Ballerinos en Pointe: Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo

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Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo was founded in 1974 by a small group of performers for the purpose of presenting a playful, entertaining view of traditional, classical ballet in parody form and en travesti. The Trocks have performed in 41 states and in Washington, D.C., and internationally in over a hundred cities in thirteen countries. Not only is the Trockadero the only comedic dance company which has been financially successful, it is the oldest all-male dance ensemble in America.

For twenty years the Trocks have presented a very complicated performance matrix which includes simultaneous and often conflicting gender codes. By exploring the range of these presentations, how interpretations of these presentations have changed over time and how they often shift according to where they are performed, the Trocks become a point of inquiry into gender and gender illusion.

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Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo was founded in 1974 by a small group of performers for the purpose of presenting a playful, entertaining view of traditional, classical ballet and modern dance in parody form and en travesti. From their start, presenting midnight performances in Greenwich Village lofts, the Trocks inspired glowing reviews from major publications like The New Yorker, Vogue, Time, Newsweek, and People, leading the company to larger Off-Off-Broadway theaters. In 1976 the company performed in Canada, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, signed with Sheldon Soffer Management, and qualified for the National Endowment for the Arts Dance Touring Program. One year later, the Trockadero appeared on national television in a Shirley MacLaine special, and on Broadway at the Palace Theatre. In the last twenty years, the
Trocks have performed in 41 states and in Washington, D.C., in addition to international tours which have taken them to over a hundred cities in twelve countries on six continents. In a pilgrimage to their spiritual homeland (the land of Petipa), the Trocks made their Russian debut in 1994, presenting 14 performances in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Lithuania, and Siberia. Not only is the Trockadero the only comedic dance company in the world which has been financially successful, it is the longest running all-male dance ensemble in America. Ted Shawn's Men Dancers performed for seven years, from 1933 to 1940.

The original concept of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo has not changed since its inception. It is a company of professional male dancers performing a full range of contemporary dance and classical ballet repertoire, investing them with a wicked sense of humor throughout the entire proceedings. Over the years, the technical proficiency of the dancers has improved to match their comic expertise. Several Trocks who specialize in female roles can execute thirty-two fouettés en pointe, a virtuosic sequence traditionally performed in Black Swan pas de deux and Don Quixote pas de deux.

A Trock performance can be analyzed from at least five points of reference: (1) the quality of the choreography (as original work, as a burlesque of a part of the canon, as a parody of an established style); (2) the technical skill of the dancers; (3) the entertainment/humor quotient; (4) the production values of décor and costuming, etc.; and (5) the gender constructs presented on stage. These categories are by no means autonomous components of a performance, however. Rather, they overlap, intersect, and exist in such a confluent flux that it would serve little purpose to investigate each item independently. Since the company's identity (and marketing strategy) is focused on its composition, that it is an all-male company which performs en travesti, the issue of gender (re)presentation becomes the most telling "lens" through which to view the company.

Centuries of social pressure have frozen men and women into very strict and limited physical vocabularies. There is a seemingly finite stock of signifiers of what is considered masculine or feminine because the official colors are black and white, male and female. Intermediate shades do not receive the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. The sissy, the tomboy, and other gender benders inspire a (generally derogatory) label because they fall outside of the binary coding system. While the theater is often a mirror held up to nature, it can also be a site to posit alternate "realities." When posture, gesture, and/or behavior is put on stage, it takes on an
iconic value, heightening and drawing attention to cultural designations. How these staged signs of gender are to be interpreted may or may not follow the author’s intent, just as their transmission may or may not employ a sexual body identical to the gender body (re)presented. The stage presentation may purposely mix male and female codes, resisting traditional binary gender coding; the resultant image is neither black nor white, but rather, zebra striped. A Trockadero performance finds a comfortable parallel in the 1994 film, *The Adventures of Priscilla—Queen of the Desert.* Remember the bloke who traveled to the Australian outback with a dream? “To be a cock in a frock on a rock.” In the case of the Trockadero ballerino, he is a weenie in a Niccolini acting like a queenie.

