

A Star Enters Another Orbit

| Ilona Landgraf | } November 3, 2015 | v 1 Comment

Jiří Bubeníček

Dresden, Germany

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by Ilona Landgraf

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In about one week Semperoper Ballet Dresden will lose one of its mainstays, a formative figure of the company, the idol of the Saxon audience, Principal Jiří Bubeníček, who will bid farewell to the Semperoper stage on November 11th as Des Grieux in Kenneth MacMillan's "Manon". In 2009, already a longtime internationally recognized choreographer, he mentioned in an interview on the occasion of a new creation for New York City Ballet that he would have to decide soon whether to focus on dancing or on choreographing. Since then he has managed the balancing act between giving top-notch performances and creating even more ballets.

Jiří's twin brother Otto had already bid goodbye to Hamburg Ballet's stage at the end of last season. Both are a perfectly attuned team. Jiří choreographs, Otto is in charge of set and costumes; sometimes he also composes the music. Now, shortly after turning forty-one, the time has also come for Jiří to finally stop dancing full-time. His schedule book is packed with commissions for the next two years. So there won't be time to put up his feet after the final bow. But that would not suit Bubeníček's nature anyway. A man of action he loves to be busy. Running several projects at the same time isn't unusual for him.



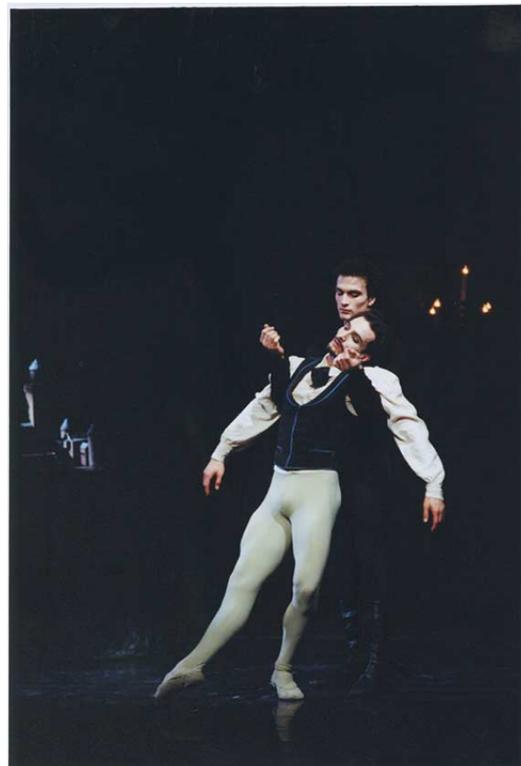
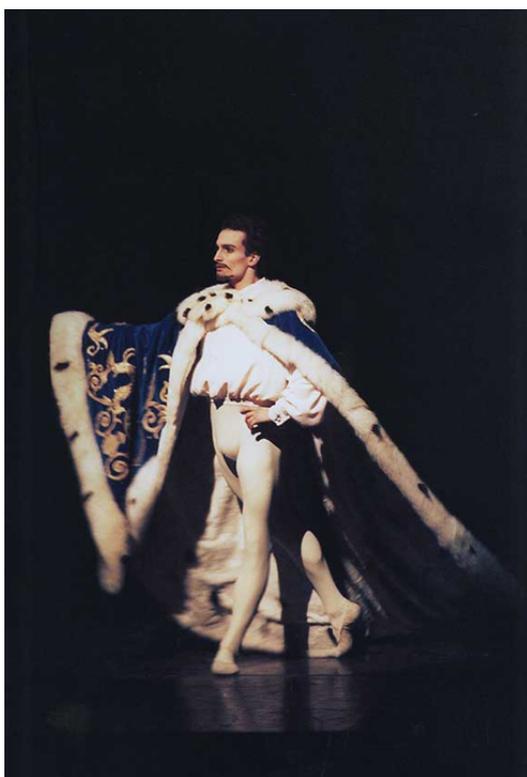
Bubeníček and I met in October in a restaurant in Dresden after a long day in the Semperoper studio. Rehearsals for "Manon" had been followed by a rehearsal of his own choreography for a Czech acrobats couple. "I am touching my roots again" Bubeníček says with a smile. So what comes to his mind when looking back on more than two decades as a professional on stage? And, above all, where will his path as a choreographer lead him?



The roots, he alludes to, are in the Czech Republic, more precisely in Prague, where in 1974 the twins were born into a family of famous circus artists. Their future might have been the circus ring, but it happened that a ballet teacher who was watching their training recognized their talent and suggested they try ballet. Soon the boys were enrolled at the Dance Conservatory in Prague. Aged twelve and having already

trained at the circus for years they skipped the first level and immediately started in the middle of the second class.

