ballet even better because it enriches their knowledge. I think my dancers dance Forsythe better after they've danced Trisha Brown. They learn something new. I think it's a plus."

For more: www.opera-lyon.org



Lyon Opera Ballet in Maguy Marin's *Cendrillon*

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