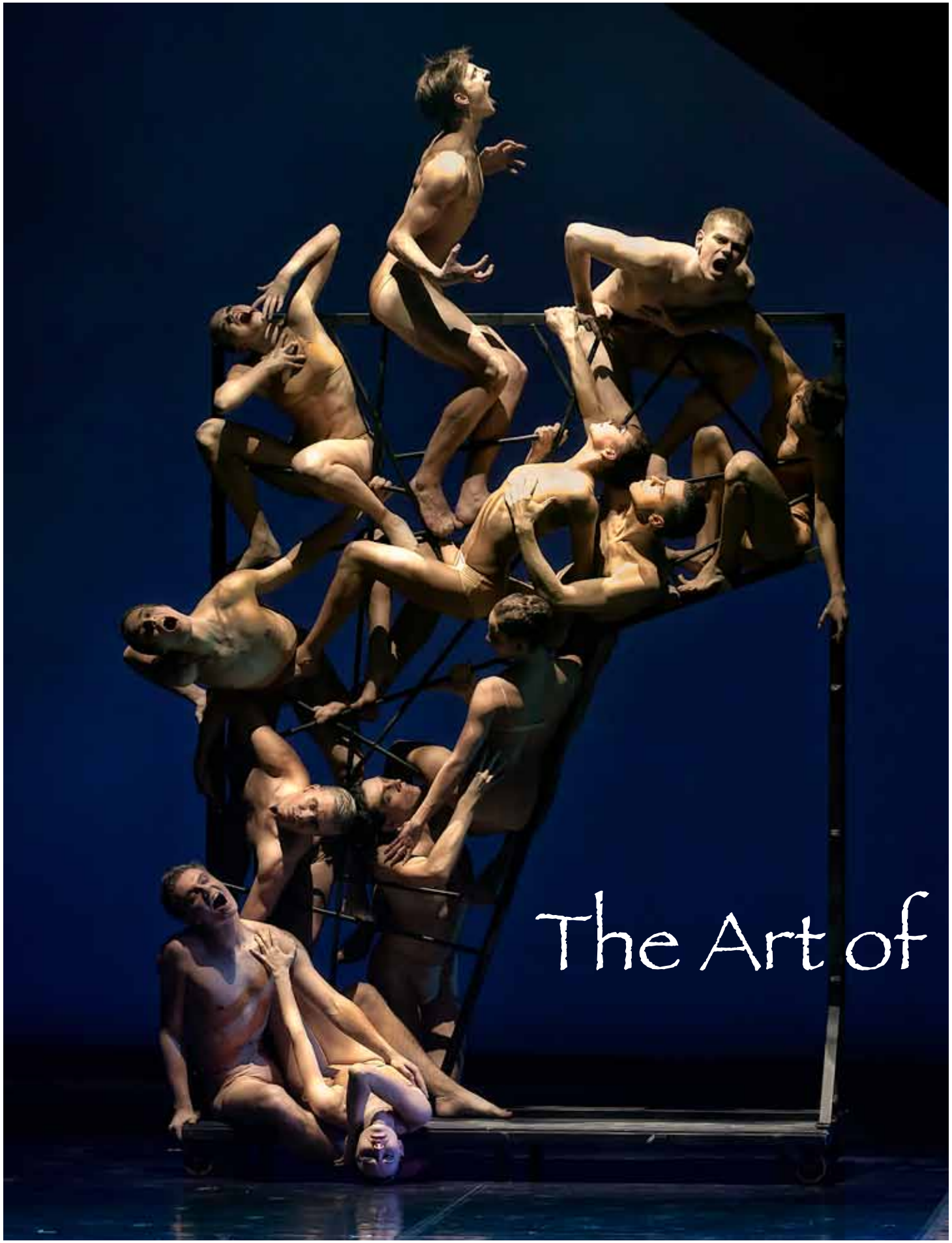

The Art of Boris Eifman

Photographed by Souheil Michael Khoury
Introduction by Tatiana A. Boborykina

To my children, Robert & Sophia

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TATIANA A. BOBORYKINA

Boris Eifman, often called "one of the leading choreographers in the world" and an "amazing magician of the theater," was born in 1946 in a small town in Siberia, into a family that was connected neither with ballet nor the theater. From early childhood, he wanted to interpret Pushkin's poems through movement, and the neighbors used to call him "that boy who dances." At the age of twelve, he started to write "My First Ballets" in his school notebook. Later, he entered ballet school in Kishinev, where he met a famous ballet master from St. Petersburg and addressed him with a straightforward question: "How can one become a choreographer?" "Young man," replied the maestro, "One cannot *become* a choreographer, one has to be born such."

And it seems like *the young man* was *born* to express his feelings and thoughts through dancing images. The innate sense of movement and the instinct to compose brought him to the Leningrad (St. Petersburg) Conservatory, where he studied in the choreography department, and then to the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet, where he worked for ten years as a staff choreographer, composing new works for student performances.

