

Designing the Primal: Interview with Nikolaj Hübbe Artistic Director of the Royal Danish Ballet

By Gunild Pak Symes

Nine months after a glowing farewell performance in February 2008 with the New York City Ballet before an adoring full-house of fans and luminaries, Nikolaj Hübbe reflects on his return to his homeland of Denmark and his new role as the artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet. Dance For You Magazine's Gunild Pak Symes learns about Hübbe's thoughts on the challenges the ballet is facing in an increasingly complex world, his experiences with the dancers and his goals for the company's development.

DFY: So, what is it like to be back?

Hübbe: Well, it's nice to be back, except for the weather. I mean, it's nice to be back food-wise. But you know what I miss? I miss the American hamburger. And there are certain things about New York just as a city that I miss – the grandness, and oh, the comfort of America, you know, the ease, the speed. But it's nice here. Yes, in the beginning, I just hated Copenhagen, but the beauty of Copenhagen... I mean, if you can get used to – what do you call it – the placidity, yes, it's placid. It's awfully placid. But if you can turn it around into something pleasant, then it's quite wonderful. But it takes a bit of work especially after living in such a hustle and loving the hustle and bustle of New York City. I am very torn.

DFY: Any surprises or insights since you've been back?

Hübbe: Well, that's the thing, the small little gems of Copenhagen. The little beauties like a café on a street corner where all of a sudden you sit there, and there's just beautiful architecture on all three sides. It just faces you. Or like the other day, I was going to go to the zoo to see the new Norman Foster building. But I never got to the zoo because somebody took me to see a place called Cisternerne (Museum for Modern Glass Art). It was in the old water cisterns with these two very beautiful entrances. I'd never been there before. It was a tiny little museum. Just little things like that.

DFY: So, a lot of things have changed since you've been here last?

Hübbe: Yes, yes, yes. I was so overwhelmed. It was just so beautiful. It's this rarity that is astounding. The fact that Danes, you know, "forarbejder" (process or design) everything. Everything they touch... a flyswatter has to be designed. A bottle-opener has to be rethought, and it is, of course, little, but those things are, and after all, I am, Danish.

DFY: Do you think that these things are reflected in the ballet company here?

Hübbe: No, I don't find it reflected in the ballet company. I would like it to be more reflected.

DFY: How has it been like to work with the dancers? What relationship do you have with them?

Hübbe: I think I have a good relationship with them. I love teaching. I always loved it, and I still do. And I teach as much as I possibly can. And I like staging, directing, you know... So, I think a lot of things are cleared (up) with the dancers with you in the studio. I think a lot of things are solved. And so, there are a lot of things you don't really have to talk about, because you are there one-on-one, or with a group of them, and it's back and forth, and there's this interaction. Peter Martins, my director (at

NYCB), I knew he really liked me. And I was fortunate that I had a director that gave me and fed me. But a lot of times, dancers wonder, "How does the director see me? What does he think about me?" I think a lot of that is clarified, once you go downstairs to class (as a teacher) and yank and pull and press and shape... I think a lot of that is really over then.

DFY: How have you seen the response from the audience so far, since you have been here?

Hübbe: The audience? Well, the audience doesn't come. We don't sell, not yet. We have these three huge stages. We have these three houses we have to fill. I think ballet and dance has lost its popularity in Denmark. People don't come. They haven't heard that there is this new man at the helm. They didn't come before, with the guy before me, and they are not coming now.

DFY: Sounds like a very big disappointment. Were you expecting that?

Hübbe: Yes, well, when I came here a year ago, I didn't know. Because the last couple of years when I have been home, I always thought that the ballet sold like crazy, like mad. I remember once – this was probably 12 years ago – I was home and I did "Onegin", and it was sold out two months before. I couldn't get a ticket. And somebody told me it was always like that, always like that. I mean, you just can't get in to a ballet performance. Well, you certainly can now. So, whether it's the artistic direction or the over-bombardment of other visual entertainment forms, I honestly don't know. Because it is not that the ballet doesn't dance well, or that it's not moving forward.

