



Flash Review & Interview, 2-27: Winging it Possokhov Takes the Coast

By Aimée Ts'ao

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SAN FRANCISCO -- When Yuri Possokhov, principal dancer and choreographer, walks into the room at the San Francisco Ballet for our interview, he does a double take, having expected some unknown journalist, and says, "Oh, it's you." Possokhov and I frequently took classes together from the late [Svetlana Afanasieva](#) a number of years ago, when SFB dancers were still allowed to take outside classes. We settle in to talk about his latest creation for the company, "Study in Motion," which had premiered two weeks before, February 5, at the War Memorial Opera House, and his "Firebird," which premieres tomorrow in Portland on Oregon Ballet Theatre.

What most of us in the dance world already know, but what the general audience usually has no clue about, is how a ballet goes from being an idea in the choreographer's mind to a performance on stage. The path can be straightforward or convoluted, relatively smooth or fraught with difficulties, and the final work may not even be close to the original vision. I ask Possokhov if he intended "Study in Motion" to be an exploration in a more formal, abstract style than his other large-scale ballets for SFB, "[Magritomania](#)" (an homage to the Belgian painter Rene Magritte) and "[Damned](#)" (an interpretation of the Medea story). He says not really, the form was dictated by the fact that there wasn't a lot of time in the hectic rehearsal schedule so he had use of only eight dancers and had to make a chamber ballet, a far more intimate work than previously planned. It was an idea he thought about a while ago but hadn't expected to work on at the moment.

Possokhov used Alexander Scriabin's solo piano music, opening with Sonata No. 5, Op.53 followed by four preludes and an impromptu and closing with the last movement of Sonata No.2, Op. 19. The qualities, ranging from Chopinesque lyricism to far more modern driving rhythms and dissonance, were matched both by the choreography and the dancers' nuanced performances.

I found both the set and costumes stunningly beautiful in their simplicity. The stage is enclosed on four sides and on top by white sheer panels that wafted gently in the drafts created by the rising curtain. A man stands alone in the dim light shining from the back. The front panels disappear skyward and more

dancers run in through the panels, which billow slightly. The illusion is both of being contained and yet having access to a dark infinity beyond. The women are dressed in white see-through dresses with solid white briefs and bandeau tops underneath, while the men wear dark plum unitards.

"Did you work closely with Benjamin Pierce on the set design?" I ask him. "Not really," he replies. "I said that I wanted a box. The first design he did was absolutely beautiful, but because of technical problems we couldn't do it. I was very disappointed. When he did this one, I was worried that the fabric of the panels wouldn't move enough and wouldn't work with the movements of the dancers. But it was perfect. That is the mystery of artistic creation. Sometimes the sets and costumes can be gorgeous by themselves, but don't work with the choreography. Or they can work perfectly. The women's costumes we changed two days before the premiere because the original ones weren't right for the piece."

I mention that I saw the piece twice, with different casts. He says that the second cast didn't get much rehearsal time, but that he was pleased with how professionally they worked and did a good job. I concur, but add that the first cast was able to give the piece more depth and contrast, and that even though the second cast didn't have that same strength of interpretation, the choreography still shone on its own.

"Now let's talk about your work in Portland for Oregon Ballet Theatre. Were you commissioned to do a ballet of your own choosing, or was it specifically for Stravinsky's 'Firebird'?" I ask. Possokhov replies that originally he could have done what he wanted, but because of scheduling conflicts he had to postpone and the time when he was available coincided with OBT's "White Nights" program, and that meant artistic director (and former SFB colleague) Christopher Stowell wanted "Firebird."



Oregon Ballet Theatre's Yuka Iino in Yuri Zhukov's costume for "The Firebird." Andy Batt photo copyright Andy Batt, courtesy Oregon Ballet Theatre.

Because he is still actively dancing with SFB, I want to know when he set the choreography. "In December I went there for three weeks. We worked for one week every day, then we were off for a week while they did "Nutcracker" and then we did another week. In ten days I finished. I enjoyed working with the dancers there so much. They really listen and work very hard. " But as he will be performing here during the week before the premiere on February 28 in Portland, he won't be able to add any last minute touches or make corrections, and will only arrive the day of the opening. This is a big problem when he has to divide his time between two muses. He considers asking Helgi Tomasson, SFB's artistic director, if it's possible to have one day off so he can at least see the dress rehearsal. I am always amazed that Possokhov manages to produce such good choreography given the time and energy restraints imposed by his performing schedule. Then again, some people are just so very talented they can pull it off.

When I ask him if being Russian made it easier to choreograph this fairy tale from his native country, he says yes, but that he has found his own way among the various versions of the story, and has changed it to include a love triangle. "The Firebird is half woman and falls in love with the Prince. There is drama with tears, but she's a smart girl and realizes that she should leave the Prince alone with the Princess he loves." Instead of the entire score as Igor Stravinsky wrote it, he is using the shorter suite of music from the ballet. It is more condensed, and since OBT is a small company of only 20 dancers, this is crucial to maintaining the momentum of the story. Possokhov has also eliminated the usually static wedding scene at the end for the same reason.

Despite the difficulties of this long distance arts relationship, he says that it has been a good experience and it will be important in determining whether he will want to work in this manner again, or if he will stick to situations where he can constantly nurse things along. In closing I ask him if there is anything he would like to add. "Yes: I want to say I never liked the music before. Now I love it. When you listen to music and say immediately you don't like it, it doesn't mean anything. When you know it well, you have the right to say you love it or hate it."

Possokhov's friend and scenic and costume designer for "Firebird," Yuri Zhukov and I speak a few days later. Zhukov is from St. Petersburg, where he studied at the Vaganova Ballet Academy, then danced at the Kirov for seven years before emigrating to the United States. He danced with San Francisco Ballet from 1989 till 1995 and met Possokhov in 1994 when the former Bolshoi dancer joined the company. Zhukov left to dance with the Birmingham Royal Ballet from 1995 to 1999. He began designing costumes in 1993 for his own choreography, but "Firebird" marks the first time he has worked on a big production. I express curiosity about his designs for OBT and he says that they are inspired by traditional Russian lacquer boxes, which usually feature pastel colors on a black background. He hopes he has been able to support Possokhov's vision and create the right atmosphere for the choreography. But the distance hasn't made it easy to supervise the realization of the backdrops and costumes. What the designer sketched may be far from the actual results. Fortunately, he will spend a

whole week before the premiere in Portland making sure that those elements of the production are correct. Let's hope the Firebird remembered to give him one of her feathers so that he can overcome any problems he may encounter and that the ballet will be a grand success.