In 1977, he formed his own ballet ensemble – Leningrad New Ballet – today called St. Petersburg State Academic Ballet House (or just *Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg*) that, from its very first productions, presented a new aesthetic and a new type of authorial ballet theater. In Eifman's words, *authorial theater* "gives the artist the possibility to create his own world and within it to express his ideas, his mission."

With no accommodations or facilities, Eifman and his dancers had to move several times a day from one end of the city to the other for rehearsals in various sport halls, which were not suitable for dancing. One of his first performances in those days was a one-act ballet called "Only Love," set to Shedrin's music. Eifman, young, handsome, refined, and always deeply concentrated on some inner creative process, was the object of romantic interest and love of all women around him. It indeed had to be *only love* that could move him and his team to work so selflessly in those years lacking money, lacking proper conditions, and lacking freedom.

Eifman began his career during a time that demanded a great deal of strength and courage to stand up for the right to have one's own creed as an artist. His early ballets were unlike anything up to that time in the Soviet Union. With their sensuality, their explicit modern dance movements and their intense drama, they challenged the Soviet cultural establishment, stirred up the stagnation of academic ballet, which was bogged down in routine, and blasted a breach in the iron curtain that had sealed off the country from new directions in Western art. His first productions were overwhelmingly successful and captured the hearts of a large number of ballet goers, especially among the youth. Subjected to the censorship of the Soviet apparatus, his ballets were at risk of being forbidden by the 'artistic counsels,' whose mission was to stamp out any gleam of freedom. "I have a comic ballet after Beaumarchais' comedy 'The Marriage of Figaro,'" Eifman recollects, "I had fun creating it and the audience had fun watching it… The members of the counsel, however, were not pleased as they sat through the first official viewing. Judging from the expressions on their faces, they may have thought I was the father of ballet pornography. However, after my Figaro danced three times his official marriage, we won them over."

Early on, Eifman was searching for and beginning to discover ideas that he would develop in his later performances: "the dance of emotions, free dance, a new language, in

which classical ballet and modern dance are interwoven with ecstatic impulses and the expression of passion." He expanded the scope of the art of ballet, having discovered within it an enormous expanse of ideas that could transcend it. He was the first choreographer to dare a ballet based on the work of Dostoevsky. "I felt the necessity to broaden the bounds of choreographic art, to penetrate deeper into psychology, into the mysteries of man's inner world," he commented on the ballet *Idiot*, based on Dostoevsky's novel and staged to Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. He pursued this effort in his ballet *The Karamazovs*, based on another of Dostoevsky's masterpieces, reaching for an artistic embodiment of 'the tragic movement of ideas' of the novel.

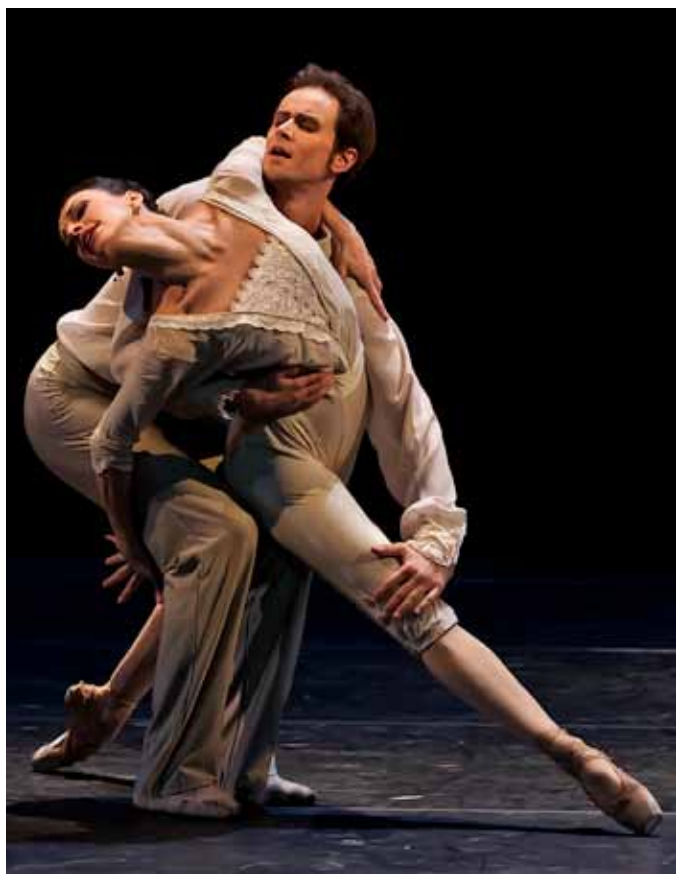
When Eifman turns to the works of great writers and translates them into the language of ballet, his aim is not merely an immersion into the words, the story, the characters, as it is a full immersion of the body into the soul. Such is his interpretation of Tolstoy's ***Anna Karenina***, the story of a young woman who, having betrayed her husband and having failed to find fulfillment with her lover, throws herself under a train.

