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Renato Zanella - "I like the fact that Greeks can work hard"



He has a vision, but his feet are firmly planted on the ground, in fact on the ground of Greece, a country that he says he admires greatly. A workaholic and an astute artist with goals and a clear rationale, **Renato Zanella**, artistic director of the **Greek National Opera Ballet** for the past two-and-a-half months, talks about his dancers and his plans for them, as well as the company's new productions, made for crisis-hit Greece.

In our discussion, the 50-year-old Italian choreographer expressed hope and optimism for the future of the GNO team, without overlooking the fact that he is being called upon to make a state organization that has its fair share of economic woes work.

What were your first impressions when you took up the post of artistic director at the GNO Ballet?

Everyone welcomed me warmly. I have received very good feedback from my dancers; they all work very hard. This company is hungry for work. I must say that we had a very good start with the company. We had a very pleasant meeting recently; we went to the Acropolis and took pictures together. It was such a great expression of support for me. I respect this country very much. I like Greece and I like the Greek people.

You chose to work in a country that is experiencing one of the toughest socio-economic crises of its recent history, bound by a two-year contract. How did the situation in Greece influence your decision?

The decision was taken at a time when the European Union was feeling positive about helping Greece. It was a moment of transition and there was optimism. Then, after the events of the summer, with the EU imposing controls, reviewing its decisions and not paying, we ended up where we are now. I don't think that in Italy things are any better, nor in Spain or Portugal, or many places in Germany. Being in Greece as the head of a company that is called Greek National Opera Ballet is a great responsibility because it's the only one of its kind in the country. I feel very proud of that. I have a two-year contract, but it will take at least three years to make the changes that are needed. But that's okay, because the priority is to shape the company.

How do you see the ballet corps you have taken on?

I made some changes to the program to focus more on our strengths. But, even though I am by nature very optimistic and I try to make the best of the crisis, the people are suffering, they don't trust their politicians and institutions, they are being squeezed like lemons. GNO artistic director mister Myron Michailidis and I have to adopt a strong stance in order to keep the company together, to give courage and motivation, to help the spirit of the company survive. From this point of view, the company is in good shape, but, if you can't pay salaries, you end up with a chain reaction. I have a lot of responsibility given this situation and I'm very sorry for these difficulties. But, it's a moment when it's better to be calm and to smile, to give a sense of unity. The artists have all been very creative despite the difficult times. I try to transform this negative energy into something that is creative. That's my hope.

Have you seen any particular areas of weakness that need addressing?

The weakness is that they have not danced enough in the past. The weakness is that there was no real programming to keep the company in motion. Now we have a premiere on November 27, and then we will begin work on "Faust" and "Don Quixote." The company has to work, to dance, otherwise, the dancers become slow. In the past, the company didn't perform enough; this is not the fault of the dancers. You can't win a race if you don't train the horse. I have to make the company work more. It has a very strong young generation that is ripe for being pushed, and a generation of mature dancers who have to be respected and given the chance to express themselves as artists. These are not state employees; they're artists. I train my dancers and I defend them as artists.

Do you think the company lacks experience?

Not really. If the body is trained, then the spirit and the mind work better. They are becoming faster, they are good-looking and they are losing weight, getting motivated. In any team -- a dance team, football team or basketball team -- the members have to be physically involved. The work, the training is a fantastic mental exercise. I need to tune my company, and it looks like they are reacting very well. I have to say that they respect my work and I teach them every day. They have strong potential for creativity because they are all individually beautiful artists. I have to tune my instruments month by month, with the repertoire, with the opera. The profile of a company is built through the right repertoire and the right piece. Building an identity for the company is our top priority. The dancers have to work within their comfort zones if they want to be the best. When the artist is happy with what he does, the audience gets a good vibe.

Was is the biggest challenge of this job for you?

Every beginning is a challenge. I think that artistically I'm at the best point of my career now. I'm at a respectable age and I have many years and a lot of work behind me. The challenge lies in the fact that Myron Michailidis gave me the position not only of director, but also of being in charge of most of the choreographies. My most ambitious project of the year is "Romeo and Juliet." This is something I have wanted to do all my life. All of the work I'm doing now, in the first part of the season, with the opera, operetta and ballet, is to prepare the company for my dream production. So, the challenge at the moment is to deal with the crisis on the one hand and, on the other, to use this fantastic opportunity. I tell my dancers that maybe we won't change history, but we may leave for home with a smile and be happy to come back the next morning.

What are your targets for this company?

There are three points: the internal situation, the national situation, which means becoming a well recognized company, and achieving international recognition. This is something we don't have. Myron Michailidis says that this is the beginning of a new era from many points of view. This era will end with the new opera house that is being built, so the commitment is there. By then, the company and the school, with which I have very good relations, need to be put in order. This is the internal work.

As far as domestic recognition is concerned, we did a production for public squares and it was fabulous. I believe that sometimes the mountain needs to go to Mohammed. We survive on money paid by the people through their taxes and people who support us, and so we need to give back to them. As far as international recognition is concerned, you can't reach that point without first reaching points 1 and 2.

How were the ballet's performances in public squares?

It was a beautiful experience. The people didn't just turn up to see us perform, but also to watch us build the stage. They were curious. In Gazi area, a woman with her daughter came two hours earlier. I told my assistant to tell her that the performance would begin in 9 p.m.; it was only 7 p.m. at the time. The woman just said that she was enjoying seeing the lights go up, the dancers talking. In other squares it was not so easy. There was too much noise. For some people the whole thing was like Disneyland. Some wanted to climb onto the stage. Then there were some squares where the lights were broken or they were dirty and smelled bad. But, at the end, everyone applauded.

Do you enjoy your life in Athens beyond your work?

I have found a very nice little place close to GNO and to the sea, because I love being on the coast. I have many friends here. I came in Greece for the first time as a dancer but I didn't know the country. I am rediscovering Greece now. Everything we have in Italy has come from you... Half of Italy is from you. I feel very much at home here and I like the fact that Greeks can work hard.

- **“Everybody Waltzes!”**: This is composed of three choreographies. “Empty Place” is a piece that is representative of my own choreographic language. I have created a version of it especially for the GNO Ballet. It is kind of dark, but it has a lot of atmosphere and it really brings out the team's strengths.
- **“Romeo and Juliet”**: Rehearsals begin in December and performances are scheduled to begin in May 2012. This production is designed especially for the GNO Ballet. We are already in discussions with a top Greek fashion designer for the costumes. For the sets, we will use images of my hometown, Verona. The production does not have such a modern orientation; the dancers will be on points shoes and we will also keep Prokofiev's music, in two acts.

info: «Everybody Waltzes!» - choreography : Renato Zanella. - Greek National Opera Ballet, premiere, Sunday, 27th November 2011. [Read more](#)

Despina Psalli