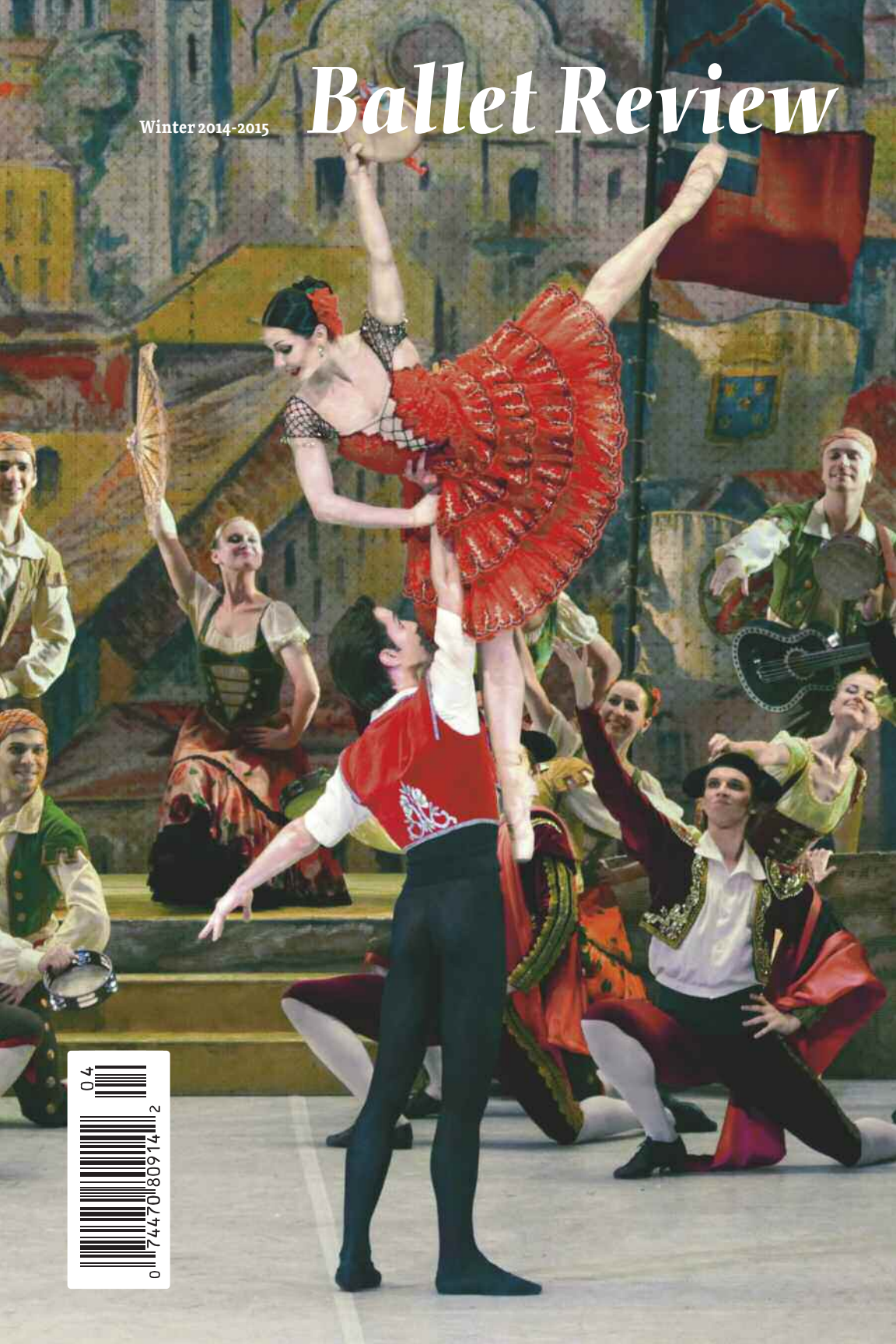


Winter 2014-2015

Ballet Review



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Bolshoi Ballet: Maria
Alexandrova and
Vladislav Lantratov
in *Don Quixote*.



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experience. Both Robinson and Pertl brought an easy sexuality to the roles they danced and Verbeni, hair loose, legs flying, gave the female member of the trio a sense of playful longing.