One of the most striking images of the ballet is that of a train which appears in different dimensions and scales. At first, we see it as a toy of Karenina's son. A little mechanical locomotive slowly goes around Anna, like some mystical partner in a mysterious duet between her and her fate to come. Then, it appears on stage as a dream

image. A memory haunts Anna, that of a man who was crushed under the wheels of a train from which she emerged and first set eyes on her lover, Vronsky. The hazy image of that train seems to spur her both to take revenge against her lover for ultimately failing her, and against herself to expiate her sin. Her nightmare unfolds before the audience: a mass of dancers in body-colored leotards splits into two huge circles, their rotary motions similar to the motion of the wheels that are about to crush Anna, their moving shapes of disaster and death spinning within her.

Finally, the last fateful train appears, enacted by the entire corps de ballet. Using a technique of "machine dancing" as well as mechanical music, synthesizing together the sound of train wheels with a beating heart, we see the image of something mighty and unstoppable. This is no longer a toy train; it is a dance of death, filling up the entire stage. Anna ascends over the hypnotically gyrating mass of dancers. The music, the sound pulse, and the movement all swell with momentous intensity, until Anna takes her final leap into the abyss.

In the ballet ***I, Don Quixote****,* Eifman, starting with Cervantes' novel and its classical choreographic version to Ludwig Minkus' music, creates a new story where two parallel worlds coexist: the world of dim reality and the brightly colored, vibrating realm of dream. The main character, mistaking ideal for real life, is locked in a madhouse. Eifman's Don Quixote has much



in common with Dostoevsky's utopian dreamers. He shares with them a personality trait that sets them apart from everyone around them: the readiness to sacrifice themselves for others, which in all times is considered madness. This is reminiscent of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and its film adaptation by Milos Forman. In Eifman's Don Quixote, the Nurse's control is symbolized by the small round sphere in which she metaphorically imprisons Don Quixote, conveying the perennial motif of conflict between power and personality, between dominating authority and Man's freedom of dream and imagination. Says Eifman: "We live under the wreck of our own illusions. In dreams we create our life stories. The intersection of fantasy with reality produces tragedy."

Another ballet based on classical literature is ***Onegin,*** after the novel in verse by Pushkin. Eifman shifts the action from the 19th century to the last decade of the 20th century, a time of revolutionary upheavals in Russia. Still, faithful to Pushkin, the ballet master stages episodes that are parallel to the novel in some of its finest details. These are not mere illustrations of the author's text, but rather a choreographic interpretation of the original, distinctly highlighting new aspects of the novel.

All previous musical, choreographic and cinematic versions of Onegin had mostly ignored the theme of the dreams. Eifman, however, makes Tatiana's main dream the centerpiece of his work. As Tatiana is falling asleep, strange apparitions, swirling in chaos of what has been and what is to come,

gradually surround her. The sinister characters of the dream are both the projections of the guests at Tatiana's upcoming name day celebration, and the embodiment of the chilling instinct that is pulling her toward her "fateful tempter", Eugene Onegin. In her dream – as described by Pushkin – Onegin suddenly and demonically appears, commanding: *'She's mine!'* And in the ballet, the Onegin of the dream is the embodiment of sensuality, as he subjugates Tatiana to his will.

'I am yours!' is what the mad, erotic dancing of Tatiana seems to respond. In this sensual duet, Tatiana genuinely comes to know a "somber bliss" and drinks the dregs of the "draught of love's temptations," her thirst for which will remain unquenched when she is awake.

Pushkin's Onegin also has dreams, which torment him after he kills his friend Lensky in a duel. In Eifman's interpretation, he is haunted by visions of death. The sleeping Onegin sees the image of his former friendship. A vision of Lensky hovers in the air over a reclining Onegin, like his mirror image, as if his friend's soul, released, is floating over him. In the mystical movement of this ballet, dreams flow into dreams, they break loose from the unconscious, they connect the past and the future, and they foreshadow the reality to come.

Boris Eifman's continuous artistic, philosophic and psychological quest led him to a new range of themes. To investigate Man's ambivalent, complicated inner world, he picked real artistic personalities as his main characters, and staged them to live

simultaneously in reality and in their own imaginations. Using factual, documentary, and biographical material, he created not so much historical portrait galleries of outstanding people, but rather dancing symphonies of their lives, passions, tragedies, and creations.