Jiří remembers the years in the Conservatory as a happy time. “We worked intensely but we had so much fun!” The schedule included ballet and variation classes, partnering, modern class, folk and character dance, and also fencing or make-up besides classes in history and so on. “The Conservatory has two buildings; the first four years



the kids stay in one building before moving for the following four years to the other building where students of music, theatrical acting and ballet were under one roof. The place, its every nook and cranny, is steeped in art. It might happen that if you went to the toilet someone would be practicing the trumpet in there!”

“When moving into this second building things suddenly started to become serious and focused for me. We also got a new teacher, Andrej Halász, an old, very kind man who made us realize that we had to work with determination. We were eleven



boys in his class, and he understood how to spark and nurture our enthusiasm. Halász also taught us etiquette; he gave us clear guidelines and made us envision a goal. We simply caught fire and were totally into ballet because of him.”

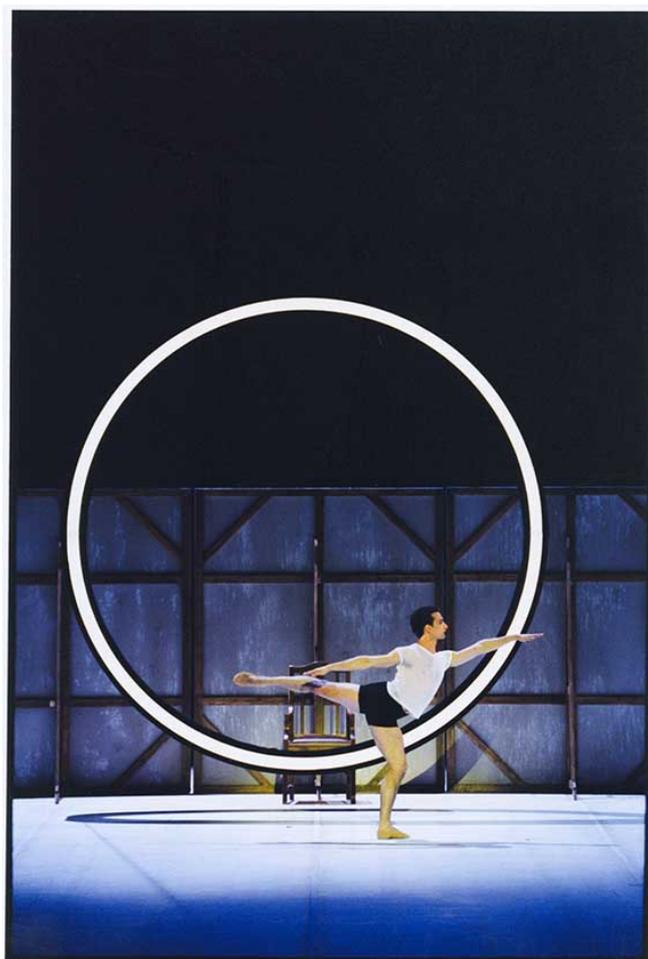
It later proved a great asset to have been given a strong technical foundation. Bubeníček’s refined technique is complemented by his acting talent. “Acting is part of the

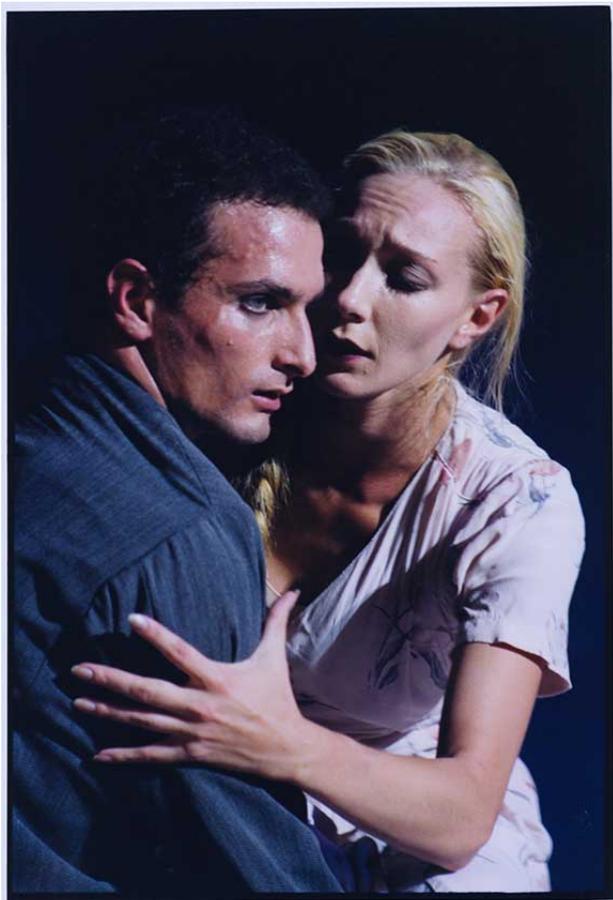
Czech mentality. We have a great acting tradition. Actually acting is in our blood.”

