

DANCE

# The Trocks, an All-Male Dance Troupe, Balance Camp and Skill

By ROSLYN SULCAS DEC. 20, 2016

“Play with the feet!” Karina Elver called out to a group of dancers running through the tricky pas de six from “Napoli,” an 1842 ballet by the Danish choreographer August Bournonville. “Stop!” she cried before offering a little lecture. “This is not the Russian style, no showing off!” she said. “Remember for Bournonville, you are always very calm. Remember you are sweethearts together, very loving.”

The sweethearts, among them a few hulking men in point shoes, nodded seriously, some sketching out the movements again for Ms. Elver’s approval. “Better,” she said.

It could have been any rehearsal for any ballet company that takes points of choreographic style seriously. The Bournonville technique — developed at the Royal Danish Ballet in the first half of the 19th century — is particularly difficult for any dancer not brought up in that tradition.

These weren’t just any dancers. Ms. Elver, a former Royal Danish Ballet dancer, was in Midtown Manhattan rehearsing *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*, the New York-based all-male troupe whose dancers play both male and female roles, and which delights in both the campy aspect of female drag and in the excesses and stereotypes of classical ballet.

The Trocks, as they are known, are performing the “Napoli” pas de six on one of two programs in a two-week run at the Joyce Theater. They have come a long way since 10 men put on tutus and a show at a Manhattan social center in 1974. Today, every one of the company’s 16 dancers is a proficient technician who can

dance on point, a demanding (and painful) aspect of ballet training that men can usually happily ignore, since conventionally it is only women who dance impractically on the tips of their toes.

Reviews in recent years have routinely pointed to the excellence of the Trocks' dancing. The men, Brian Seibert wrote in *The New York Times* in 2012, are "good enough — technically, stylistically — that you want them to be better."

But how good can the dancers be before they cease to be funny? And in an age when drag is a mainstream phenomenon, can the Trocks continue to depend on the silly jokes and visual incongruities, the vaudeville humor and slapstick physicality? Can a work like the "Napoli" pas de six, which demands speed, coordination, grace and delicacy, be stylistically correct as well as amusing?

There is no way to perform Bournonville's work adequately, Ms. Elver said after the rehearsal, without being a good dancer. "It's logical once you get it, but at first it's like patting your head and rubbing your stomach," she explained. "There is fast leg and footwork, but a very soft upper body and a lot of épaulement, the twisting of the body that makes the shape of the movement really beautiful."

For the Trocks, more used to performing Russian ballets and parodying their large-scale dramatics, the "Napoli" pas de six is particularly challenging. "It's perhaps the hardest piece we've ever done," said the company's artistic director, Tory Dobrin. "It's just not the old-school style that we are used to — and used to finding jokes about."

Mr. Dobrin said that the company's process was to learn a piece first, then "junk it up." The dancers, who tend to be funny, he said, are encouraged to bring in their own brand of comedy and ideas. "Then we shape it," he said, "so that it doesn't go into excess and retains some dignity. We want to be sure that knowledgeable people are looking at something that is academically correct."

The difficulty for the Trocks is to find a balance between correctness and the broad humor that has been the company's stock in trade. Tipping the equation further are newly prominent ideas about gender fluidity. "The level of dancing is now so high that we're less and less inclined to laugh and more and more likely to ponder the ambiguities of a male dancer who can actually be convincing as

Odette, Giselle, Paquita,” Robert Gottlieb wrote in The New York Observer in 2009.

Mr. Dobrin said that he was very aware of the change of mood around gender issues. “There was something interesting about being part of a movement that was not widely accepted and felt underground and slightly subversive,” he said, speaking of the 1980s, when he joined the company. “The Trocks of today are of different mind set, as they are guys in their 20s and 30s and grew up in a different time. This is something completely normal for them in terms of their place in society.”

Now, he said, drag is important, but not the most significant element in a Trocks performance. What is vital is to keep the comedy alive through a homage to ballet and the ballerina.

The Trocks’ ability to find the essence of a style, a mannerism or a tradition is their great strength, Ms. Elver said: “Of course you know it’s men, but they have the grace and open hearts. A lot of companies today, it’s just dancing, no face, no feelings. They show their passion, they really love ballet itself.”

Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo continue through Dec. 31 at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, Manhattan; [joyce.org](http://joyce.org).

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