Such is the ballet ***Red Giselle*** - a psychological drama about the Russian ballerina, Olga Spessivtseva, who went mad (as does her heroine Giselle) in the days of revolution. It is also an allusion to the drama of Russian history, to its revolutionary madness. The blood-red color came to symbolize the fate of the Russian Giselle. The idea of using the metaphor of the red color dawned upon Eifman when he came across a drawing by Spessivtseva, of a ballerina dressed in a classical tunic and pointe shoes, which she herself colored in red. Eifman opens his ballet in a dance class setting, where harmony and order reign, but suddenly, it explodes with chaos and cacophony: among fragile ballerinas all dressed in white, there appears a roaring crowd of security officers in black leather coats. It is here that Eifman adds the dramatic red tone to the classical black and white. The ballerina dresses up in red to perform for the new "proletarian" audience. The scarlet attire produces impressions of a straitjacket, or of a flame in which Spessivtseva's vulnerable psyche is burning. The waves of the garment cover the whole scene, like a sea of blood that covers the territory of revolutionary Russia.

Though violated by the new power, the Ballerina falls in love with the charismatic security officer who, paradoxically, helps her to emigrate (as was the case in Olga's real life story). In Paris, Spessivtseva dances *Salome*. While holding the cut-off head of Jon the Baptist, she sees not his face, but the face of her former lover, and kisses his "bitter tasting" dead lips. Later, when dancing the mad scene in *Giselle*, it becomes clear that the Ballerina is herself going mad. Finally, Eifman's heroine, like a prisoner, is surrounded by her own reflections in countless mirrors. *And through the looking glass,* she escapes into the darkness backstage.

"I was stunned to learn the tragic details of her life, and my emotions became the impulse for the creation of this ballet," shares the choreographer. "Spessivtseva was the Giselle of genius. The ballerina plunged so deeply into the world of her heroine that she was unable to return to reality: the fate of Giselle became her fate."

In many of his ballets (like *Red Giselle*, *Don Juan and Moliere*, *Tchaikovsky*, *Musagete*), Eifman penetrates into the hidden world of artistic personalities and explores dramatic relations between the creator and his creations. Each of these characters include a part of his own soul; through them, we can hear the confession of a man and an artist who imbues his creations with the burning flame of his own passions, love, pain, and imagination.

In this sense, his ballet 'Rodin' is perhaps the most honest. Its subject is the art of Auguste Rodin, but it is evident that it is also the art of Boris Eifman, who, like the sculptor, uses the body to express the unrest of his soul. The main characters are Rodin, Camille Claudel, his pupil, muse and lover, and Rose Beuret, Rodin's long-term companion, whom he married at the end of his life. The love story between Rodin and Camille was tumultuous, and she spent the last thirty years of her tragic life in a psychiatric hospital. "But this is a private side of their lives," says Eifman, "What they left us is the works of their geniuses. The statues of Rodin are not static; they vibrate with passionate inner life. He wanted to catch the moment of Beauty, and he managed to do so."

In the ballet, Camille appears on a round turntable in Rodin's studio, simultaneously as a woman and as a statue, the embodiment of love and the art object. Smoothly, she transforms into various shapes as if she and Rodin were perfecting her as a statue; then, the scene progresses, and they start working together to extract a new composition out of a shapeless mass of bodies: the famous *Citizens of Calais*. Progressively, Rodin and Camille themselves become the models and the subjects for the *Eternal Spring* and *The Kiss*, these works which today fascinate us with their sensuality and beauty. Somewhere behind them appear women's faces, smiling crazily, as if foreshadowing the price that Camille will have to pay for her love. Finally, Eifman composes, with his corps de ballet, a live version of Rodin's monumental "Gates of Hell," depicting a scene from *The Inferno* of Dante's *Divine Comedy.* Rodin, Camille and Rose all become protagonists in *The Inferno*, weaving their lives and passions within that eternal allegory.

Eifman's expressive, impassioned choreography always speaks of something immense and profound – be it love, the dramatic conflict between The Creator and his creation, or the quest for the meaning of life and the cognition of Truth. Boris Eifman, like no other choreographer in the world today, has the ability to reveal the turmoil of the human soul through the movement of dance.

Anna Karenina

Drawing his inspiration from Leo Tolstoy's novel, Boris Eifman focuses on the Anna-Karenin-Vronsky love triangle. Anna struggles with the illusion of harmony and peace of the high society life and norms. When passion strikes her, she rebels against those norms. Overwhelmed by her all-absorbing love to Vronsky, she abondons her husband, ignores her motherly duty to her son, and rejects the life she had led. Ultimately, her inability to overcome her sensual descent into hell leads her to hopelessness and suicide.

PREMIERE March 31, 2005
MUSIC Piotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky
COSTUMES Slava Okunev

CHOREOGRAPHY Boris Eifman
SETS Zinovy Margolin
LIGHTS Gleb Filshtinsky

CAST **Anna :** Nina Zmievets
Karenin : Oleg Markov
Vronsky : Oleg Gabyshev