—*Trois Poemes de la Nuit*, choreographed by Gonzalo Galguera to music by Charles Valentin Alkan, is a romantic pas de deux in a classical vein. Lou Beyne and Leander Rebholz, from Germany's Magdeburg Ballet, danced as if one, finding in the lush movement a ravishing sense of passion unleashed. Later they returned in Muriel Duclos' stunning *Adult Air*. Beyne, a dramatic dancer with legs like the iconic Zizi Jeanmaire, performed with glorious abandon, finding in both music and choreography a catalyst for surrender.

—Robinson and Badenes opened the gala with *White Swan Pas de Deux*, giving the program some familiar classical roots. Robinson isn't as comfortable in the classical milieu as he is with something like *Aff*, and while he partnered cautiously, there wasn't sufficient surrender. Badenes, for her part, looked to be to the manner born, but didn't always let go enough to suggest the rapturous abandon she could supply in this piece.

—The gala introduced many Islanders to the joys of classical and contemporary dance. The fact that most of the participants are corps members in their respective companies and in the early stages of their dance careers made the event all the more impressive. What an amazing prelude for the future.

New York

Karen Greenspan

Upon walking into the small square gallery on the second floor of the Asia Society, I was transfixed by three maroon-and-ochre-clad Buddhist monks seated cross-legged atop a five-foot-square, low, white table. Their brown socks peeked out from beneath colorful robes. They were bent over the intricate pencil-drawn outline of the Shitro Mandala in a concentrated group endeavor. With the precise design etched in their minds, they had pen-

ciled the cosmic diagram onto the table's surface. Then, over the course of five days, they patiently and painstakingly painted the mandala into visual existence by applying grains of brilliantly tinted sand.

In the ritual of *dultson kilkyor*, or constructing a sand mandala, the monks use a copper instrument called a *tchabuk* – a small, horn-shaped funnel with tiny notches etched along the top. When rubbed with a separate copper tool that looks like a six-inch stick with a flat trapezoidal spatula at the end, it dispenses the colorful sand grains that compose the mandala painting. The *tchabuks* are made with different sized openings at the end, controlling the flow of sand depending on the degree of detail needed for each part of the design.

I was mesmerized as I watched a tiny cobalt blue *vajra* (scepter) emerge onto a small vermilion panel. The degree of focus and stability of fine movement mirrored that of a neurosurgeon. The monks donned surgical masks while engaged in their task so as not to accidentally blow and displace any of the sand design. They frequently braced their forearms on cushions to eliminate extraneous movement. Accompanied by the constant sound of rough metal rubbing on metal, they worked all day from 11:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m., taking only an hour break for lunch. In a corner of the room a genial monk taught the child visitors to use the *tchabuk* to paint a drawing of a flower on a piece of paper.

The monks constantly nudged stray grains of sand back into place with the copper spatulas, reminding me of other Buddhist meditations in which it is necessary to continually redirect wandering thoughts back to the focus. One of the monks placed the wide end of the *tchabuk* up to his mouth and deftly sucked up a few unruly grains. He turned and commented, "That's always a last resort."

Before the painting commenced, the monks participated in their morning meditation followed by a ritual to consecrate the gallery space – all part of this Tantric Buddhist practice. According to Robert Thurman, eminent

scholar of Tibetan Buddhism at Columbia University, Tantra is an apocalyptic style of Buddhism that emerged out of India and infiltrated Tibet and the Himalayan region between 500 and 1000 C.E. In service of its goal of accelerating the progress of universal enlightenment, it developed a complex meditation system with visual, vocal, physical, and ritual supports. Mandalas are thus used as a visual anchor for meditation.

The Shitro Mandala represents the palace of 108 peaceful and wrathful deities and is attributed to the great fourteenth-century, Tibetan lama, Karma Lingpa, who is considered to be one of the great *tertons*, or treasure revealers. It is believed that the early Tantric guru, Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet from India in the eighth century, intentionally hid texts and holy objects all over the landscape of the Himalayas as well as in the minds of his disciples in anticipation of the people's spiritual needs in later times. These hidden, and later discovered, teachings are called *terma*, or revealed treasures.

Karma Lingpa is responsible for discovering the Shitro treasure text containing the *Bardo Thodrol*, commonly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This text deals with preparing oneself for death, *bardo* (the in-between state where one remains for forty-nine days), and rebirth. By meditating on the 108 deities housed within the vibrant design of the Shitro Mandala, one becomes familiar with the deities one will encounter upon death and in the sensitive transitional state of *bardo*. Tantric Buddhists believe that this awareness helps to ensure a positive rebirth.

