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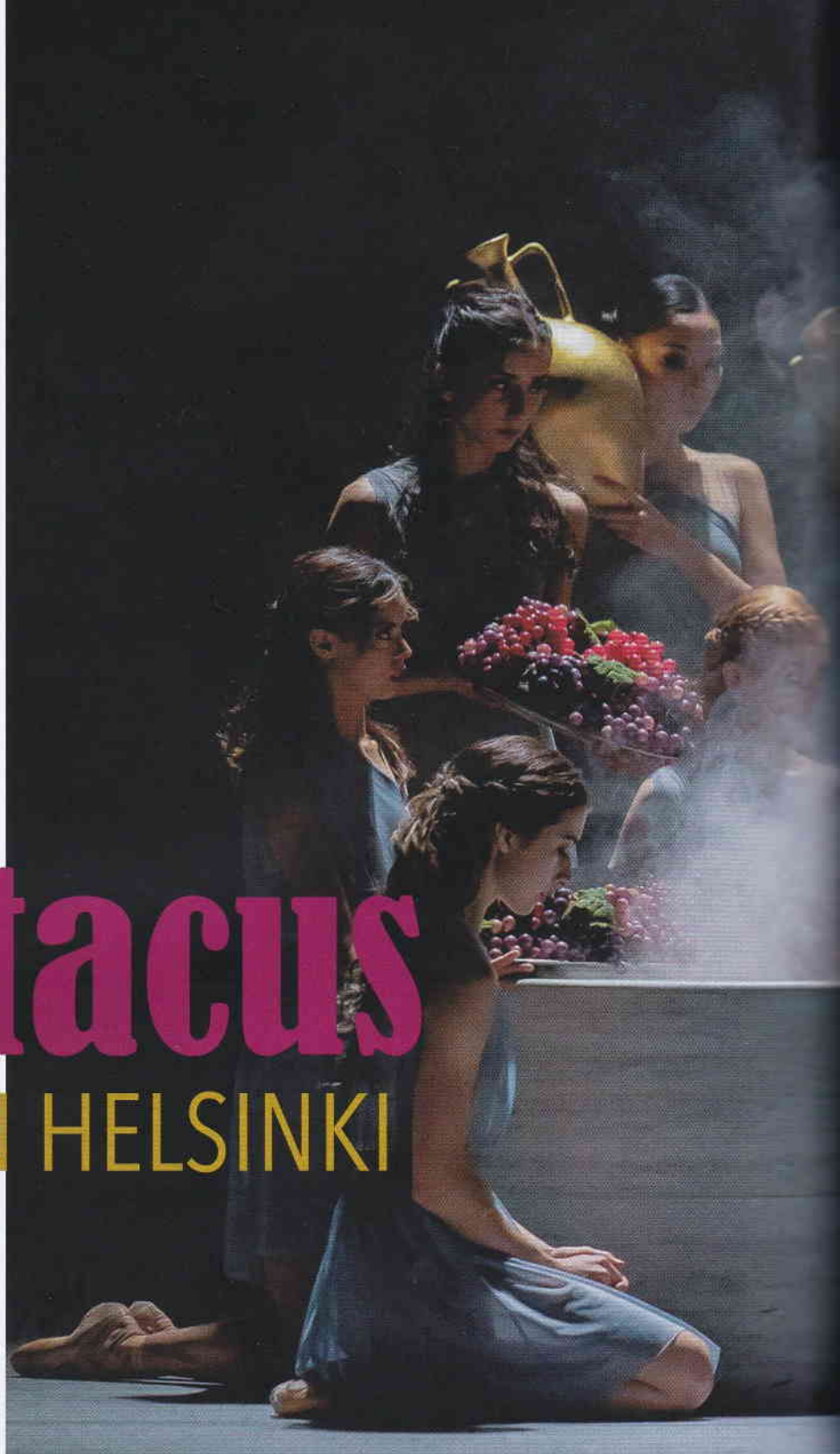
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Spartacus

IN HELSINKI



LUCY VAN CLEEF
considers a new take on
the historical story

Roman gladiators were forced into a minimalist lifestyle long before it became a lifestyle trend for millennials. But despite set and costume designer Jérôme Kaplan's every effort towards understatement, the new *Spartacus* at Finnish National Ballet, which premiered in October, is anything but sparse.