Papers don't want to write about us. Because they are in dire straits, newspapers are in dire straits, nobody has a subscription anymore or go to a newspaper like you did just ten years ago because you go onto the Internet. And you basically don't have to go to the cinema anymore. You can do it all on your computer or your TV. Basically, you can spend your day at home: you can work from home, and you can get your culture and your entertainment, your stimulants online at home... everything you can do from home.

DFY: So how are you going to reach these "home" people?

Hübbe: Well, maybe through the Internet. The Internet and TV seems to be the major source, the rope into people's little apartments. We had a huge success with (the production) Silk & Knife, the Jiri Kylian evening. It basically sold out. But then you go, "Well why didn't you come back?" Why don't those people come back? What is it that prevents them? That was a lot of young people. You would always find like 400 bikes outside the theater and a lot of students.

DFY: You, yourself, brought sex-appeal back to ballet at NYCB. You have that star charisma, which is one of the reasons why they brought you here as director. How can you make ballet "cool" again? How can you make it "cool" to go to the ballet?

Hübbe: I would love to make ballet "cool", but to tell you the truth, I don't know how. Also because I find that you can't. It is what it is. It's not that you should maybe wrap it differently. You could, but you will unwrap it, and it will be what it is. And I also find morally – this sounds weird, it's not that I am conservative or old-fashioned – I just think that to make ballet popular, do we do popular titles? Would I invite a popular rock band on stage and everybody dance around them?

DFY: That works for some of the young people, but not all of them. They want to be challenged.

Hübbe: Yes, but that's the thing. You know what? This is a classical tutu. This ballet is danced in it. And that's what it's going to be and that's what it's going to be called anyway. To sort of call it something else would not be right.

DFY: I have asked young people about this... They want a challenge. They guess that ballet is hard, but they don't really know anything about it. And the more they know about it, the more they get excited and say, "This is cool". So, I think it is a lot about education.

Hübbe: I think it is education. Yes, I think so. Education and the word on the street...

DFY: What inspired you to start dancing when you were little?

Hübbe: I saw a performance of "The Nutcracker". I had to be in there. I wanted to perform. I think I just wanted to be on a stage. I think dancing more than acting. I was very fascinated by both acting and dancing, plays and ballets. But I wanted to be on the stage. I had to be on stage.

DFY: And your parents are theater people as well?

Hübbe: No, my father is a doctor and my mother is a teacher. My whole family is very academic. It was like I had to be in another reality, be in another world.

DFY: And then you asked your parents if you could get into the school?

Hübbe: Yes.

DFY: And they said yes.

Hübbe: No. They said no. (laughing)

DFY: They said no?!

Hübbe: Yes, and then finally at age nine, I started taking ballet outside. And the teacher took me (to the audition at the Royal Danish Ballet School) under the radar, and without my parents' knowledge, and then it was sort of inevitable. And she was the one who said to them, "He has to dance. This is it. You don't know. He has to dance. This is what he wants. This is what he should do, and you don't get it." And it was not that they did not take me to operas, ballets, and plays. We were well-cultured. The thing was the academic education, they were afraid that it wasn't good enough, and if I failed, then what? And what if you were thrown out of the exam system? That was it. It was not that they had anything against the job of a dancer or an actor; it wasn't anything like that. It was the art form as much as it was about the scholastic education.

DFY: But the program at the Royal Danish Ballet School is quite good with that.

Hübbe: Oh, absolutely.

DFY: They do take care of those that do not continue.

Hübbe: That's the funny thing. That when the ballet in the old days when they took the kids they called it "the black school" ("den sorte skole") because they basically couldn't read or write. But now, it's – my God – it's very good.

DFY: Switching gears now... you mentioned something about Copenhagen being "provincial" in an interview published in the New York Times, and it reminded me of the "jante law" that we have here in Scandinavia. Can you speak more to that and how you are going to approach it artistically?

Hübbe: The other day, I took my bike through the delivery door – I just bought a bike, and it was goddamn expensive – and I took it through the truck port. I was not going to let it stand out there in the rain. And somebody said to me, "You know what? That specially built bike – people will know what it is – it's going to be stolen like this! (snaps fingers) You have to take it indoors."

So, somebody comes from the theater and says, "Oh, you know, you can't do that, because we told the stage crew that they can't, so since you are the artistic director of the ballet, it looks very bad." And I said, "I don't care what you told the stage crew. I'm not part of the stage crew. I am who I am, and I am the artistic director, and I will goddamn take my bike in, if I please. Thank you very much. I don't care about your social democratic negation of every goddamn thing in this country."