The Trocks’ official stand is that they are not impersonating women, but impersonating ballerinas. While most would suggest that the person of ballerina is inextricably linked to the cultural construct of woman, the argument is basically semantic since the gender matrix of ballerina and woman overlaps under the heading of feminine. The intent of the Trock presentation is not meant to fool the audience into thinking they are watching women on stage. There is no “reveal” at the end of a Trock performance; the dancers do not doff their wigs to surprise the audience with the fact that they are genetic males. There is little need for this gimmick since mixed gender constructs are an integral part of the performance. While the Trock dancer appearing as Odette in Act II of *Swan Lake* dons the pink pointe shoes and tights, the pancake tutu, and the requisite array of white feathers; he also paints on the caricature of a ballerina face, does not shave his chest or arm pits, utilizes no bust pads to approximate a bosom, and can do little to hide the silhouette of his male frame. While on stage, the ‘Trock ballerina may comment on the character he is portraying in a particular ballet, but the dancer never breaks character in order to comment on himself as a ballerina.

The majority of the ballets the Trockadero perform are the traditional “work horses” in the classical ballet repertory: *Swan Lake* Act II, *Giselle* Act II, *Les Sylphides, Pas de Quatre.* Humor arises in how the choreography is being performed and who is performing it, not because the choreography is inherently comic. Even though little in classical ballet choreography is humorous, what is advantageous to the Trockadero is that the plots of most story ballets are decidedly silly. While the Ivanov/Petipa choreography for *Swan Lake* is universally acclaimed for its sublime beauty, the plot of the story is basically
ludicrous. A prince, wandering about in the woods, falls in love with a big white bird. Even though he has sworn to be true to her, he later falls in love with a big black bird, and this last event he does in front of his own mother at a party!

Regardless of the less-than-probable stories of most 19th century ballets, the Trocks derive humor from them not by commenting on the plots, but rather by concentrating on how the choreography is performed. It is worth noting that dance steps have no gender; it is the execution of steps that project gender. As founding co-director of the Trocks Peter Anastos told Hilary Ostlere, “Pointe work has no gender. It’s not the exclusive property of women. It hurts everybody” (Ostlere, 1976, p. 15). The Trock preparation for a step might be exaggerated, or the movement may begin with the wrong point of initiation, or a muscular preparation may lead up to nothing more than a single pirouette. The possibilities for physical humor are endless. Keith Glancy’s Natalia Zlotmachinskaya made a career out of being a sort of Edward Gorey ballerina, the one with osteoporosis. William Zamora’s Zamarina Zamarkova’s Marie Taglioni was so arthritic you could swear you heard her joints creak as he moved.

What is equally important in the Trock performance is not only how the choreography is performed, but who is performing the choreography. At 200 pounds, Richard Goldberger’s Olga Plushinskaya literally defied the laws of gravity when he got up en pointe. And there was no getting around the fact that Peter Anastos’ Olga Tchikaboumskaya was extremely hairy. Large tufts of body hair is not the image that immediately comes to mind when one dreams of the ideal sylph, swan, or willi.

Arlene Croce, dance critic for The New Yorker, wrote about the company in the first month of their existence, September, 1974. Her early reviews not only gave the fledging company much needed publicity, but, more importantly, gave them a credibility that was not implicit in their midnight performances in a homophile center on 14th street. Croce explained the basis of humor in the company’s work as simply the effort of something heavy trying to be light. She wrote that “Drag ballet provides one answer to the question of why men impersonating women are funny, while women impersonating men are not; it has to do with gravity. (A heavy thing trying to become light is automatically funnier than a light thing trying to become heavy)” (Croce, 1979, p. 80). Other critics have suggested that the humor in a Trock performance is more related to gender than it is to physical weight or bulk. By adopting female-coded clothing and gestures, men are laughable because they are relinquishing the superiority of their birthright, whereas when women cross the gender line in male-coded clothing and gestures, this act is seen as subversive and potentially dangerous.

