

Cultural Daily

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Baryshnikov: When Theater Stage Embraces Cutting Edge Art

Edward Goldman · Thursday, April 19th, 2012

After last week's [explosive spectacle](#) staged by Chinese artist [Cai Guo-Qiang](#) outside of the Geffen Contemporary, I was worried: would I find anything equally intriguing and unusual in the museums or galleries in the days to follow?

The answer is sort of yes and no. I did find some amazing artwork, though it was not in the galleries or museums, but on the stage. A friend of mine invited me to see Mikhail Baryshnikov acting, not dancing, on the Broad Stage in the new production *In Paris*. I have seen Misha—as he is known to millions of his admirers—numerous times on stage and on screen. But this was a special occasion as he was not dominating, but generously sharing the limelight with delightfully quirky actors and singers, performing on an eye-popping, constantly shifting stage set, worthy of a must-see museum show.



(L) Mikhail Baryshnikov performs In Paris. Photograph courtesy of Bertrand Langlois/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images (R) Mikhail Baryshnikov (R) and Anna Sinyakina perform In Paris.

Based on the short story by Russian writer Ivan Bunin, the play tells the melancholy tale of Russian émigrés in Paris shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution. In the best tradition of the Russian avant-garde theater, Moscow based director [Dmitry Krymov and his Laboratory](#) keep the audience on edge, never knowing what is going to happen next. Blown-up, century old postcards are used as stage props, constantly moved around. One moment a postcard is the background for the action, the next moment, with a wonderful sense of humor, it is transformed into a car, carrying the actors across the stage.



Mikhail Baryshnikov performing In Paris. Photograph by Maria Baranova.

The costume design is equally full of surprises. The ageing general, played by Baryshnikov, shows his passion not only by breaking into a short dance, but also by unexpectedly opening up his military overcoat to reveal the startling bright red lining. For a second, Baryshnikov transforms himself into a bull-fighting toreador, reminding the audience of his famous role in the ballet *Don Quixote*. The general's paramour, while trying to decide which dress to wear for their rendezvous, performs something close to a magic act. She reveals and then folds a series of completely different outfits, all cleverly concealed inside one seemingly simple dress.



Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, Le Spectre de la Rose, choreography by Benjamin Millepied. Photo by GTG/Vincent Lepresle.

Even more visually stimulating, was the performance by the [Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève](#) at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. I loved the dancers and enjoyed the clever choreography of Benjamin Millepied. But again it is the set design and costumes that, for me, stole the show. One hundred years ago, Mikhail Fokin famously choreographed *Le Spectre de la Rose* for the Ballet Russe, as a quintessential romantic fantasy. This new production by the Grand Théâtre de Genève makes light fun of the sleeping young woman who dreams of not one, but three dashing male suitors. They dance, climb, and jump over the few simple, brightly colored geometric shapes, which make up the intriguing set design.



Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, Les Sylphides, choreography by Benjamin Millepied. Photo by GTG/Vincent Lepresle.

Next to the famous *Giselle*, *Les Sylphides* is the most beloved and romantic of any classical ballet performance. And once again, here on the Dorothy Chandler Stage, we saw it being completely reinvented. The dancing took place on a stage imagined, not as a mythical forest, but as a vigorous, black and white abstract composition.



Nederlands Dans Theater, Silent Screen, choreography by Paul Lightfoot and Sol León. Photo by Lawrence K. Ho, Los Angeles Times.

It was only a few months ago that the [Nederlands Dans Theater](#) performed at the Music Center, demonstrating their trademark innovative set design. The performers were dancing against black and white movie footage, projected on several large screens. Tension between the movement on the stage and the action on the screens was palpable. I remember it as one of the most visually stimulating and satisfying theater experiences I have had in recent years.

There is such a wealth of risky, creative, and intelligent set design in contemporary theater. It would be great to see a major museum show dedicated to the visual magic of stage design at its best.

Topmost image: Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, Les Sylphides, choreography by Benjamin Millepied. Photo by GTG/Vincent Lepresle.

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