

AROUND TOWN 13

FRIDAY, JANUARY 1, 2010

Toeing the line



*Les Ballets Grandiva
leavens the rigors of ballet
with a dose of comedy*

BY **DIANE BAKER**
STAFF REPORTER

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Les Ballets Grandiva, Men in Tutus
WHEN: Wednesday to Jan. 10 at 7:30pm, Saturday (Jan. 9) and Sunday (Jan. 10) matinees at 2:30pm
WHERE: Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall (國父紀念館), 2F, 505, Renai Rd, Sec 4, Taipei (台北市仁愛路四段505號2樓)
ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$3,000 for Wednesday and Thursday's shows; NT\$600 to NT\$3,600 for Jan. 8 through Jan. 10 shows. Tickets available through ERA ticketing outlets, online at www.ticket.com.tw or by calling (02) 2723-7953
DETAILS: Members of Novel Hall can receive a 20 percent discount, or if they buy three tickets at the same price they receive a fourth ticket for free. For more information on discount offers, go to www.novelhall.org.tw/dance/2009MIT/en-ticket.html

Boys who study ballet don't grow up learning the finer points — pardon the pun — of toe shoes. They don't have years to learn which brand of toe shoe works best, figure out how to pound the box of the shoe to soften it up and sew on the ribbons — they don't learn how to articulate their feet, how to scoop the floor on point.

This means that for most of the men of Les Ballets Grandiva, learning to dance on point is on-the-job training — along with learning how to keep the comedy flowing.

And being funny is what Les Ballets Grandiva are all about.

The all-male troupe will be making its Taipei debut next week, with seven performances at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, as part of a tour that will also take them to Malaysia and Singapore.

The 13-year-old troupe was founded by the Japanese promoters ZAK Corp in 1996 with Victor Trevino, formerly of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, the original all-male drag ballet troupe, as artistic director.

Current artistic director, Brian Norris, also danced with the Trocks for six years before retiring. A few years later he got a call from Trevino, asking him to join the Grandivas.



Chatting in the coffee shop of the Union Hotel during a press tour to Taipei in the middle of last month, Norris said he doesn't mind the comparisons with the perhaps more famous Trocks.

"Bring it on," he said, snapping his fingers. "They're Riverdance, we're like the Lord of the Dance."



The company is based in New York City, but tours widely in Europe and Asia, including annual months-long visits to Japan. The Grandivas have a core of 14 dancers and add more for tours, depending on what they're performing.

The makeup of the company is diverse, with dancers from the US, Japan, Canada, Italy and Argentina. While the Trocks adopt Russian personas, Grandivas who dance the female roles take stages names similar to famous ballerinas from their own countries.

One of the newest members, 20-year-old Joshua Thake, who was on the press tour with Norris, is using a former member of the San Francisco Ballet as his role model. The San Francisco Ballet School graduate was just hired in October and is enthusiastic about his new job. He admitted, however, that the first time he danced on point was the day of his audition.

"People are more accepting [of troupes like the Grandivas]. Men are looking for it as an option, a career," Norris said, noting that 15 men turned out for the troupe's auditions in New York City.

"Ten to 15 years ago it was harder to find men who could do point easily. But now the ability is really skyrocketing, everything has really advanced," he said.

Norris said he was mentally casting roles during the auditions, but added: "New dancers are excited with whatever you give them."

One role Thake will be getting is a turn performing the company's signature piece, a parody of Mikhail Fokine's *The Dying Swan*, the solo that Anna Pavlova made her signature piece in the early years of the 20th century. At 1.88m, Thake will be a lot of swan.

As the company's press material notes, however: "This solo is so significant to male comedy ballet, it has developed into two ballets — the piece itself, and the bow. Which is longer depends on the ballerina and how responsive she demands her audience to be."

Which brings us back to the main point of Les Ballets Grandiva performances — laughs and audience interaction. The company wants people to enjoy the show and isn't shy about seeking feedback.

"For people who have not seen ballet before, the company breaks down the barriers," Norris said.

The shows operate on two levels. The sight gags, hissy fits and one-up-manship — the broad comedy — can be enjoyed by those who don't know ballet.

Those in the know about ballet's finer points and its history can enjoy the parodies and inside jokes, as demonstrated with Trevino's restaging of Jules Perrot's 1845 *Pas de Quatre*, which brought together the four greatest ballerinas of that era. While one can only image the tensions those four brought to their rehearsals, the Grandivas are happy to show audiences what could have happened during the performances.

The company has an extensive repertoire of classic and modern works but is sticking mostly to the classics for its Taipei visit. The 90-minute show will also include Balanchine's 1964 *Tarantella* and a yet to be announced pas de deux, plus a one-act version of the highlights of *Swan Lake*.

Dancers have to be very talented to deconstruct such works. It's keeping the men focused on the humor that's the struggle, Norris said, adding he has to constantly remind them to stay in character.

"Especially in the pas de deux, the dancers want to do so well they forget to put the comedy into it," he said.

"People say you can't teach it [comedy], but I think you can. You can teach technique, so you can teach this. That's my challenge as director."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LES BALLETS GRANDIVA