

# DANCE

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**The Bubeníčeks**

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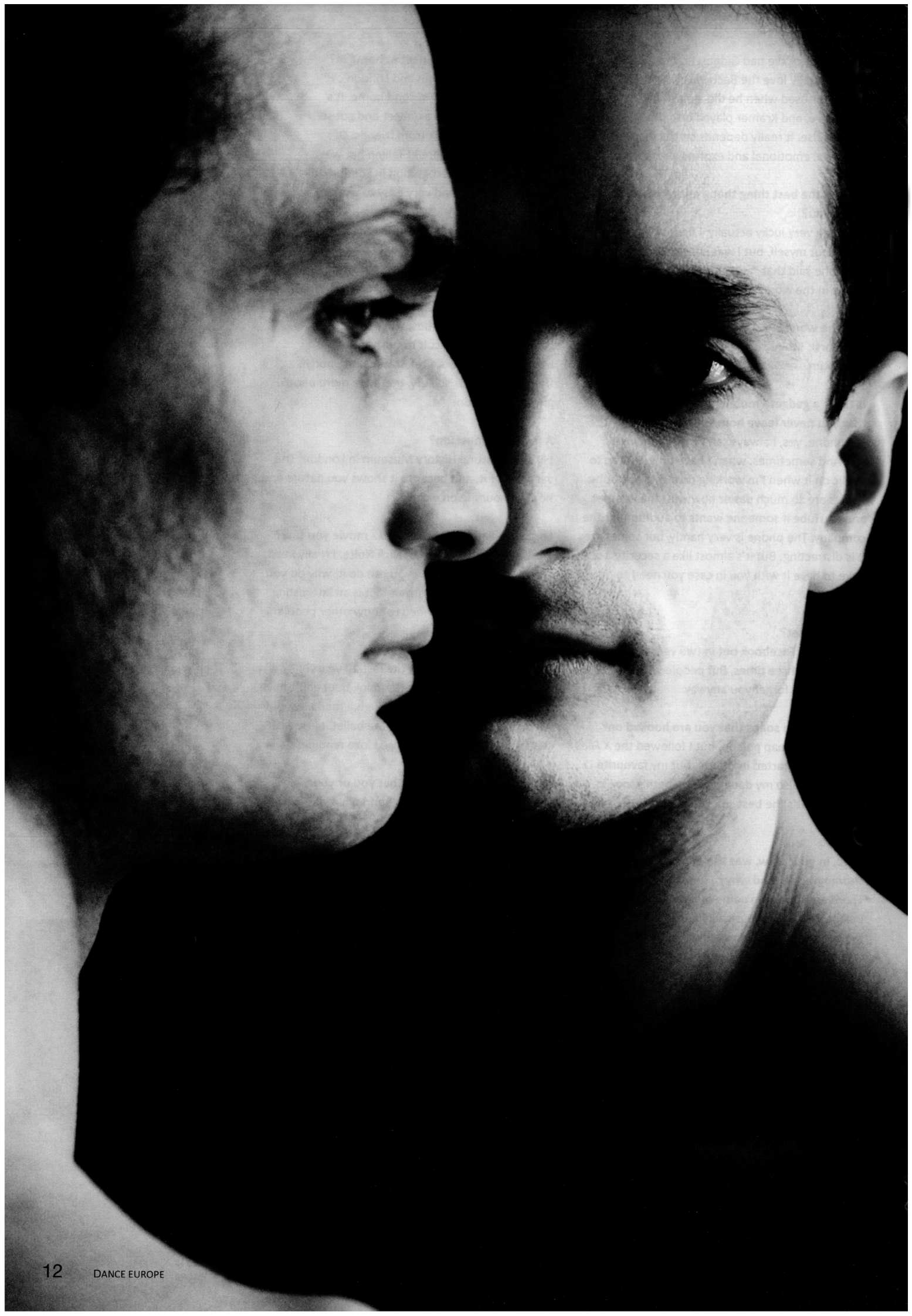
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Otto and Jiří Bubeníček. Photo: Rachel Hoppé

# Jiří and Otto Bubeníček

MAGGIE FOYER  
catches up with  
dance's multi-  
talented twins

**L**ast June at the Dresden Semperoper I watched an intriguing new version of Debussy's *Faun*, a lustful interpretation based on the Barberini *Faun*, also known as *The Drunken Satyr*. This was the creation of choreographer Jiří Bubeníček and his designer brother, Otto. Together, they had worked on the dramaturgy to bring together a complex slew of concepts and images. At the curtain, they took their bows on stage and, after a brief pause, the lights came up on Jiří, now in white tights as the god Apollo in Balanchine's great ballet, ready to launch into a fine performance. The twins danced together for 13 years in Hamburg, establishing themselves as world-class principals. Now, with Jiří in Dresden and Otto still dancing in Hamburg, they have begun a new creative project: Les Ballets Bubeníček, a company that promises an exciting and unique partnership.

