

Connection between Two Countries – the Canadian Choreographer Sonia Clarke Stages Two Performances With *Arabesque* Ballet Troupe in Bulgaria

Sonia Clarke comes from Montreal, Canada. She has lived in Europe for a long time and two years ago she came to Bulgaria where by chance she met the director of the *Arabesque* ballet troupe – Roumiana Markova. Later on, this meeting gave birth to two dance spectacles and to a cooperation, which transformed into a friendship.

I met Sonia Clarke during her second visit to Bulgaria and she told me it is quite probable that she would be back to work there. Her impressions were connected mostly with the beauty and the rhythm of the Bulgarian folklore and with the friendly behavior of the Bulgarian people. But the thing that excited her most, was the possibility to create and dance in complete freedom. Her creative biography is impressive and diverse: in 1989 she finished the school “Les Grands Ballets Canadiens” in Montreal, and in 1994 she graduated from the University of Quebec in Montreal, majoring in “dance”. In 1997 she received a state diploma for theatrical direction from the Institute of the Theater of Motion in Lion, France. She has, herself, an experience in teaching dance. She has participated in many festivals, has completed diverse dance projects in Montreal, Paris, Lion, French Guyana and... Bulgaria. In 1998 she created the production company “Armistice”, with which she hopes to succeed in different fields – dance, music, cinema.

The two performances, which Sonia Clarke set up in Bulgaria with *Arabesque*, are built up upon subject matters, which are taken from the reality around her. She presented these subject matters the way she understood and felt them: “The first show is called “Similar But Not the Same” because the idea was based on different dancers telling us who they were and giving us a piece of their personality. So I was asking for a movement, but movement that I wanted them to transform into themselves. And there are pieces at the finale that they created themselves – it was a nice mix. So the first show was exploring the personality and also the art form of what do you have to say and who are you as a dancer.

The second piece is called “Human Symphony”, because the dancers are based like an orchestra. I wanted the music to be at the same time classical and modern and I thought that I had to pick one or the other, but then I said: “Why choose?”. So I put both. I had music from Biset, Sinead O’Connor, Tom Waits, Lion Parker. It was a kind of classical-modern style.”

Sonia told me that her work with the Bulgarian ballet dancers was a challenge for them as well as for her. Her both pieces are very different stylistically and rhythmically from *Arabesque*'s repertoire.

"Their bodies weren't used to work that way", Sonia says, "but they were very attentive and even though sometimes they were fighting with their movements, by the time we came to the premiere everything started to filling in properly. So when I came back in Bulgaria for second time, they have gotten used to a lot of the movements and I was able to go technically a step further."

Sonia Clarke does not exclude the possibility to continue working with some of the Bulgarian dancers, but in Canada. With her colleagues in "Artmistice" she is preparing a new show for the next year and she has the idea to invite some of the dancers she met in Bulgaria.

According to Sonia she didn't choose the dancing, but the dancing chose her. After passing through classical, jazz, and afro-Cuban dancing, now she describes her style as "natural": "I find that the classical ballet is a beautiful art, but often the old romantic style is so far from reality. Or, my reality maybe."

In her pieces she often mixes different musics and in such a way her dancing becomes rhythmically and emotionally diverse. She likes travelling, so one of her favorite themes is the mixture of different cultures.

"Even though we have a lot of different cultures in Canada I prefer to taste those cultures in their countries. I have very much difficulty to stay at one and the same place. I love travelling. I love dancing. And I am happy when I can do both."

Interview With Roumiana Markova

Mrs. Markova, how did you meet Sonia Clarke?

It was a very pleasant meeting. She was in Bulgaria through the Bulgarian-Canadian Business Council. We met by chance and she was interested in *Arabesque* so I asked her to make a workshop for a week. I saw that she works very professionally and I invited her to build a show. I am very happy for our collaboration.

Sonia told me that you gave her a complete freedom for work – something, which is essential for an artist.

Of course. I am a choreographer myself and I know that only when I feel free, I can stand up for what I want to say. And I respect the right for freedom. Sonia felt comfortable here because she was able to make the things the way she wanted to.

You have been working with Arabesque for more than 26 years now – can you tell us shortly what was the beginning of the ballet?

It was created 33 years ago. At first, a group of enthusiasts decided to break up with the established norms in the dancing and to search for different ways of artistic expression. So the created troupe was very original for its time. They also had a good manager – Liuben Goranov who organized lots of trips to other countries and invited foreign choreographers. And this is a tradition in *Arabesque* which I try to keep going – an exchange of thoughts, ideas, techniques, art forms. Penka Encheva – a big star in the Bulgarian ballet – was the director of the troupe for 2 years. After her, Margarita Arnaudova directed *Arabesque* for more than 20 years and she established the ballet as something essential and precious in the Bulgarian cultural life.

What are the problems that you encounter as a director of the ballet?

In Bulgaria it is very difficult to do the art that you love. And I am not talking only about the financial problems. It is true – we have no money, but there is no ethics either. I cannot motivate the artists to give their best while working. Not everybody has the idealistic vision about the art. Especially in the dance, you have to give 100% of you in order to succeed. If you are not devoted, it would not work.

What are the themes that interest you as a choreographer?

The modern times.

It's interesting that in the Arabesque's repertoire one can feel a mixture of contemporaneity and tradition.

Arabesque really shows a style, which is very diverse, and that is its strength. But it's very difficult to keep it going, to present always many

different points of view. What I liked in Sonia's art is its vitality. Her dance is full of optimism and joy. It also has seriousness, but it is presented as a touch. That's the artist – he/she does whatever she/he feels from inside. And if a person has a talent, it will show in no matter what form – writing, music or dance.

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