It drives me up the wall. I can't stand it. You are good. And you are something. You (points to someone else) are not. And that's why he or she does that, because they can. And those who can, shall. Sorry. Yes, it's a strange country in that sense. It's so odd. And I also think Danes, they want to move forward, but they love "plejer" (what they are used to). They want to move intellectually, but I don't know if they really want to move, when you are talking action!

DFY: Does the jante law, the notion that no one can stand out or be better than the rest, affect the company in any way?

Hübbe: They are all very the same. Not the same, but there is not enough difference, or sense of, "I am a principle dancer. Therefore, I stand in the foreground, and therefore, I am leading – just like the artistic director is leading and directing – but I shape everybody who is under me, because I am a principle, and therefore I am here in the hierarchy. And I am very aware of it, and I am a role model." There's a huge lack of that.

DFY: Is that a good or bad thing?

Hübbe: I think it is very bad. I would love to see it more, especially from the men. From the women also, but I think it is more pronounced with the men. There I find it and I think that is very Danish.

DFY: They are afraid to stick out.

Hübbe: It is almost looked upon as bad taste. I find it strange. I find it foreign. To me, it is a nuisance.

DFY: Does it affect their work? The quality?

Hübbe: It affects the younger dancers.

DFY: In what way?

Hübbe: Well, when you are a principle dancer, you set a certain standard. You have to live up to your title.

DFY: So, when the younger dancers don't see that, they don't learn it?

Hübbe: Exactly.

DFY: Modern dance... You said you would like to have Mats Ek or Pina Bausch.

Hübbe: I would love the ballet to have, if not to be choreographed on by these two, at least have works by them because, especially Pina, I like her theatricality. Of course it is not "ballet", but it is still performance – it's theater and it's also movement. But I think there is this beautiful simplicity in her work, and there's this very strict expressionistic sensitivity. I am in awe of her. I just think she has such a beautiful company. They're so beautiful, so expressive, so personal. She's like a fantastic illustrator.

DFY: How do you think the dancers would take the challenge of her work here?

Hübbe: Well, I don't even know if we can get work from her. She rarely works outside of her own company. Well, they are a theatrical bunch of people, and, oh, I think it would be wonderful. It remains to be seen. I think there is a certain group of the dancers that would "get her", you know, that would click.

DFY: And what about Mats Ek?

Hübbe: I love his physicality, all of his humor. He's Swedish. We're Danish. We are not that far apart – the mentality, the language, the culture, the background. I think he has a warped and crooked take on a lot of things, and then he is very, very physical, and I like that.

DFY: How will you put these two very different things together, the Bournonville ballet and the contemporary work? Do you have an approach or a philosophy about it?

Hübbe: I don't think there is any. It's like food. You know? It's like cuisines. You have a little of this and then eat that and then you have that. Whether there is any rhyme or reason to it, yes, maybe you do a "Sleeping Beauty" work and after two months, it premieres, and then you go on to do something by Mats. You keep going back to back – classical ballet and then you venture out and then you come back and then you venture out, like that.

DFY: Balanchine, will you be bringing your experience here?

Hübbe: Yes, Balanchine, Petipa... always. If you talk about cuisine, those are the staples. And Bournonville, of course. They are the three – that's your cod liver oil.

DFY: What you are working on right now?

Hübbe: Just teaching these days and then the Balanchine program which is going to premier out on Holmen (an island borough of Copenhagen) at the Opera House on the 14th of March. For that, of course, I will be helping with staging "Symphony in C" and "Symphony in Three Movements", but mainly taking care of "La Sonnambula".

DFY: In the New York Times article, you mentioned you had bold plans for the company, but wouldn't say what they were, but that you would like to take it child step by child step to reach them. Since you've been here, have you changed those ideas or kept them the same?

Hübbe: I don't think I have changed anything. If I have changed something, it's minute. Really, it is baby steps.

DFY: And is it with the baby steps you're meaning what you are going to introduce to the company and to the audience?

