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‘The Golden Cockerel’ Is a Ballet Bird With a Kick

By MARINA HARSS JUNE 1, 2016



Duncan Lyle, left, and Skylar Brandt in “The Golden Cockerel.” CreditFabrizio Ferri

It’s almost a cliché to say that a ballerina’s arms suggest wings — the technique of ballet itself lends itself to metaphors of lightness and flight. Its repertory is filled with creatures of the air: melancholy swans, magical firebirds, charming bluebirds, even butterflies. This season, American Ballet Theater introduces yet another feathered creature to its menagerie, the gold-plumed rooster in Alexei Ratmansky’s [“The Golden Cockerel.”](#)

“The Golden Cockerel” opens midway through a season in which Mr. Ratmansky’s works dominate the repertory. By July, eight of his ballets will have been performed on the Met stage. But, as the recent revival of his 2012 “Firebird” underscored, his idea of birdlike movement doesn’t necessarily coincide with the familiar 19th-century image of fluid arms, delicate necks and fluttering feet. This is even more true of his “Golden Cockerel.”

“The movement is almost mechanical,” Mr. Ratmansky said recently at the company’s studios, “very strong, brilliant and sharp, with fast changes of focus.”

In a rehearsal, Skylar Brandt, one of four dancers performing the title role, slid forward several feet on her pointes, then folded her arms back at her sides and flickered her elbows quickly, almost like mechanical winglets, and finally bent forward at a right angle, jerkily, like a marionette. Later she skittered across the studio in a series of blisteringly fast backward-traveling leaps; again, the impression was both brilliant and almost frighteningly inhuman.

Mr. Ratmansky's golden bird has a long history, onstage and in the literary imagination. He (a cockerel is a young rooster, though he's danced here by a woman) is merely the most recent incarnation of a character that first appeared in a folk tale by Alexander Pushkin. (Another rooster plays a bit part in Frederick Ashton's "[La Fille Mal Gardée](#)," which just ended its run.) Pushkin began jotting down his old nursemaid's stories in the 1820s while in internal exile at the family estate. (He was being punished for his support of the Decembrist revolt against Czar Nicholas I.) Pushkin's tales, or skazki, are familiar to most Russian children, as they were to the young Mr. Ratmansky. (There is even a [Soviet cartoon version](#), from 1967.)

It's a strange story, in which the cockerel plays only a small but crucial part. A doddering old czar (Dodon) wants only to sleep. ("It is the Russian dream to do nothing and to sleep all the time!" Mr. Ratmansky said. "Don't forget, the winters in Russia are long.") His kingdom is attacked from all sides. An astrologer offers a solution: a golden cockerel who will crow whenever danger is nigh. After repeated warnings, Dodon marches off to battle a kingdom to the east, where he encounters a beautiful princess. He falls madly in love and decides to make her his wife. When the astrologer demands the princess as his prize, Dodon kills him. Then, in a magical reversal, the cockerel springs to life and kills the czar.

In Mr. Ratmansky's version, she lands on the czar's shoulders and pecks him to death. (No, she's not your usual bashful swan.) "It's really fun to kill someone onstage," Cassandra Trenary, one of the dancers performing the role, said after rehearsal.



Richard Hudson's costume sketches for the American Ballet Theater production of "The Golden Cockerel."
Credit Richard Hudson

The moral is hard to unravel. What does it mean? In part, Pushkin's tale was meant to poke fun at the folly of kings, a perennial Russian subject. But, contrary to appearances, "The Golden Cockerel" didn't start as a Russian story. Rather, it's an adaptation of a tale by Washington Irving from his "Tales of the Alhambra" (1832). It is both a satire and, like the Irving version, an exotic fable in which magic plays a big part. "There is this interesting relationship between the astrologer and the queen," Mr. Ratmansky explained. "They are both magicians; they come from the same dimension somehow."

The story's political undercurrent lingered in the 1907 opera it inspired. Composed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, it is a cartoonish political satire dressed up as a fairy tale, in which he pushed his usual musical language — highly colored instrumentation, sinuous melodies, folk motifs — to a parodic extreme. "The Russia depicted in this opera is a caricature," the Princeton musicologist Simon Morrison said in a phone interview, adding that the composer "contrasts this with a fantasy space of the exotic east." In other words, nothing in "Golden Cockerel" feels remotely real.

Still, the content was troubling enough to alarm the censors and delay its premiere. The opera opened in Moscow in 1909, after Rimsky-Korsakov's death and was picked up a few years later by the Ballets Russes. In that version, from 1914, staged by Michel Fokine, the story was acted out by dancers while the singers and chorus sat in tiers on either side of the stage. The separation of the voice from the body made the similarity to puppet theater even more apparent.

Fokine's take was also less political, not "a satire on royalty," he wrote in his memoirs, "but on human frailty and weakness in general." His characters were puppetlike, in the style of Russian folk art, echoed by the production's spectacular designs, by the avant-garde painter Natalya Goncharova: brilliantly colored, vehemently two-dimensional, almost childlike. Richard Hudson's designs for the current production are based on Goncharova's, though not as exuberant. "I simplified some of the backcloths," he explained in an email from London, "to achieve a clear, sharp, coherent stage picture."

In 1937, Fokine created a new, one-act, pure-dance version, without singers. (The designs, again, were by Goncharova.) The cockerel, which had been represented by a prop bird, was now a ballerina on pointe. [Extended excerpts were captured on film.](#) (You can see them at the Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

Fast forward to 2012, when the Royal Danish Ballet asked Mr. Ratmansky to create a new work for the company. He was intrigued by the lore surrounding the Fokine staging. "The first knock on the door for me was that Fokine said it's his best ballet," said Mr. Ratmansky, who expresses a great love of ballet history. "I thought, it must be a very special thing." He went back to watch the footage from the 1930s production and was persuaded to give it a try. His own version quotes just a few of Fokine's movements, particularly in the sharp, jerky choreography for the cockerel. They are like a salute to the ballet's past.

Mr. Ratmansky's two-act ballet opened to [mixed reviews](#) in Copenhagen in 2012; critics lauded the designs and the characterizations, but some complained that there wasn't enough dancing. For American Ballet Theater, Mr. Ratmansky has added more. Even so, there is more mime than most contemporary audiences are accustomed to, all in the interest of conveying the fantastical story. The political subtext is not emphasized. "I mean, what do I do, put Putin makeup on the king?" Mr. Ratmansky asked, with a wry laugh. "I wish I could be more daring in that sense, but I don't see how I can translate that. For me, it's about the music and visuals and characters."

Above all, the ballet is a gift to the company's current crop of excellent actor-dancers, including Roman Zhurbin, Alexei Agoudine, the guest Gary Chryst, and the soon-to-depart Victor Barbee. As brilliant as the role of the cockerel is, the ballet belongs to them. Because, even more than a ballet, "The Golden Cockerel" is a colorful fable told through music and danced mime.

"The most important thing for us," Mr. Ratmansky said, "is to create a world onstage."

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