In her analysis of gender issues present in a Trock performance, Croce turned to the French poet and philosopher Stéphane Mallarmé. Mallarmé suggests that a ballerina is not a woman dancing, because she isn’t a woman and she doesn’t dance. Dance, in Mallarmé’s view, is “preeminently the theatrical form of poetry,” and therefore the ballerina is a metaphor. She is one who writes poems with her body, who appears before us as a vessel teeming with abstract preliterate suggestions. Forever a symbol, the ballerina is never a person (Croce, 1979, p. 76).

Through the years, the Trockadero’s official “company statement” to interviewers has followed this Mallarmé/Croce model: they are impersonating ballerinas, not women. Besides aligning themselves with high art, this rhetoric attempts to steer the Trocks away from the gender issue. For seventeen years as artistic director of the Trockadero, Nattch Taylor remained true to this position. This 1989 interview with Barbara Newman (Dancing Times) is typical of Taylor’s elaborate two-stepping around the gender issue.

The thing is, we’re not making a comment about men doing women’s roles, we’re not making a comment on drag, as it were. We’re just making a comment on ballet and having fun with ballet…. But there’s nothing sexual about our dancing or about being male or female or anything else. (Newman, 1989, p. 345)

Taylor contends that “A ballerina isn’t a woman, she’s a choreographic machine” (Temin, 1981, p. A20). Over the last twenty years, the Trocks have hired few true transvestites, men who cross dress regularly as an integral facet of their gender identity off the stage. Taylor remarked: “they don’t last. We’re not what they want. They want to make it as real as possible. The company isn’t a vent for fantasies because we work too hard. We aren’t female impersonators at all. That isn’t our intent; we’re not out to fool the public” (Pappas, 1981, p. G4).

Intent is one thing; perception is something else. Regardless of how many press releases the Trocks have issued since 1974, repeating over and over that they are not drag/queens, each audience member is free to “read” this event as they wish. Though it can be informative to look at a Trock performance through the spectacles of their official intent, we are by no means restricted to this perspective.
While Jill Dolan has never written about Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo specifically, she has done a great deal of ground-breaking work concerning gender constructs in performance. Dolan contends that men, heterosexual or homosexual, do not have as much at stake in the gender arena since they historically control theater, the mirror that reflects society. Dolan aligns gender illusionists closer to straight men than to homosexual communities, since men in drag can easily don the clothes of the cultural elite when they are off the stage. She dismisses most gay male drag from the field of serious gender investigation since it is generally a product of camp. Here, Dolan relies on Susan Sontag’s treatise on camp. For Sontag, camp sensibility emphasizes style over content, has a love of artifice, and is purposefully disengaged from underlying meaning. In light of recent repositionings of the term, camp as a political, queer, cultural critique, Sontag’s definition of camp, first published in 1964, is quaintly (or annoyingly) old-fashioned. While there is no one standard definition of camp, new or old, in general it delights in artificiality, exaggeration, and affectation, especially when used in conjunction with banality, irony, and/or kitsch. Yet, even embracing Sontag’s tenet of camp, in which style is emphasized over content, does not necessitate that the content that is present should not be analyzed. Dismissing gender illusion because the author of this gender disarray is male is ignoring a rich arena of analysis. Dolan does so, however, because she believes that when the drag queen is on stage, woman is invisible.

Until 1660, when women were legally permitted to act in London theaters, woman’s stage image in most of Western drama was completely controlled by men. Men wrote the words that came out of other men’s mouths, men who were literally acting for women. It is incorrect, however, to apply the same model of gender studies to the entire span of performance history. From the classical Greeks to the Renaissance, women were never seen nor heard on stage. This differs from the last 400 years in which women have, even in a limited sense, been able to perform and write for the stage. Since 1660, when one sex appropriates gender codes traditionally associated with the opposite sex, the absent sex is there, often powerfully so, because of its absence. In the case of the Trockadero performance, the reality of a powerful absence not only applies to the person of woman, it also applies to the archetypal perfection of dance. In a Trock performance, in which comic dance is presented en travesti, what is presented is just as important as what is missing: woman

Figure 3 Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. Olga Plushinskaya (Richard Goldberger) in The Dance of Liberation of the American People in Homage to Isadora Duncan, the greatest American Patriot since Betsy Ross, Barbara Fritchie, and Sacagawea. Photo: John L. Murphy.
on stage, supple stretched arches, flexible spinal columns, knees that straighten completely, etc.