This is primarily due to the original score by Aram Khachaturian, which presents a bombastic spectacle straight

out of the gate, horns blaring and symbols crashing. A bit of background: Khachaturian composed *Spartacus* for the 1954 premiere at the Mariinsky Theatre (then the Kirov) choreographed by Yuri Grigorovich; it was restaged for the Bolshoi in 1962, where it was a major focal point of that company's tour to New York. *Spartacus* became an archetype for the bravura and bold expression of Soviet ballet and was embraced by Stalin as a symbol of breaking away from the Russian Empire.



Finnish National Ballet in *Spartacus*. © Roosa Oksaharju

Choreographer Lucas Jervies' version is very much a commentary on that interpretation. The work debuted at the Australian Ballet in 2018. In Jervies' words, "I wanted to avoid the clichéd iconography associated with the period [of *Spartacus*], and to align the contemporary ballet form with its content; I also didn't want to glorify the oppressions of the era. The choreography had to demonstrate a tension between beauty and terror."

The curtain opens onto a crowded stage.

Dancers in regimented formations wave large red flags. A huge stone sculpture of a hand pointing straight to the sky (a literal heavy hand) looms in the background, admonishing from above. Sure, Crassus wears a crown, but the imagery makes it impossible not to associate his rule with the Communist regime - an audacious claim, considering the historical significance of *Spartacus*.

Jervies' choreography uses Khachaturian's bold music to underscore the power of unison. Group dances are team

building; a way of conveying power and camaraderie - to jaw-dropping effect. Unison makes the movements as loud as the music. It also presents an easily definable contrast between royalty and slave: one group moves with surety and sharp angles, the other produces curved and weighted shapes under the stony yoke of oppression.

Michal Krčmár is quite an interesting dancer as Spartacus. His muscular frame suits the role well, initially preparing the viewer for macho displays of strength and prowess.

But Krčmár offers just as much sensitivity and fluid movement to the role as he does guts. His port de bras is descriptive and artful, and he connects each movement as though drawing a single, cohesive portrait. His landings are feline and supple, and his emotional reactions are convincing. In Spartacus' signature pose, kneeling in profile, one arm stretched on the diagonal and the other framing his head, as though strumming Apollo's lyre, Krčmár could be chiselled in stone. But the depth he offers his character makes Spartacus a human, who endures pain and heartbreak, and experiences love. Krčmár infuses Jervies' *Spartacus* with life.

The production is an admirable showcase of the company's men. Gladiator training scenes feature both dancers' technical prowess and group fellowship. Nicholas Ziegler serves as an unnerving Batiatus, alarming for his grim authority. Martin Nudo, as Spartacus' best friend Hermes, and Luciano Ghidoli as the prize fighter Crixus, stand out for their courageous dancing. Overall, fighting scenes, choreographed by Nigel Poulton, are seamless and transporting—moments that make it easy to forget that this was a theatre performance, and not a real, and very terrifying, reality.

Crassus, the dictator of this inferno, is danced by Henry Grey, a dancer so tall and sly that it's easy to be convinced of his character's wickedness. His concubine Tertulla (Aegina) is danced by an elegant and regal Claire Teisseyre. Their costumes and surroundings are a sumptuous contrast to the stripped-down slaves' world permeating this universe - jewel tones, metals, and luxurious fabrics like velvet and silk reveal Kaplan's good taste and style without taking away from the production's pared-down aesthetic.

As Flavia (also known as Phrygia), Zhiyao Chen brings out the delicacy of her character. Her elegance cannot be sullied by smears of dirt or her ragged costume. While displays



Finnish National Ballet - Michal Krčmár in *Spartacus*. © Roosa Oksaharju

of oppression elicit sympathy at every turn, Chen's defeated demeanour is the easiest to commiserate with: she's treated badly, and then even worse. Her ultimate breakthrough comes in the ballet's closing solo when, framed by the bloody bodies of the defeated rebels, her rage reaches a tipping point. Chen's extremities become daggers as she charges the floor, all inhibitions cast aside. Here is the ballet's truest statement of the unflinching power of freedom; amidst tragedy, Chen is the flickering light of hope.

It's easy to see why the Finnish National Ballet chose this for one of their first premieres post-lockdown. *Spartacus* is unabashedly unapologetic - a statement about the necessity of freedom as a basic human right. It's a celebration of the company and its return to the stage, and an example of the sublime impact of live performance. And, as evidenced by the exceptional applause for conductor Philippe Béran's full orchestra in the pit, an occasion for very big sound.