

Stage

Tsarry night



Cygnets ring: there's a whole lot of tutu heading for the RAI

This month, Amsterdam's biggest theatre space hosts 'The Greatest Swan Lake on Earth'. *Malcolm Rock* talks to Tchaikovsky Perm's chief ballet master about why the title may be more than festive hyperbole

Almost three centuries have passed since Russia's Mariinsky Ballet (the Kirov) began furnishing the world of dance with its biggest stars. Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova and Rudolf Nureyev are just three of its most famous. A lesser known, but no less remarkable, progeny is the Tchaikovsky Perm State Ballet, whose inception was the result of war: in 1942, during the Siege of Leningrad, the Kirov evacuated to the town of Perm in the Urals. After the war, much of the company returned to the city but a few remained and founded a new company.

Today, the Perm upholds the same training methods and conservative traditions that were brought to the Winter Palace in 1738 by the father of Russian ballet, Jean-Baptiste Landé. Henk van der Meijden, who's been presenting the Tchaikovsky Perm, Kirov and Bolshoi

companies in the Netherlands for the past 40 years, says the result is akin to a living painting.

'The Russian technique is as fine as the lines on a Rembrandt canvas,' enthuses Van der Meijden. 'The dancers of these companies have all learnt the same style from the same schools. You won't see such harmony and togetherness on any other stage.'

This month, Van der Meijden will bring the Tchaikovsky Perm's history-making production of 'Swan Lake' to the Amsterdam RAI Theatre. The engorged staging, trumpeted as 'The Greatest on Earth', uses 48 swans rather than the usual 24 and is based on a version by Mariinsky alumni and former American Ballet Theatre principal dancer Natalia Makarova. (Local balletomanes might retain the bitter-sweet memory of Makarova seeking asylum in London in 1970, four days before she was scheduled to appear in the Netherlands with the Kirov.)

Aleksey Miroshnichenko, Tchaikovsky Perm's current artistic director and chief ballet master, insists that the Makarova 'Swan Lake' is more faithful to the Marius Petipa original than the more popular Nureyev revision. 'Makarova's version uses more of the Petipa choreography,' he says. 'It preserves the academic dances, for

example, which means that you will see the noble dancers – the princes and princesses – as well as the character dances that have been raised to the level of nobility.'

Double the swans means double the magic but also double the effort, says Miroshnichenko. 'Being twice as big

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means it's twice as difficult to rehearse,' he says. 'Forty-eight people have to hear the same music in the same way. And it has to look beautiful, not like a march for Stalin on Red Square.'

Stalinist allusions aren't exactly a joke for Miroshnichenko and his company. The director and his predecessors have worked hard to maintain the link with imperial theatre that was all but severed by the Soviet era and he's proud of the Russian dance heritage the Perm represents. 'Historically the company can be traced directly back

to the Mariinsky Theatre and the Vaganova Academy, the oldest school of ballet in the country,' he says.

He adds that the pre-revolutionary style has survived through Makarova, Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, who, by defecting, were able to introduce Russian ballet to the world: 'They proved to the world that the Russian spirit was not gone, just oppressed by the immense pressures of Soviet authority.'

Featuring a grand total of 150 performers onstage and in the pit – not to mention those 48 swans in 96 pointe shoes – the Tchaikovsky Perm's 'Greatest Swan Lake on Earth' is a luxurious ode to the legacy of Russian dance and the enduring qualities of its teachers and schools.

'Good technique is passed from teacher to pupil,' Miroshnichenko says. 'My teachers taught the generation before me and the generation after. Petipa was the teacher of Balanchine, who brought Russian ballet to America in its most crystallised form. Balanchine taught Forsythe and Forsythe will train others. We're all linked by the same style, the Mariinsky style.'

The Greatest Swan Lake on Earth' at Amsterdam RAI Theatre runs until 2 January. See listings for details.