

PENNSYLVANIA BALLET

ROY KAISER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 2010-2011 SEASON

The Abiding Allure of Roland Petit's *Carmen*

by Rita Felciano

At its world premiere in London on February 21, 1949 Roland Petit's *Carmen*, performed by his own Les Ballets de Paris, exploded like a rocket into the demure world of English ballet. Music lovers were outraged at the way the young Frenchman re-arranged Bizet's much beloved opera score. Catalan painter Antoni Clavé's design was said to overwhelm the choreography. Dance traditionalists considered *Carmen*'s jazzy energy, its explosive theatricality and dramatic realism an assault on ballet's classical tradition. But balletomanes were also divided. Used to tutus and genteel fairytales, many took umbrage at the eroticism, violence and nihilism of what they considered a sordid tale. What Bizet had only implied, Petit spelled out.

Yet his harsh but also witty and amusing *Carmen* became a huge popular success, putting Petit and his troupe on the international radar and making Zizi—known until then as Renée—Jeanmaire a star. Arnold Haskell, a dance critic and major force behind the founding of the Sadler's Wells Ballet (today the Royal) was an early Petit admirer, calling him “the first French choreographer of importance since the great days of the 1830s” and “a leader of the shock troops of contemporary ballet.”

Petit had wanted a Spanish-style ballet for Les Ballets de Paris' second season. He first considered one based on paintings by Francisco Goya. But traveling around Europe he noted the ongoing popularity of Bizet's *Carmen*. So he reread Prosper Merimée's 1845 novella and encountered a heroine who was cynical, fiercely independent and sexually voracious. He had found his subject.

After its American premiere on October 6, 1949 at New York City's Winter Garden, *Carmen* ran for 118 performances at Philadelphia's Shubert Theater. Later that season it grossed \$60,000 (adjusted for inflation, \$528,858) in a fortnight.

Sixty years later David Vaughan, now the archivist for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, remembers having loved *Carmen* when he first saw it in London, though later he developed reservations about Petit as a choreographer. “*Carmen*,” he recalled, “of course had the great advantage of being danced by Zizi Jeanmaire who was not only a great personality but a terrific technician.”

Jeanmaire almost didn't get the part. Petit had reservations about her stamina and wondered if she was right for this man-eating femme fatale. The dancer gave him an ultimatum: either she would be Carmen, or she would quit the company. So he told her to cut her hair and turn herself into “une furie asexuelle, ni fille, ni garçon” (an asexual fury, neither boy nor girl).

The choreographer, however, had been correct about Jeanmaire's stamina. During the last pas de deux on opening night, with Petit dancing Don José, Jeanmaire kept whispering in his ear that she couldn't go on. So at a critical moment when he was supposed to slap her pro forma, Petit hit her hard. Jeanmaire screamed—and finished the ballet in triumph. They later married, and she danced Carmen some 5,000 times during her long career. (A 1980 recording, in which, at 56, Jeanmaire partners a 32-year old Mikhail Baryshnikov, gives an idea of just how exceptional a performer she was.)

Though *Carmen* still packs a powerful theatrical punch—it remains Petit's most popular ballet—the work is also grounded in its time.

Born in 1924, Petit entered the Paris Opera Ballet School at the age of nine and received superb classical training. Joining the company at sixteen, he became a "sujet" (roughly the equivalent of a soloist) at nineteen. When he was twenty, POB artistic director and Diaghilev's last great dancer Serge Lifar created *L'amour sorcier* (The Magician of Love) on him. Petit had a brilliant performance career ahead of him. Yet he was restless. "POB was musty," he has said. "I didn't want to be paid every month like a civil servant and retire with a pension at forty-five." So he started to choreograph and in 1944 quit the security of a full-time job. This is how he remembered the period:

"The occupation was terrible but it had an advantage for me: all the artists lived in Paris which was like a village. You knew everybody: culture, music, painting, sculpture, writing and dance—all the arts, I had them in my hands."

Paris's Left Bank famously became the gathering place for students and the circle around existentialist writers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. They smoked Gauloises, dressed in black and listened to American jazz. They also embraced human freedom as an absolute, along with the responsibility that came with it. For all the ballet's veneer of light-heartedness, *Carmen* reflects this "here and now and nothing else" philosophy.

The City of Light also burgeoned with theater and nightlife. Given the circumstances, this seems miraculous. Though the war was over, daily life was still hard: electricity intermittent, food scarce, heating fuels for one of the coldest winters on record almost non-existent.

Curiously, in his autobiography, *J'ai dansé sur les flots* (I have danced on the waves), Petit never mentions these physical hardships. The closest he comes is to observe that "the only place to have hot water was in the dressing rooms of the Opera."

Janet Flanner ("Genet"), who for fifty years published her "Paris Journal" in *The New Yorker*, was more explicit. In the June 21, 1946 letter she noted:

Fifty-three Paris theatres and five music halls are going full blast—a sign of the continued restless tension, the hunger for unreality, and, indeed, the plain hunger that still obtains. It is cheaper for the modest bourgeois couple to nourish their imaginations at the theatre than their stomachs at a black-market restaurant.

Paris just after World War II was an extraordinarily vibrant place for young artists, and Petit was in the middle of it. Sartre's *Huit Clos* (No Exit) had opened in 1944, the same year Edith Piaf brought Yves Montand to Paris and, incidentally, made him her lover. Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes* (The Maids) was to follow three years later. In 1945 the Sadler's Wells Ballet performed to sold-out houses (eighty-five percent American G.I.s), and film director Marcel Carné released *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Children of Paradise) with the aging Arletty and Jean-Louis Barrault, who was about to start his own company with his actor-wife Madeleine Barrault. In 1946 Jean Marais starred in Jean Cocteau's *la Belle et la Bête* (Beauty and the Beast) and Jacques Prévert's *Paroles* (Words) became an immediate bestseller. Prévert wrote the libretto for one of Petit's early ballets, the 1945 trio *Le Rendez-Vous*.

Petit may have disliked working under Lifar at the Opera, but from him he learned the effective use of theatrical space. More importantly, at a crucial juncture in the young choreographer's development he was taken under the wings of two other Diaghilev alumni: Cocteau, whom Diaghilev had challenged with his famous "étonne moi, Jean" (astonish me, Jean), and Boris Kochno, who had been Diaghilev's secretary and artistic associate. Cocteau and Petit had met in a radio studio when the dancer was being interviewed about the Opera's ballet school, and the writer about his latest book. The two became life-long friends. Cocteau wrote the libretto for Petit's 1946 *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* (The Young Man and Death), his first international hit.

Cocteau and Kochno instilled in Petit what they'd learned from Diaghilev: the importance of finding first-rate collaborators so that dance, music and design coalesce into a unified theatrical experience. Petit has followed this principle ever since.

With the tough taskmaster Kochno (and money from his father, who owned a restaurant in Les Halles), Petit in 1945 started his first troupe, the Ballets des Champs Elysées. One of its members, who a few years before had gathered dandelions along railroad tracks to ward off starvation, was a very young dancer by the name of Leslie Caron. His own boss at last, Petit embarked on the international career from which, at 86, he has yet to retire.