A great deal of the humor of a Trock performance comes from “breaking the rules,” disrupting the propriety of classical ballet and the seriousness of modern dance. Humor can also come about by providing audiences a new perspective on a familiar subject: the silly plot of Swan Lake; the histrionics of Graham; and the revelation that gender is a culturally constructed formula that has nothing to do with genital equipment. The same Trock performance can also elicit from audience members copious amounts of laughter for entirely different reasons. From another vantage point, a Trock performance is funny not because it challenges gender coding, but because it reinforces the status quo. In the paradigm of sex-equals-gender, the homosexual is the one who attempts to become the opposite sex via dress and behavior: all lesbians are butch and all gay men are effeminate. From the homophobe’s point of view, a Trock performance is humorous because the male dancers look ridiculous in tutus, look awkward executing “feminine” movements, and, well, faggots are funny as long as they are not sexually aggressive: same performance, different reading.

One perspective of a Trock performance that is routinely overlooked by reviewers is the dancers’ ability to transcend their male bodies and their level of dance technique to present the presence of a ballerina. Sanson Candelaria (1941–1986) was one such performer. Candelaria combined impeccable comic timing, solid dance technique, and savvy performance skills to create the incomparable Tamara Boundiyeva. Candelaria transcended the tendu and the wig, the eyelashes and the battement, to satisfy the reason we go to the theater: to be transported.

Intrinsic to the Trock’s concept of the ballerina is that this creature is larger than life. While cinema performances have influenced acting in the theater, making it more restrained and subtle, the Trocks hearken back to a nineteenth-century acting tradition that embraces flamboyant bravura. Abandoning any sort of “safe” or laid-back performance style, the Trock dancers literally fling themselves into a performance, armed with an outrageousness to match the size of their enormous false eyelashes. This largess is certainly one of the reasons for the troupe’s popularity. By combining the choreography of the ballet stage with madcap antics of the circus, a Trockadero performance is a wonderful antidote to delicate and “refined” high art.

Even in a “regular” dance company, what distinguishes a prima ballerina from a demi-soloist is not only technical proficiency, but also that illusive energy known as presence, that quality that makes the act of executing a simple movement of the arms by one dancer a revelation and by another an inconsequential gesture. Especially during the early years of the Trockadero, its dancers often had little else but presence to offer an audience; they acted like they were ballerinas instead of dancing like ballerinas. As Francis Herridge (New York Post) said of Antony Bassae/Tamara Karpova in 1975: “His technique is barely good enough but the assurance he exudes makes you feel ‘she’ is superb” (Herridge, 1975, n. pag.). Observing Bassae (1943–1985) perform the female role in Le Corsaire pas de deux, Robert Talmage of Dance Magazine thought it the most entertaining rendition of this classic he had ever seen.

And considering Karpova looks like a cross between a barrel-chested tenor and a frog on two legs, so much more the marvel. Her feet are almost indescribable. The right is short and hooked, but allows her an occasional balance. The left is not so fortunate. Picture Cinderella’s sisters actually getting the glass slipper on, and you have a sense of Karpova’s left pied. It’s all knuckles and joints, hanging over the sides of the shoe and it never, repeat never, points correctly. But be that as it may, she flies about the stage, underslung jaw set bulldog fashion, with a smile to dazzle the gods. She doesn’t do all the steps, but I can think of others who don’t either. And not worrying about it gives her wonderful freedom. (Talmage, 1976, p. 78)

Indeed, the knowledge that perfection is impossible gives the Trock ballerina an advantage over his female counterpart since the former can devote energy into facets of his performance other than technical proficiency.

