

Romeo and Juliet, an emotional marathon choreographed by the famous Jiří Bubeníček



Photo Fanni Tutek-Hajnal

The Rijeka Ballet is in the midst of extensive preparations for something new and grandiose! One of the most popular ballets of the 20th century, Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, will soon appear before you - alongside actors and an orchestra!

What a privilege! The world-famous dance star Jiří Bubeníček is choreographing the ballet, which is presented in collaboration with the Rijeka Symphony Orchestra and the Croatian and Italian Drama companies, and based on a concept he devised with his wife Nadina Cojocar, who is also responsible for the dramaturgy and costume design. Behind them is a long period of research, of composing and rearranging ideas and thoughts, as well as a lot of energy invested in artistic creations, which from every corner of the theatre will immerse the audience in the world of quarreling families full of hatred and the most in-love couple in history through "polished" dance, music and acting interpretation starting April 27.

From short scenes to abstract works, then to full-evening ballets with a story, Jiří Bubeníček is the creator of an impressive 60+ choreographies. Before that, he enjoyed huge acclaim in his 25-year career as one of the greatest ballet dancers in the world – it is a great achievement to have his work in the repertoire! His musicality, athleticism, unrivaled technique and instinctive sense of character is what made what he did special, because of which some of the greatest choreographic legends created choreographies especially for him. And now, a man with such experience is working with the Rijeka Ballet, with the creative support of Nadina Cojocar.

While watching the choreographer work with the dancers at one of the rehearsals of *Romeo and Juliet* three weeks before the premiere, one could already conclude that this is a great,

especially beautiful ballet, with tender and passionate duets, telling a story that is an emotional marathon. It was inspiring to watch his work with the dancers, to watch as the choreography “took hold” in the dancers’ bodies. It was a pleasure to hear the precise instructions that offer a whole new world for each character in each of the dancers, while they also create the characters from themselves. Between choreographing, Bubeníček motivates with stimulating energy to work hard, with healthy moments of humor and his great respect for the dancers, full of praise for the uniqueness of each member of the Ballet with Character.

And the cast is a perfect fit! When you see the duet between Romeo and Juliet, for example, how they intertwine, how they “merge” and “melt” into each other in amazing choreography, how they glide on the stage and hover with ease in their infatuation, beautiful bodies and energies, young, enthusiastic, so realistically committed to each other – you really believe them. The casting is very important to Bubeníček, especially when it comes to ballet that tells a story. The dancers are chosen according to the nature of the roles, and he helps them develop the assigned character from themselves. The process is infinitely interesting: from extensive conversations with the dancers to find that character in themselves through a series of questions, to try not to “act or overact, not to act as though they are moving in a ballet, but to break free and be simple, young people with certain desires, endeavors and thoughts that the character elicits from them,” until they have a reimagined interpretation the characters from Shakespeare’s play, conveying all their nuances. Bubeníček frees them from all learned, limiting tasks, reminding them to become aware of implicit biases and to use knowledge and experience in a new way.

When Jiří Bubeníček demonstrates a part of the choreography, in a short moment he completely assumes the attitude and personality of the character, so clearly that you fully recognize the character’s nature. His intention is not to impose his own way, but to provide a brief example. “The music is so beautiful; it’s beautifully composed. Listen to the music – it tells you everything,” says Bubeníček, fascinated by Prokofiev, searching for full presence and individual dramatic persuasiveness among the dancers. Between choreography sessions, we managed to capture a moment for a short conversation:

You not only present this story in front of the audience, but also in a Shakespearean way - from among the audience.

With the story of Romeo and Juliet, we wanted to get closer to the audience, physically as well. That’s why we created a bridge in the auditorium; that’s why we have two actors – because when you listen to a story about something, you feel it more closely, more clearly. Dancers portray characters from words and music with dance. We wanted to give it all to the audience to make the impression stronger; instead of the usual order, there is none: the audience, the orchestra in the pit and then the dancers on stage. We wanted to tell a story from among the people.

What are your thoughts on a topic that has never ceased to be relevant, neither before Shakespeare’s time nor ever since?

The story is so familiar; the topic is so current. When you read Shakespeare, you realize that people haven’t changed. It’s more or less the same: the problems we have today, the difficulties, the search for ourselves, have been the same for centuries. Shakespeare talks about two families who hate each other. The same thing is happening in every country in Europe, the past full of family quarrels in which no one wants to forgive anyone.

It is then passed down from generation to generation. Europe is small. Suddenly we have whole countries fighting against each other. Due to such tensions, suddenly no one knows what to do anymore, so they fight on. It’s so topical! It takes a lot of sacrifice to escape it. Here are young lovers who sacrifice their great love while their families are fighting.

What do you mean when you say you really give a place to Romeo and Juliet?

If we do not give younger generations a voice, if we force them to act like their parents, we are only educating them to fight against each other. Indefinitely so? Instead we give them whatever we can to develop emotional intelligence and learn about emotions and reactions.

The premiere is April 27 at 7:30 PM, with reprises following on April 28, 29 and 30 and May 3 and 4. We can hardly wait! And you?

Conversation with Andrea Labik, 26 April 2022