It was quite significant to learn that the Shitro Mandala was ascribed to Karma Lingpa, as his Shitro treasure text is also the source and inspiration for a very famous Bhutanese sacred dance, or *cham*, called *Raksha Mangcham*. The *cham* is categorized as a *tercham*, or treasure dance, because it is derived from a treasure text.

I have seen *Raksha Mangcham* performed live

twice – including two weeks after watching the Drikung monks construct the sand mandala. It is a popular, three-hour dance-drama performed at sacred festivals all over Bhutan. The dance, like the text it is based on, addresses



Photo: Kenan Greenstein

Shitro Mandala at New York's Asia Society.

the universal preoccupation with the hereafter. This courtroom drama unfolds in the state of *bardo*, where two newly deceased men are judged by Shinje (Lord of Death) to determine the realm of their next incarnation.

The court case is presided over by the Raksha, an ox-masked dancer who represents the Minister of Justice. The dance includes a frightening prosecutor; a white-masked defense attorney, a black-robed criminal, a red-robed righteous man (dressed in the robes of a Buddhist monk), a full jury of twenty-four animal-masked dancers holding symbolic props (a set of scales, a counting board, a mirror of fate), and an oversized puppet of Lord Shinje with his attendants and angels. This danced morality play is supposed to remind people that their day-to-day life choices and actions have karmic effects on their future state of existence.

The sacred dances are considered to be mandalas – three dimensional, living, breathing, cosmic diagrams mapping out the abode of the deities. The Bhutanese believe that by viewing this dance, as with the Shitro Mandala, they will become aware of what to expect upon death and will be familiar with the deities they will meet. So the Shitro sand

design and the Bhutanese dance *Raksha Mangcham* are both mandalas spawned by Karma Lingpa's treasure text.

The Shitro Mandala was on view for three months, as part of a larger Asia Society exhibition "Golden Visions of Densatil: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery. The five monks who alternately worked on the mandala in New York are from the Drikung lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, which is headquartered in exile in Dehradun, India, while there is also a lineage seat in Lhasa, Tibet. The *Raksha Mangcham* dance can be viewed on the New York Public Library's website: <digitalcollectionsnypl.org/dancevideo>.

At the conclusion of a sand mandala ritual, the brilliant design is swept into a vase and carried in procession to a river where the sand grains are dispersed into the waters. This serves as a reminder of the impermanence of all phenomena. So, too, the cham mandala dissolves, as the dancers exit with a purposeful movement phrase, one by one or two by two, across the sacred space – until it is again, empty.

Washington, D.C.

Lisa Traiger

Swan Lake, the very epitome of ballet, is both the apex and the aspiration of companies the world over. The 1895 Petipa-Ivanov version for St. Petersburg still lives on in structure and in the oral tradition passed on from ballerina to ballerina, generation to generation. Even today the Maryinsky dancers remain the ultimate exponents of this fairy tale of a white ballet.

—For the Maryinsky's now annual Kennedy Center season, the company brought its "Stalinized" staging from 1950, in which Konstantin Sergeyev stripped out substantial passages of the mime, "streamlining" and "Sovietizing" the first act. But this alteration is mi-

Alina Somova and Vladimir Shklyarov.

nor compared to the "Stalinized" happy ending, instead of the more poignantly satisfying one that unites the lovers in death—a finale Western audiences are far more accustomed to seeing.

—The sheer scope and accumulated tradition that the Maryinsky maintains lends this production its richly lustrous look. Igor Ivanov's sets—a gothic castle overlooking the action; balconies in the great hall for trumpeters to herald; a moody, moon-washed, wooded lake—are beautifully painted and detailed. The action shifts from a warm afternoon glow in the castle grounds of act 1 to the frost-tinged forest lit in an icy blue in act 2. Costumes as well, by Galina Solovyova, are richly decorated and detailed, as is the dancing, which is to be expected by this still-illustrious troupe.

—Bringing just one set of principals to Washington this year, the company left Odette/Odile and Siegfried open to soloists and second soloists, save for the opening night. That evening's principals, Alina Somova and Vladimir Shklyarov, are familiar to D.C. audiences from their run in Ratmansky's *Cinderella* in 2013. While they are an attractive pair, the dramatic connection was simply not there, making it hard to believe the prince was love-struck and pining for his swan queen.

—Somova, lithe and flexible, willowy in that Maryinsky manner so suitable for Odette, was icily cold in her transformation into the