

See guys in tutus

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For decades, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo have made an art form of turning classical ballet on its end with its all-male gender-bending performances.



Understandably, men in tutus never cease to be funny. In this company, formed in 1974, male dancers play all the roles — both male and female — in their loving spoofs of story ballets. That means men dance en pointe as sylphs, princesses, water sprites and more.

Paul Ghiselin, formerly of the Ohio Ballet, is ballet master and performs as Ida Nevasayneva in Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo at Ohio Theatre at Playhouse Square Saturday, Jan. 29.

The joke would be on the Trocks, though, if they didn't dance as proficiently as females in those roles. According to Paul Ghiselin, a former Ohio Ballet member in his 15th year with the Trockaderos, the bar has been raised very high over the years as far as technical requirements for troupe members.

This is not a group that totters around on tippy toe and fumbles through the female parts. The New York Times described the Trocks' recent Christmas program as "mallerina glory" with "equal measures of buffoonery and technical aptitude."

The New York-based company, which has gained fans across the world for both its humor and technical mastery, will give one performance at 8 p.m. Saturday at PlayhouseSquare's Ohio Theatre. Ghiselin, the current ballet master who still dances as Ida Nevasayneva, won't be performing this weekend. Artistic director Tory Dobrin won't be in Cleveland so Ghiselin will be busy with his ballet master duties with the 16-member company.

The Trockaderos, presented by DANCECleveland and Cuyahoga Community College Tri-C Presents, haven't performed in Northeast Ohio for 11 years. Limited tickets at \$20-\$50 remain. Call 216-241-6000 or see <http://www.playhousesquare.org>.

The troupe doesn't try to ham it up. The humor flows naturally from the incongruities of serious dance, Ghiselin said.

"We kind of take that refinement and push it a little bit more," he said. "If you see a big man with hairy armpits and chest hair busting out of a tutu, just the look of that is funny," he said. "The batting of eyelashes is an amazing tool."

"The incongruities of ballet are hysterical," Ghiselin continued, giving the example of *Swan Lake*: "Who's gonna fall in love with a bird?"

Their brand of humor and dance talent has earned the Trocks a cult following in Japan, where they perform for months at a time each year. The Japanese have formed a Trocks fan club, and multiple generations of families attend their performances.

"The Japanese love ballet, first of all, and they love the Trocks. They absolutely adore the Trocks," Ghiselin said. "Our audience is packed with women."

He's been the Trocks' dance master for five years, which requires him to know every ballet in the repertoire in order to teach it to new dancers. He also is responsible for restaging repertoire being brought back into the company.

Ghiselin joined the Trockadéros at age 33, just as he thought his dance career would soon be winding down. He said dancers who join the all-male troupe tend to be on the fringe of the ballet world, often the class clowns.

"Learning to dance en pointe was like learning to dance all over again," he said. "I had to go take little ballerina classes," namely pointe classes with Pam Pribisco, formerly of the Cleveland San Jose Ballet.

"It was sort of like it was meant to be. The repertory opened up for me," said Ghiselin, who quickly began dancing lead roles.

Working with the late Heinz Poll for 13 years with the contemporary Ohio Ballet served him well in his transition to both classical story ballets and the Trocks' work in modern dance, Ghiselin said: "I had a discipline of understanding music and athleticism rather than just posing and looking pretty."

So how long does it take for the dancers to don their wigs, tiaras, tutus, pointe shoes, makeup and false eyelashes? Ghiselin said they're given only one hour to get ready, part of the life of a disciplined dancer.

"You can really get overindulgent," Ghiselin said of focusing too much on costuming and makeup.

The Trockadéros' program is designed to entertain both novices and those knowledgeable about ballet. Ghiselin said the company makes the story lines very basic, so knowing the ballets ahead of time isn't required.

"I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, 'I've never been to a ballet before but I'm so glad I came to this.' "

In Cleveland, they'll perform *Patterns in Space*, with choreography after Merce Cunningham, a postmodern work in which Ghiselin said two onstage musicians totally upstage the dancers. Other pieces will be the Trocks' signature work, *Swan Lake Act II*, and *Le Grand Pas de Quatre*, in which four grand ballerinas of the late 19th century fight for supremacy. Finally, the men will create nuptials onstage with *Raymonda's Wedding*, with choreography after Petipa.