
Interview: Alexandre de la Caffinière



'Never before had I reached such a degree of freedom'

Alexandre de la Caffinière, whose remarks we reproduce below, was born in 1971 and trained at the school of the Paris Opera. Between 1989 and 1992, he was engaged at the Royal Ballet of Flanders at Antwerp; he then danced for one season at the Hessen State Theater, before, in August 1993, taking up an engagement as soloist at the Berlin German Opera, where the ballet is now directed by the renowned Danish ballet master Peter Schaufuss.

Although the artist is, as yet, unknown in the United States, his observations will be of interest to those who may have little knowledge of the ballet, but are concerned with the classical theater, as they give a real insight into the degree of intellectual rigor, even suffering, which the great roles such as "James" in Bournonville's *La Sylphide*, call for. For those who do follow the present debate over dance technique, what Mr. de la Caffinière has to say about the Bournonville school is, to say the least, audacious. Never before has a person entirely trained at the Paris Opera, number one among the world's academies, suddenly proclaimed the superiority of another, "less prestigious," but extraordinarily difficult school, of which most dancers prefer to remain profoundly ignorant.

It should be noted here that when this gentleman refers to the "Bournonville" or "French" school, he is talking about the particular technique taught in France in the mid-19th century, and which, for historical reasons we cannot discuss here, is presently taught only in Denmark. In France and elsewhere today, there prevails essentially, the modern Russian technique, which, with its emphasis on stretched-out, taut lines, hyper-extensions and vast jumps, is far more spectacular, far more "effective" on stage, but also, frankly, absolutely vacuous.

Mr. de la Caffinière's words will have to be taken seriously by the art world, because they are spoken by a person who must be respected, in spite of his youth, as a great artist. His interpretation of James in Schaufuss's production of *La Sylphide* at the Hessen State Theater in the spring of 1993 can only be described as a breakthrough for this art form, reaching a level of mental concentration and moral truth, which reminded one of the pre-war Shakespearean theater. Although in every respect severely classical, the French-

man's interpretation traced a new frontier with regard to the ability of the ballet to express the most powerful, the most elevated thoughts and emotions. For those who were there and had eyes to see, it will never be forgotten.

Mr. de la Caffinière responded in writing to written questions submitted by Katharine Kanter.

EIR: You say that you have thought about the role of James for years. Why?

De la Caffinière: It is indeed the case that *La Sylphide* holds a most special place in my heart: It was the first piece from the repertory I ever saw. It was at the Opera, I was a child, and in that moment I thought to become a dancer. For me, to dance James was to fulfill that dream. Interpreting James in Bournonville's *Sylphide* is the point at which I knew I had become a dancer.

However, to dance this ballet also means to be aware that you stand, so to speak, before a monster of the classical repertory: the first romantic ballet, the one which broke the path for those that came after. Many great artists have danced the role before me; I knew that to take on James's being would be an astonishing journey. Nor was I let down!

EIR: Most striking is the humility with which you put forward the author and his ideas, rather than the morbid self-display so often seen. What did Bournonville intend in this work?

De la Caffinière: For a dancer, the trap of narcissism lies always open, the trap of putting up on stage, not what the author may have wanted to say, but an exhibition of the self.

La Sylphide is a drama, in the real sense of the word, of a man whose sensitivity and weakness lead to his fall. To my mind, this ballet is not out of date. I see James, and I know that I myself might fall under the spell of a Sylph. She stands for that which is unknown, mystery, fantasy, desire, temptation, and that is what leads James to his wrack. Men are weak, at times too impressionable and imprudent; they want to break away, to see other climes, to have dealings with mysterious things. Women are more aware of danger, more realistic, more clear-sighted: This is well depicted in Effie, in *La Sylphide*. In the outcome, she shows herself to be

strong; she will dry her tears, marry Gurn, and in the end, forget James, his folly and lack of judgment. It seems to me that these traits in man and in woman hold true for our own day; most likely, they are universal, and that may well be what Bournonville wanted to say.

EIR: It is most unusual for one artist to play both Gurn and James, the more so, in a single season. How have you worked on these two roles?

De la Caffinière: "To work on a role" is, to my mind, not really an accurate way of putting it. From a technical standpoint, I work on the steps, the variations, on the choreography.

