

# Heat

Dance New Amsterdam,  
New York –  
August 24, 2010

**H**eat came to Dance New Amsterdam on August 24 with a programme note that began, “The heat. It’s overbearing, inescapable. It brings our tempers to a boiling point...” Since this production was Russian, those words might presage a Slavic storm. Instead, *Heat* was fun.

Billed as a “New Russian Interdisciplinary Performance,” it was the collaborative creation of four able young Russian theatre artists – Nataliya Dievskaya, Olga Leonova, Alexander Safronov, and Kirill Vytoptov, actors and singers as well as dancers, who were brought to the US in a residency co-hosted by New York’s CEC ArtsLink and the venerable Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts.

Although Jacob’s Pillow is justly celebrated, CEC ArtsLink is less well known. Yet this admirable organisation promotes significant cultural exchanges between the US and Eastern and Central Europe, Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus and presents dance concerts in association with such centres as the American Dance Festival and Jacob’s Pillow, where *Heat* was developed.

*Heat* began with its cast sprawled on the floor clutching red fabrics suggesting sheets. After twisting restlessly as if tossing about on a hot sleepless night, everyone rose, turned the fabrics into robes, then hopped, staggered and mopped their brows. The heat was surely intense.

Wit prevailed, however. The women resembled cabaret artists singing while flirting with the audience. Returning in red shorts, the men became gymnastic rivals. They, too, flirted with theatregoers by smiling, waving, and wiggling at them. When they loosened their shorts a bit to peer at what was inside them, they seemed mighty pleased by what they saw.

Singing a sultry ballad, Leonova assumed odd shapes, and it soon became evident that someone hidden beneath her skirt was controlling her. Man or woman? We never learned. In another song, Dievskaya lamented



Kirill Vytoptov and Alexander Safronov in *Heat*. Photograph: Elena Skochilo.

her inability to do anything properly. Most song lyrics were sung in clear English, but Vytoptov delivered a long monologue in Russian with florid gestures, which he said in a discussion afterward concerned an unhappy clown mourning a circus ballerina. Some theatregoers were unsure whether this was supposed to be poignant or comic.

There were other ambiguities in the work, for the performers appeared to be both expressing and gently mocking theatrical emotions. Thus dancers sadly cradled one another, after which everyone walked solemnly downstage, whereupon this doleful procession gave way to jolly curtain calls.

Ric Rider, a vocal coach at Jacob’s Pillow, contributed an inventive score for piano, synthesiser, and taped sounds that combined moody musical motifs with pop songs. In addition to the performers’ choreography, there were what programme credits termed improvisations based on choreography by Chet Walker and Dana Moore, Broadway choreographers on the Jacob’s Pillow faculty.

Although surely influenced by Broadway, *Heat* didn’t resemble a Broadway show. Yet neither did it recall Russian ballet (interestingly enough, the cast received basic dance training at theatre schools, rather than ballet academies). *Heat* looked fresh, and one knew why its programme note finally proclaimed that heat can “melt the coldness in our hearts”. ■

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