Hübbe: I think a change of mentality in certain people, the approach towards the work, towards the theater, towards the art form, that it is an art form, and that humility is important. Sometimes there is (humility), sometimes there is not. And also I would love to change the technical standard of the women. I think the men are – I don't know, it must be in the walls – for some reason, the male roster is booming with talent. The women... and it has nothing to do with the women currently in the company. It's not so much that, it's the tradition. It's that in the Danish tradition there is not the sophisticated ballerina that we know outside of the borders of Denmark. She doesn't really exist here, and she always had a hard time growing here. Even though there have been, if course, many wonderful Danish ballerinas, but it was almost like they were wonderful ballerinas despite this tradition.

I do believe Bournonville is choreographer of a man. And I don't think he – except for "La Sylphide" – I don't really think he, because he danced, himself, saw the ballerina as did Balanchine, Petipa, Ashton. Even a Dane like Harald Lander, I think had another view of the ballerina as a woman. Because, of course, I am heavily influenced by where I came from, where I was for 16 years, I see woman differently. I see the ballerina, and women dancing, in another light. And I would love to bring that here. Not that we have to do Balanchine or Petipa. It's not that the women have to look like the New York City Ballet or dance specifically like the Mariinsky (The Kirov). It's not so much that, well, it's that too, but it's that dull thing of a woman, a woman on pointe, a woman in a tutu, the romantic script, this whole thing of being a female dancer, what goes into it.

DFY: Are you talking about power, charisma, technique?

Hübbe: All of the above. Status.

DFY: Royalty?

Hübbe: Yes. In this house, men and women have always been very equal, which is, of course, good when you are talking about ensemble. But I would like to give the women a higher status.

DFY: Higher than men?

Hübbe: (pause) Maybe... Maybe one season like this, maybe one season like that.

DFY: Will you be expanding – you have maybe 80 or 90 dancers now – to 100? So, will you be choosing the dancers then?

Hübbe: Yes.

DFY: What will you look for in a dancer? And where will you look for them?

Hübbe: Well, the school. What do you look for in a dancer: you look for grace, harmony, beauty, musicality, technique, strength... I love this, something that Balanchine said, something about "can the leg go up" or "if the leg goes up, and she doesn't fall over". They said that the hips have to be square and aligned, and he said, "I don't care if their hips are square and aligned, as long as they don't fall over." (laughing)

It's like, can it dance? Yes, it can dance. Fine. Does it turn and jump? Does it have a head and two legs and two arms? Will it dance? (laughing)

DFY: Some dancers are great technicians, but not very interesting. "Star" quality is missing. Can one teach that?

Hübbe: I think you can teach that. I don't think you can give personality that they do not have. But I think you can teach presentation. I think you can teach theatricality, of course you can. Dance is, after all, a theatrical art form, that can be taught.

DFY: Finally, is there anything you would like to add to tell us what the Royal Danish Ballet means to you, and what you would like it to mean to the audiences and the rest of the world, or the Danish audience?

Hübbe: I would love to – I think at one point it had a huge high status international – I would like to bring it back to that. That thing, when the first time, critics, audiences, saw the vast treasure of these particular ballets, but also of you talk about dance, that the Danes could dance, And I think they still can, I would just like them to be a little more refined (laughing) because they certainly can dance. So, I would like the Danes to be more refined, and the company to be a little more sophisticated, and then I would love to drag them (the company) all over the world and show them the world, but also show the world them, it.

DFY: So you have a lot of travel plans. Any specifics?

Hübbe: Yes. Hopefully, Japan in May, and then we are going to Dresden, and then we are going to Budapest. And then I hope, I hope, I hope for a big, big tour in America down the road.

DFY: My last question: Why dance? Why is dance important?

Hübbe: Basically, because I think we are meant to speak, sing, dance, draw, write... I mean, we are meant, some people, most people are meant to express. Why do little kids, once they get their balance, once they get their footing, why do they dance, why do they move around? Because it's in us, that's why. That's "why dance". It's like "urkraft" (a primordial force). I won't say it's a power of nature. It's primal.

DFY: But ballet is not "primal", is it?

Hübbe: No, but it's just that thing, the primal thing, taken through "forarbejde" (processing/designing) and worked over and over and over. It's just a form, it's just a stylistic, strange, bizarre and totally artificial form of something very primal.