When it comes to interpretation however, I cannot truly say that I work on that. But, if you insist, "working on the roles" of James and Gurn started by understanding what these characters have to say. Pure dance excludes the use of speech, but in truth, some roles do speak. First and foremost, I must understand the character I play. From then on, I do not try to bring to each performance the same emotions. Once I am on stage, I think of myself as James, or Gurn, and each mime passage, each single gesture, takes on meaning; I cannot, without it being dishonest, do what I have been asked, simply because I have been told to do it. On stage, I discuss with myself constantly, and I live each moment as though it were

real to me. Thus, each single performance becomes another adventure.

Plainly, however, in order to come at that degree of freedom, many hours of work have to be put in, whether on the technique, on studying the choreography, or on the mime.

EIR: What was the hardest for you in this piece?

De la Caffinière: In classical dancing, many believe that bravura means spinning a thousand times through the air or on the ground, a kind of acrobatics. Such things have more to do with gymnastics — much as I like to watch that myself — but do not possess, as I see it, the quality of bravura in any way whatsoever. In Bournonville, there is such a thing as bravura, indeed, it seems to me that bravura is intrinsic to Bournonville's style.

To reach the level known as bravura, there must be the utmost simplicity, the utmost modesty in the work, and empty provocations which one may have been taught before, such as futile accents of the arms or the head, must be put aside. Whereas, what is called for, is a very correct execution of the steps. That is what makes Bournonville's technique so hard: to dance each step with unflinching rigor, the which requires utmost concentration, making it seem as though it were all effortless, the strain being all the while hidden, as though it were nought, as though you were born winging



*De la Caffinière in
"Gurn" in La Syphide.*

through the skies, flying from one side to another, and, withal, smiling!

EIR: Do you agree with those, the majority, who say that there is far too much mime in Bournonville?

De la Caffinière: I have not yet seen all of Bournonville's works; what I have seen, gave me considerable delight. However, I must say, that after watching on video a film of his *A Folk Tale*, to the eye of a professional the part he gives to the mime passages, which are both numerous and lengthy, struck me as somewhat excessive, and, if I may so, even somewhat dull.

That being said, one should bear in mind that at the time, there were quite other motives: Dancing had only begun to emerge as an art form in its own right, whereas music and drama had for long been considered as such. That may well be the reason why, in some of Bournonville's ballets, there are so many, and such lengthy passages where there is no dancing. In my view, that should be respected, and held up as a witness to the past. Furthermore, like any other artist, Bournonville, though a genius in his art, did not compose only masterpieces.

In *La Sylphide*, what particularly enchants me, is the way the mime is woven in throughout: Even in the dancing passages, it does not stand apart, while dance and mime mingle in the most admirable way to form one single element, the which makes this ballet speak so powerfully.

EIR: You have said that your own character changed and that you "aged" considerably while studying the role of James. What do you mean?

De la Caffinière: The psychology of the character of James led me to think a great deal, and I am persuaded that thinking will always bring about change, and some kind of progress. Further, I feel somehow close to James: Like him, I can resist temptation, but it may be that one day I shall be carried away by it. The role of James helped me to understand myself. I am 22, and when I danced this role, I knew I had become a man, and an adult.

Moreover, I do not believe that ever before, had I reached such a degree of freedom of expression: The rigor I imposed upon myself allowed me to become open, to move forward; also, I learned much more about my art.

EIR: What did you mean, when you said that Bournonville has helped you to put back order in disorder? What do you mean, when you speak of "putting aside unnecessary things"?

De la Caffinière: At the Opera school in Paris, where I was fortunate enough to be trained, it is true that young dancers are expected to have certain physical attributes which I do not possess. Striving to live up to those demands, and under that influence, I tried to stretch out my limbs in order to



Alexandre de la Caffinière as "Gurn" in Bournonville's classic ballet *La Sylphide*. In the center, T. van Cauwenberg as Madge. Hessen State Theater, March-April 1993.

appear longer, taller, and more finely constructed than I am. At present, I have to pay the price for those flaws in placement; I am struggling to get back to the way in which my body should be balanced, and to find a placement suited to it. It is in fact Bournonville which has let me do away with unnecessary things.

The great strength of Bournonville's school lies in that it demands the utmost sobriety from the interpreter. In order to dance it, there must be the most exact possible placement of the body, precise positions, and the *épaulement*. These things, to my mind, make the French school the best in the world, because it allows those who have developed such qualities a vast range of freedom to interpret all other choreographers.