The brothers come from an illustrious line of circus performers. Their father was training them for the same career, and it was when they were practising acrobatics in a studio in Prague that a teacher from the Conservatoire spotted their talent and, aged 10, they





Hamburg Ballet - Otto Bubeníček in Neumeier's *Orpheus*. Photo: Holger Badekow

## Milestones

### JIRÍ AND OTTO BUBENÍČEK

Born Lubin, Poland, 7 October 1974  
(Czech nationals)

**Trained:** Dance Conservatoire, Prague - teachers Andrej Halász, Jaroslav Slavický.

**Companies:** Hamburg Ballet - engaged 1993, soloist 1995; principal 1997; founded Les Ballets Bubeníček in 2009.  
[www.bubenicek.eu](http://www.bubenicek.eu)

**Joint Awards:** St. Petersburg - Dance Open, awarded with Best Duet 2012, *Les Indomptés*; Italy - Danza & Danza Prize 2009; Prix Espèces, Prix de Lausanne 1992.

### JIRÍ BUBENÍČEK

Semperoper Ballet Dresden - engaged 2006 as principal; Nomination Dancer of the Year Ballettanz (2009); Audience Prize, 18th International Competition for Choreographers - *Prisoners of Feelings* (Hanover 2004); Second Class Distinction - *Made on Earth*, Varna (2002); Benois de la Danse (2002) Armand in *Lady of the Camellias*.

joined the prestigious Prague school. Jiří remembers: "Me and my brother were not so sure about it. We liked the idea of circus and travelling, but my father said if you want good education, how to look elegant and move well on stage, it will be good. He also said whatever we wanted to do, we must do it full out. So we tried ballet, we liked it and stayed." Winning the Prix espèces at the Prix de Lausanne in 1992 brought them into contact with John Neumeier, one of the judges. He invited them to the school in Hamburg but they chose to finish their schooling in Prague, "...because we had a very good teacher: a very hard, very old man, Andrej Halász. He taught us everything." On graduation they were then invited to join Neumeier's company. Jiří traced their progress. "In Hamburg we were two years in the corps, two years as soloists and then we were promoted to principal. John really liked us and it was a good time from the beginning because he always offered us solo roles."

Jiří mentions creating the eponymous

role in Neumeier's *Nijinsky* as a career highlight. The brothers have danced most of the principal roles and created many in the repertoire, and are very much part of the history of Hamburg Ballet. When Mats Ek created his *Sleeping Beauty* on the company he had two identical lead dancers, Otto to play the dark and dangerous Doctor Carabosse and Jiří to play the glamorous Prince, the two men who shape Aurora's life. It was an intriguing piece of casting that is impossible to repeat.

It was John Neumeier's choreographic competition that encouraged Jiří to try his hand at choreography. "I was quite interested, but not too serious. I had been watching a singer friend rehearse and was imagining movements to the music, so I choreographed a solo and the audience liked it. After that John asked me to do a piece for the Hamburg Ballet School, and I wrote *A Different Drum*." In tandem with his dance career, a steady flow of choreographic opportunities arose both in Europe and



internationally.

Neumeier exerted a strong influence on both men. Otto spoke of the education they had in Hamburg. "John is a genius in telling the story. We learnt a lot from him, especially in the amount of preparation he did before he starts to work in the studio." Jiří said, "There is no other company like John's, where you need to be acting all the roles. His company is very special, it's where you really learn how to be an artist on stage."

Their Prague upbringing was also influential. Otto said how much Czech people love their stories and so everything he does has some kind of 'understory'. "We were educated that everything must have meaning." He is the one who brings the critical outside eye to his brother's choreography. "He makes the steps but I help with the dramaturgy and put the piece together."

Otto started his musical education at the Prague conservatoire, although he was not particularly interested at that time. "My main thing was always dancing. But in Hamburg, when I was 18, my brother came home with a keyboard and I started to play and discovered that composing gives me such happiness. When I compose something, I have to listen to it like a hundred times before I can fall asleep. Then the next day I see where the problems are, what I need to work on and if I like it. It's not only music, all creation is so fulfilling." Otto's compositions include the music for Jiří's ballet *Unerreichbare Orte* for The

Hamburg Ballet in 2005. He has also explored video and photography and has created several short films.

It was a wrench for Jiří to leave Hamburg after 13 years and come to Dresden. "Hamburg was very inspiring and John loved me but I wanted to develop as a dancer and try different choreographies. I felt if I wanted to continue choreographing I had to see more, do more and have more freedom and time." The new company in Dresden, directed by Aaron S. Watkin, offered him the opportunity to work with new choreographers, especially Forsythe, who he had always wanted to work with, and also the freedom to pursue other projects with his own group.