The brothers’ first engagement was with Hamburg Ballet. “John Neumeier saw us in Tokyo where the Slovakian choreographer Robert Balogh presented us in a competition. John Neumeier was on the jury. We were around fifteen years old. Then, in 1992, Otto and I won the Prix Espèces at the Prix de Lausanne and the audience prize. John Neumeier, who again was on the jury, invited us to change to the School of the Hamburg Ballet. But having only one year until our graduation in Prague, we decided to stay there.”

In 1993, at the age of eighteen, the twins joined Hamburg Ballet and, quickly ascending the ranks, were promoted to principals in 1997. Jiří, a charismatic dancer with a strong stage presence, danced all leading roles during his Hamburg time. Vaslav Nijinsky in “Nijinsky” was created on him. As The King in “Illusions – like Swan Lake” he was filmed. Then the role of Armand Duval in “Lady of the Camellias” earned him the Prix Benois in 2002. Being identical twins, the Bubeníčeks also added an extra “something” to roles in some of Neumeier’s ballets. For example while Jiří depicted The King in “Illusions – like Swan Lake”, Otto was his figure of fate, The Man in the Shadow.

Neumeier developed and fostered both of their talents. He also was an inspiring model of how to create new pieces. “I learned from his





way of choreographing how to use the moment in the studio or how to work with larger groups. Dealing with a big corps never intimidated me. Especially John Neumeier's approach when creating story ballets inspired me."

In 2006, after thirteen years with Hamburg

Ballet, Jiří was hungry for new artistic challenges. In 1999 he had begun to choreograph, an ambition he wanted to pursue while at the same time he was eager to broaden his experiences with other choreographers. Hence he put out feelers to several companies. At that time Aaron S.Watkin, who was about to take over as artistic director of the Semperoper Ballet, assembled a new troupe and invited him to join. Bubeníček accepted and moved up the river Elbe from Hamburg to Dresden. "Aaron's vision was very appealing to me. He planned to build something new in which I was able to participate. Assimilating into an already set structure would have been less tempting. I remember the first years being such an exciting time! Half of the company was new; Aaron worked with us the whole day – it was great! I love this company."

What Bubeníček had searched for in the preceding years came true. "I was able to immerse myself in the styles of different choreographers such as



William Forsythe, Jiří Kylián, Mats Ek or Ohad Naharin. Being myself a choreographer I wanted to learn how others work. Now I know.”



Bubeníček also describes his relationship to Watkin as absolutely positive. “Aaron always has a sympathetic ear for my ideas; he is ready to hand out advice and he has always supported me. For him it is a matter of course to send his dancers to galas all over the world which I am very grateful for.”

Loved by their home audience Jiří and his brother are also regulars on Czech stages and in Czech television shows. Yet choreographing takes priority for him. In Dresden he was able to intensify this work. Up to now he has brought more than forty pieces into being, mainly abstract, but recently more and more are story ballets. Not all company managements are accommodating when it comes to coordinating their in-house dance schedule with a dancer’s artistic self-realization yet the Semperoper’s management is.

The troupe “Les Ballets Bubeníček” which the Bubeníček established in 1999 also thrived during his last years there. It consists of carefully-selected dancers from various, mainly German companies, and friends from abroad coming together to tour with the Bubeníček. “Up to now we guested each year – in Rome, Tokyo or Prague – and Aaron always made it possible that dancers from Dresden could participate.” By this the popularity of the Semperoper company also rose, which in turn led to the whole company being invited to guest abroad such as later this season in St. Petersburg.

Bubeníček’s farewell partner in “Manon” will be Melissa Hamilton. Some weeks ago Hamilton, principal of the Royal Ballet, came over from London to stay for the season with the Semperoper company. Her move to Dresden was initiated by Bubeníček. “We met before a gala in St. Petersburg and, talking about ‘Manon’, I asked her if she would like to be my partner in the last performance. She agreed, Aaron did as well and Melissa came round for some days to train with us. She liked the



company so much, that she decided to stay a whole year.”