EIR: As a dancer, you have to do what you are told. But in 20 years, you yourself will be responsible for the dance. Does one have to accept accidents as an "occupational hazard," a normal by-product of what I always say is irresponsible choreography?

De la Caffinière: Accidents *are* an occupational hazard. To seek must involve an element of the unknown: The dancer

must go beyond what he thinks are his limits, he must err in order to be right, and that can sometimes lead to accidents. On a bigger scale, choreographers, working out new steps, sometimes demand dangerous things from dancers. But no matter what the field of investigation, it is far more instructive to err than to hit upon a thing straightaway, without ever knowing why.

Thus, and yes, I do believe this, one must to some extent take this on, while knowing one's limits; in any event, in choreography there will always be both sides, the author and the dancer. A choreographer cannot ask from a dancer what he cannot do.

EIR: Whatever do you see in Balanchine, my old enemy?

De la Caffinière: Unless he himself feel that emotion while performing a work, I do not think a dancer can convey it. That state of emotion arises in me when I dance Balanchine, whom I consider to be a turning point in the history of ballet. What I love in him is his study of the extreme, without ever there being exaggeration, and his study of calculated loss of balance. He sought another means of conveying emotion through movement, and found it.

Of course, and such is often the case with Bournonville as well, some of Balanchine's movements are dangerous. Each in their own way, these two choreographers are both extreme. Be that as it may, I think the best way to understand and dance Balanchine, is to understand the French school, that is, Bournonville.

Other choreographers interest me, people who would perhaps not be with us had Balanchine not opened the door; I like the originality and creative spirit of Jiry Killian, or William Forsythe, for the same reasons I like Balanchine, to whom Forsythe is, in my opinion, the successor. But I have also had the good luck to dance James Sutherland [dancer and choreographer, currently at the Ballet of the Hessen State Theater, Wiesbaden], a yet-unknown author, who has brought me a great deal in my art, and whose works I find to be on the highest level.

EIR: What do you think of the state of your profession today?

De la Caffinière: As for classical dancing, the teaching of it is often not what it should be. I can accept a number of styles, but the academism of the French school should be universal. Bournonville's works do allow, and will allow, those dancers willing to look closely into them, no matter what the school they themselves come from, to understand a great deal, and by their own volition, of what is classical dance.

As for contemporary dance, I am most interested in it, and thanks to the few but good choreographers who do exist, it is doing well. As a dancer, I will always be open in the mind to new authors and new ideas, otherwise men of ability will never be found out.

'Multi-culturalism' is to destroy education

by Carlos Méndez and Cynthia Rush

The United States isn't the only country in which neo-malthusian Satanists are out to brainwash schoolchildren under the guise of "educational reform." Throughout Ibero-America, entities such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the Organization of American States (OAS), the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), the World Bank, and numerous non-governmental organizations have been engaged, often for many years, in dismantling traditional education and replacing it with what they call more "relevant" multi-cultural programs which take into account ethnic and even geographical differences.

These reforms amount to outright racism and cultural relativism, inculcated under the pretext of eliminating allegedly "authoritarian" tendencies. The aim is not only to create the ignorant and docile labor force demanded by foreign usurers, but to extirpate the continent's Spanish-language, Catholic heritage. They are designed above all to reverse the evangelization process launched in the 16th century, through which Ibero-America's Indian populations were assimilated into the more advanced western European culture introduced by Spain, and were exposed to the concepts of universal history. Today, many of these reforms are taking place under cover of "non-discriminatory" programs whose real purpose is to brainwash students into thinking that their identity is really ethnically determined.

The Inter-American Dialogue (IAD), the Washington think tank which runs the Clinton administration's policy for Ibero-America, recently made known its intention to make "educational reform" in Ibero-America a key focus of its future work. Such reforms are coherent with the liberal free trade and drug legalization policies the Dialogue backs.

De-schooling in Bolivia

Take the case of Bolivia. New President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, a member of the IAD, announced shortly after taking office in early August that he would completely overhaul the country's educational system, which one former education minister has labeled "repressive" and discriminatory. The Lima daily *Expreso* reported on Aug. 8 that in order to create a curriculum that meets the educational needs of