

**"Peter the Great" Gala
A Celebration of Peter Pestov's Life in Ballet
New York City Center
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Review by Leigh Witchel**

Bravura Overload

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There's something about a gala night of super-duper stars in solos and duets that can make your eyes cross from fatigue. Luckily, there's also usually something in the carnival that makes you glad to have seen it. The gala honoring Russian teacher Peter Pestov was more substantial than its sister gala honoring the Youth America Grand Prix with better choreography sprinkled amidst the choreographic lollipops and some unfamiliar dancers New York should be very glad to see.

Peter Pestov taught men at the school at the Bolshoi Ballet and now at the John Cranko School of the Stuttgart Ballet; he is celebrating his 80th birthday. His students are illustrious; Alexei Ratmansky, the evening's host, was part of his graduating class of 1988. The other students included Vladimir Malakhov and Yuri Burlaka, who replaced Ratmansky at the Bolshoi. Burlaka was not in attendance, but many of Pestov's other students from Russia and Germany were, along with several other guests.

Six young men from Pestov's current graduating class at the Cranko School filed onstage to begin the evening with a demonstration of Pestov's class. His combinations aren't "dancey," they're built to develop strength and control. One of the boys, Maxime Quiroga, had everything – talent, stage presence and face. He's entering the Royal Ballet of Flanders in the fall and I would not be surprised if we hear more about him.

Following an emphatically Russian version of Bournonville's "Flower Festival in Genzano" danced by kids, Sascha Radetsky, another of Pestov's students, danced Hans van Manen's "Five Tangos." A scheduled performance of "The Leaves are Fading" didn't happen, but a passionate, full-blooded bedroom pas de deux from "Manon" with Victoria Tereshkina and Marcelo Gomes did. Wearing a corset and skirt, Tereshkina was a leggy arc in arabesque with sharp dart-like feet. When doing classical pieces, she favors very large tutu skirts that make her proportions shorter.

Alicia Amatriain was born in San Sebastian, Spain, but her career has been at Stuttgart Ballet. She may be Spanish, but she was all German engineering dancing "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated" – and more. Amatriain has an extraordinary whippet body and profligate ability, but she added interaction to the acrobatics. She barely bothered with makeup and stared at Mikhail Kaniskin of the Berlin State Opera Ballet before they danced; she looked pinched and submissive from exhaustion, almost despondent. Then she tore into the pas de deux and flattened the audience with 220 degree extensions. Kaniskin did more "acting" and less "being" than Amatriain and partnered well.

Malakhov danced the New York premiere of "La Vita Nuova," an operatic solo by Ronald Savkovic. It involved some stretchy histrionics and a strip from



a baggy black shirt and pants to a white shirt and shorts. It was forgettable, but let Malakhov be Malakhov.

"Le Corsaire" has some of the flashiest dancing for short male pyrotechnicians around, and since they're all over ballet like mushrooms after rain, we see a lot of "Le Corsaire." The YAGP gala closed with an expanded suite from the ballet; we saw several of the same dances here in a pas de trois. Herman Corenjo danced the slave with Adiarys Almeida; Joseph Gatti, originally from Orlando Ballet and now with Almeida at Corella Ballet, was Lankendem, the slave-trader. Almeida, trained in Cuba, is a prodigious, brutal turner, slamming her way through nonetheless impressive triples in the coda. Cornejo danced his variation plain vanilla and Gatti threatened to steal the show with some flashy air turns. Not to be outdone, Cornejo pulled out the stops in the coda with soaring elevation.

After the intermission, Yuri Possokhov, San Francisco Ballet's choreographer in residence and another of Pestov's students, staged his pas de deux from "Raymonda" on one of SFB's new stars, Maria Kochetkova and a former one, Gonzalo Garcia. Kochetkova is also Bolshoi trained and a little snowflake of a dancer, small and waif-like, but steely. Garcia looked happier dancing than he has at New York City Ballet, but there was a partnering bobble and it damaged his composure. Garcia has the soul of a dancer and good technique and elevation, but putting him in a gala among tricksters shows that he isn't one; he doesn't have the precision. Apart from an unlucky slip, Kochetkova is very precise and very lovely; Possokhov's enchaînements were quite demanding and she negotiated them with coloratura ease.

Islom Baimudurov and Yekaterina

Kondaurova have done Ratmansky's "Middle Duet" on this stage before; once again it recalled the ticking of an existential clock. Radetsky, along with Karine Plantadit almost didn't dance Twyla Tharp's "Sinatra Suite." It took three false starts before someone found the correct music. In the interim Gennadi Saveliev hurled out Rostislav Zakharov's "Gopak," which compressed fifteen minutes worth of air jumps into a minute and a half. The audience loved it.

Sergei Kheylik came out immediately after and danced "Fractal" by Josie Walsh. It had several of the same tricks as "Gopak," only danced to Massive Attack and in shorty-shorts instead of Russian costume. Plus ça change . . . Amatriain and Kaniskin returned to do Christian Spuck's Rossini spoof, "Le Grand Pas de Deux." It's an amiably dopey ballet and Amatriain continued to impress. Not only does she have world-class technique, she's got flawless comic timing. She was hilariously putty faced as a bespectacled ballerina forced to choose between her porteur and her favorite red purse. She even managed to do fouettés in character.

The third time was the charm and Radetsky and Plantadit were finally able to do a pugilistic rendition of "That's Life." Plantadit dances on Broadway and her vivid, ballsy style suited the work. Malakhov's second solo, "Voyage," by Renato Zanella, was more substantial than "La Vita Nuova." Malakhov danced shirtless in a pale suit and the piece had a nostalgic, languorous quality that suggested the sea. Though in excellent form, Malakhov is no longer young, yet there was something of the inevitable sense of age that also suggested "Death in Venice's" von Aschenbach.

Nicolai Tsiskaridze was not to be outdone, or ignored. He performed a version of "Carmen" extra-specially

prepared by Roland Petit, came out in flaming red and danced all the parts. All of them. Leaps, fans, fouettés, and simpers. This stupefying performance fell into the uncomfortable area between parody and wish fulfillment. Who knows which he intended more.

Tereshkina and Vladimir Shklyarov closed the YAGP gala and here as well, this time with "Don Quixote" instead of "Le Corsaire." The "Don Q" pas de deux has lots of empty calories; there were fouettés and triple hoo-hahs aplenty. Shklyarov could just partner Tereshkina; her best moment was when she came out with a large fluffy red fan and hit us between the eyes with her variation. It may have been the simpler version, but she had grade A fan technique and she's a real girl. Take that, Tsiskaridze.

The gala ended with the participants onstage saluting the honoree, who seemed to be still in his classroom attire and clutching his bag as if no one told him he was to be feted. It was an impressive tribute to a man with an impressive roster of students, but it also showed that the hazy line between technique and decadence can only be avoided by substance and artistry.

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Photos by Nina Alovert

From top to bottom:

1. Alicia Amatriain and Mikhail Kaniskin in "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated"
2. Maxime Quiroga
3. Gonzalo Garcia and Maria Kochetkova in "Raymonda"
4. Alicia Amatriain and Mikhail Kaniskin in "Le Grand Pas de Deux"

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