Facing the day of his farewell approaching Bubeníček admits to sometimes feeling a bit of nostalgia. “But I don’t immerse myself into this feeling. I love to dance and I want to soak up and enjoy every second until the end.”

It is not the right moment for digging deeply into the past. Instead Bubeníček focuses on the here and now and is already preoccupied by what awaits him after his last performance on the

Semperoper’s stage. He knows his schedule for the next two years by heart. He is fully booked and will crisscross the globe to choreograph, occasionally dancing with his brother. The start will take place in Hanover.



“Around one week after ‘Manon’ I’ll go to Hanover to create a new piece for a triple bill on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Jörg Mannes’s ensemble. It will be an abstract piece to music by Mozart.” As in most cases Otto will design set and costumes. He will also stage “Gentle Memories”, a 2012 creation, for a gala of San Francisco Ballet. A new creation for Helgi Tomasson’s company will follow in summer 2016. But first, at the end of this year, Jiří will work in Tokyo. “Tokyo City Ballet asked for an enlarged version of ‘L’Heure Bleue’, so I have to rework the piece.”



In spring 2016 the twins will tackle a weighty subject. They decided to create a piece based on Boris Pasternak's novel "Doctor Zhivago" for the Slovenian National Opera and Ballet Theatre in Ljubljana. "I watched the film of the same title, starring Omar Sharif and Klaus Kinski, when I was a boy, being eleven years old, and was fascinated by it. Pasternak tells the story of a love triangle between Dr. Zhivago, his wife and a nurse in the light of the

revolutionary turmoil and the civil war in Russia. The plot is complicated and meandering so I will cut some characters and side stories and instead put the love story center stage." The music will be by Shostakovich.

The season will close with a new piece for the ballet company in Gera, Thuringia, dealing with Anita Berber – the German dancer of the 1920s surrounded by scandal – and the painter Otto Dix. There are many cross-references: early in her life Berber trained with Jaques-Dalcroze in Hellerau near Dresden; she later toured Prague. "At that time – the period between the first and the second world war, which



marks Berber's heyday – art blossomed in my home country. Dix, who later painted the famous portrait of Berber, was born in Gera." Hence Bubeníček has plenty of threads to weave together. He is in the throes of research.

Bubeníček's latest major choreography was for the upcoming New Year's Concert 2016 in Vienna which will be broadcast worldwide. The dance sequences interspersed in the program are always filmed in



advance and shown as videos. “Being chosen by Manuel Legris is an honor for me. I am the first Czech to be invited. We filmed for ten days inside and outside the Schönbrunn Palace, which is a beautiful location. What added to the challenge is that we filmed from eight o’clock in the evening to seven o’clock in the morning because my libretto plays in the night. Included are Johann Strauss’s ‘Emperor Waltz’ and his ‘Polka’. I am really happy with the outcome.”



A professional to the core, Bubeníček is perfectly organized, one-hundred percent reliable, though nearly snowed under by work. It is a mystery how he juggles his daily schedule. A generous person, he is moreover always ready to help, to jump in for an injured colleague or to organize a benefit gala. Having an excellent reputation and being very well connected within the dance scene helps him. He is a pragmatist with a realistic mindset. “There is always a solution for a problem”, he says. “Only that one might not like the outcome.” He prefers instead to tackle obstacles head-on.

But beyond the surface of a well-structured thinker and doer is a sensitive man. When he comes to talk about

working in the studio his voice suddenly becomes another, softer, timbre; his busyness is gone, revealing calm confidence and



determination. “When creating, the atmosphere in the studio has to be peaceful; that is crucial. Of course there might be tension here and there but too much pressure harms the process.” Is he aware of becoming someone else, of allowing a glance into his core personality while telling me this? Usually Bubeníček doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve. Though plumbing his topics deeply he wouldn’t talk at length about it. What is presented on stage rather speaks for itself.

Bubeníček enjoys working with many different ensembles, finding a language which will bring out the dancers' fullest potential. Yet the goal is a company of his own, with which he can establish a long-term relationship; dancers he could imprint a unique profile on. Let's hope this will happen in the very near future.

(The interview has been edited for clarity.)



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- [Homepage of Semperoper Ballet](#)
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 - [Ian Whalen's Homepage](#)
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4. Jiří Bubeníček (The King) and Otto Bubeníček (The Man in the Shadow), “Illusions – Like *Swan Lake*” by John Neumeier, Hamburg Ballet © Holger Badekow 2015
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- 21. Michal Mudrák, Daniella Vítová (Duo HandtoViolin) and Jiří Bubeníček, rehearsal for a variety show © Otto Bubeníček 2015
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