For both men, fitting in the demands of a dance career with new projects can be a problem. Jiří has been dancing Romeo in Dresden. "I feel I'm doing something 24 hours a day. I come home and want to rest but I have to play music and prepare

choreography." Otto is currently recovering from an injury – "Not a good thing for a dancer, but good for me at the moment. I have free time to work with Jiří." It is a dynamic and trusting relationship with a remarkable balance of skills. "Jiří is very talented in finding new ways to move." While Jiří acknowledges, "Otto doesn't choreograph, but he is very creative with a good sense of dramaturgy. He's a great artist and I trust his opinion, so he is my closest artistic friend. He is quite critical and tells me honestly what he thinks. Sometimes it's not easy because we have both very stubborn heads. When he was creating music for me in Hamburg I would say, "I need it longer," and he would say, "No, the music has got to be this way." To find a compromise is sometimes not that easy."

Creating *Faun* put their combined talents to the test. Otto contributed to the dramaturgy and also designed the sets and costumes. Otto's design interest was initiated by Jiří. "He just told me to create designs for him and didn't question whether I am able to do it or not!" A particular challenge was to update the animalistic element of the Faun costume. "I research on the internet and even stuff I see on the streets around me, and I put the different elements into Photoshop. Then I take the pencil on my computer and I mix everything. We had many fittings for the costume, but when I first saw it on stage I was happy because for me it really looked like Faun." For

#### Choreography:

*L'Heure Bleue* (2013) North Carolina Dance Theater; *Prelude & Fugue* (2013) Bunkamura Theater Tokyo; *Gentle Memories* (2012) Mariinsky Ballet; *Faun* (2012) Semperoper Ballett Dresden; *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2011) Velké Losiny, Czech Republic; *Die Innere Stimme* (2010) Albertinum Museum Dresden; *Letter to Felice* (2010) Bunkamura Theater, Tokyo; *Outrenoir* (2010) National Ballet of China; *Toccata* (2009) Lincoln Center; *Maifest der Brunnen* (2007) Basel; *Le Souffle de l'Esprit* (2007) Zurich; *Unerreichbare Orte* (2005) Hamburg; *A Different Drum* (2000) Hamburg.

#### OTTO BUBENÍČEK

##### Music compositions:

*Unerreichbare Orte*, Hamburg Ballet (2005) also released on CD; *Ai No Yukue Mo*, (2005), Sapporo Japan; *Le Souffle de l'Esprit*, (2007) also sets and costumes, Zurich Ballet, Wiener Staatsballett and North Carolina Dance Theater; *Toccata* (2009) also costumes, New York City Ballet; *Faun*, (2012) set and costume design, Semperoper Ballett Dresden; *Nocturnal Ecstasy*, film direction with Jana Pulkrabek also music, Filmförderung, Hamburg (2006).

Ekaterina Kondaurova and Otto Bubeníček in Jiří Bubeníček's *Gentle Memories* - YAGP Gala in New York in 2012. Photo: Dance Europe





Jiří the challenge was the steps. He described the creation of *Faun* as a play rather than a ballet. "Maybe it is John's influence, but this is dance for the theatre and I had to create a certain language."

Working as a team generates confidence, and this is also important in Jiří's choice of dancers. He was invited to choreograph a work for Ekaterina Kondaurova for YAGP Gala in New York. "I did not know how they would react to my style so I took Otto and also Jon (Vallejo, from Dresden) because I had choreographed on him already this season, I like how he moves and he's very fast. Katarina looked very good in it and the Kirov liked it." The work has been taken into the Mariinsky repertoire in a lengthened version and Jiří has been offered a future invitation.

Like many choreographers, Jiří feels more comfortable working with dancers he knows well. "I don't judge myself so much, I just create, and when the atmosphere in the studio is relaxed then the best work comes. I like really open dancers, dancers who move classically and also in a contemporary way. Not just a dancer who can move, but one who has a soul and a heart and charisma on stage. With creative dancers I can trust both myself and them. It's more interesting to choreograph and the piece becomes theirs. In China I had an amazing time: I had just two weeks to teach my *Canon* and a short pas de deux but they were very welcoming and so warm. It was very positive and I was very impressed by their high standard."

Jiří had been dancing in Dresden for a few years before he wrote his first choreography for the company. It was a site-specific work, *The Inner Voices* at the Albertinum Gallery. "The space is incredible and so inspiring. It was a beautiful experience, with 60 performers, singers, actors, dancers and orchestra, so it was a big responsibility but I loved it." Jiří's work is in increasing demand and will be seen for the first time in London this summer when the Royal Ballet School perform his *Canon* at their Opera House matinée.

With their own company the brothers hope to explore ideas and make their own pieces. "We want



Semperoper Ballett Dresden - Jiří Bubeníček in Balanchine's *Apollo*. Photo: Costin Radu

“  
We want new classics.  
We find stories in old  
books that have not  
been made into  
ballets.

”

new classics," said Otto. "We find stories in old books that have not been made into ballets." On their gala tours they provide an impressive evening of new works, mixing contemporary movement with classic and narrative with more abstract pieces. Jiří has also organised charity galas, including the 2011 *Ballet for Japan* at Dresden's Albertinum Gallery where dancers from major German companies performed to raise funds for the victims of Japan's disastrous tsunami. There's a tireless energy about this creative team where their combined talents are generating such inspired results.