Arlene Croce also fell under the spell of Antony Bassae as he appeared as La Karpova, the self-proclaimed “black rhinestone of Russian Ballet.” To Croce, Karpova looked like a cross between “a pug version of Lou Costello,” and “a bulldog standing on its hind legs.” As Kitri in Peter Anastos’ Reader’s Digest staging of Don Quijote, Bassae delivered a performance that inspired Croce to proclaim that “Karpova, I believe, gave a better performance than the Bolshoi’s Nina Sorokina” who was dancing at the Met at the time. “Though the two performances are not to be compared technically, there was more wit, more plasticity, more elegance, and even more femininity in Karpova’s balances and kneeling backbends than in all of Sorokina’s tricks, and the way Karpova used her snap-open fan put the Bolshoi to shame” (Croce, 1979, p. 80). This heavy
announcement from one of New York’s leading dance critics, that a male dancer in drag, dancing in a broken-down loft, essayed the role of Kitri more impressively than a member of the Bolshoi was nothing less than stunning. When a Trock is good, it isn’t about technique, it isn’t about gender, it’s about presence.

One curious facet of the Trockadero’s checkered past is that while the repertoire has stayed basically the same over the last twenty years, how the company has been “read” has changed significantly. The ‘Trocks’ original audience were balletomane acquaintances, predominateley gay, who knew the ballets and personalities being parodied. Indeed, the first performing venue for the Trockadero was the Westside Discussion Group, a homophile organization on 14th street. But in 1977, the Trocks changed their audience; they were on a Shirley Maclaine television special, and appeared for two weeks at the Palace Theatre on Broadway. When the Trockadero hit the road, Middle America was now their audience. They are folks who have often heard about Swan Lake or Giselle, but who have never had much opportunity to see classical ballet, and rarely know anything about modern choreographers such as Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, Pina Bausch, who are the other targets of the Trockadero’s satiric observation. In addition to a shift in their core audience base, another crucial change affected the “reading” of the Trockadero. From 100 seat Off-Off-Broadway performing spaces, the Trocks were now booked into 1,000, 2,000, and 3,000 seat road houses. The same ten-member company whose dancing filled the tiny postage-stamp sized stages of the Village now looked precariously thin on a large stage.

As drag became more visible in theater, film, and television in the 70s and 80s, the shock value of seeing a man in female-coded gender illusion was no longer so unusual in New York, yet Middle America continued to find the Trocks unique and outrageous. Until the Jesse Helms inspired hysteria concerning “homosexual” content in publicly funded art, the Trocks enjoyed a very lucrative market on the road, performing only occasionally in New York after 1977. (The Trockadero has never received direct funding from the NEA, but has been booked by many sponsors who do, which is why the Helms amendment to the NEA application directly affected the company. No promoter was going to book the Trockadero and run the risk of losing his or her entire NEA funding by booking an act which might be labeled homoeoetric. Overnight, the Trocks’ American market virtually disappeared.)
Not only has time affected the readings of a Trock performance, so has place. South Africa, South America, Australia, Europe, and now, Russia, have all enjoyed performances by the Trocks. But it has been the Japanese who have responded most enthusiastically to the company. In 1996, the Trockadero celebrated its twelfth tour of Japan. These are tours; in addition to Tokyo, the company has appeared in over thirty different Japanese cities. In a different culture, why has the Trocks' depiction of satires of Western dance, and caricatures of ballerinas produced so much laughter? And in Japan, why is it important that the parody be performed by Americans? The Trocks do not have a copyright or trademark on their concept and do not produce themselves, so there is nothing prohibiting their Japanese promoter from creating and/or booking a Japanese "Trockadero" in order to save money. This has not occurred because the Japanese promoter knows his audiences like Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo just the way they are. While there are centuries-old Japanese performing traditions of gender illusion (Noh, Kabuki, Takarazuka), these forms do not derive humor from the convention of travesty. I suggest that for the Japanese, the cultural distinction of who (nationality) is performing the gender illusion is just as important as what sex they are (male).

The Trocks have defied common sense, business acumen, bunions, Jesse Helms, and tour-schedules-from-hell to entertain legions of fans around the world. Few enterprises that literally start off as a joke among friends ever achieve the level of notoriety, artistry, and sheer magic that have been, and are, the Trocks. Enthusiastically embracing the rhinestone-and-banana-peel aesthetic, the troupe continues to bedevil those who try to pin it down.

References