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ON POINTE
Dancers on the Old Stage, main; and the Royal Danish Opera House, left

Come dancing with the Danes

Copenhagen is celebrated for many things, but for Nick Trend it's the ballet that stirs his soul

It's hard to know what to think about Copenhagen at the moment. We are assailed by so many mixed messages. For many, it's the culinary hotspot of the world, where Danish chef René Redzepi launched Noma, turned it into the "best restaurant in the world" and propelled the city towards its current star-studded list of 17 Michelin-ranked

restaurants. For others it is the capital of bloody murder and bizarre intrigue that we see in *The Bridge* or *Borgen*. But then again it is also the city where the bars are lit by candles, faux-fur rugs are laid out on chairs and open fires roar in the grates: a place which has made being cosy during its long dark winters an art form and even given it a name - hygge.

For me, however, the Danish soul is not shrouded in darkness, nor glowing in the fire light, nor does it reside in its national stomach. The spirit of Denmark is dance. Visiting Copenhagen, you can hardly miss it. The home of the Royal Danish Ballet - the Old Stage - has pride of place on the city's central square. The theatre we see today, with its grand neo-Renaissance loggia - dates from 1874 - but there has been one on the site since 1748. And when the company isn't dancing on the Old Stage, it is performing just across the harbour at the new one - Henning Larsen's supremely sleek glass, steel and timber Opera House which was opened by Queen Margrethe II in 2005.

That royal connection has been central to the ballet's success. Founded in 1771 by King Christian VII, it is the world's second oldest company, five years senior to the Bolshoi and outranked only by the Paris Opera Ballet. Royal patronage didn't always run smoothly. The ballet's greatest choreographer, August Bournonville had a near-disastrous falling out with Christian VIII in 1841, when he broke

ESSENTIALS

TICKETS AND TIMING

If you plan a visit to the ballet, try to time your trip with productions at both the new Opera House and the Old Stage. These are some of the highlights for the 2019/2020 season.

OLD STAGE

◆ *Spar Dame* (Scarlett/Tchaikovsky) - from September
◆ *The Nutcracker* (Balanchine/Tchaikovsky) - from November
◆ *Bliven* (Dean/Debussy) - from April 2020

◆ *Come Fly Away* (Tharp/Sinatra) - from April 2020

OPERA HOUSE

◆ *Romeo and Juliet* (Neumeier/Prokofiev) - from October
◆ *Mahler Symphony No 3* (Neumeier/Mahler) - from March 2020
◆ *A Folk Tale* (Bournonville/Hartmann and Gade) - from May 2020

◆ Both the Old Stage (in July and August) and new Opera House (year round) offer regular guided



tours which take about 90 minutes. Bookings for these, and for all performances can be made direct at (kgtheater.dk).

STAYING THERE

For ballet fans, the only place to stay in the city is the Hotel Sanders (hotelsanders.com), from £265

come here to eat, drink and stay.

GETTING THERE

For an overview of flights from London and regional airports to Copenhagen, see skyscanner.net.

MORE INFORMATION

A Copenhagen Card (from 54 euros) covers entrance to all main sights and city transport. Available from Danish Tourist Board's website (visitdenmark.com).

protocol and addressed the King - who was installed in the Royal Box - directly from the stage. For six months Bournonville was out in the cold, exiled to Milan and Naples. But, ironically, his time in the south of Italy led to his greatest success. Several of Bournonville's ballets are still performed internationally - but the Danish national treasure is *Napoli*. It's the story of a simple Naples fisherman, Gennaro, and his love for Teresina.

Napoli was unusual for its time in that it is the story of ordinary people, rather than kings and queens, but for whatever reason, it still touches a national nerve, and remains a guaranteed sell-out. I saw a performance in March. There has been a bit of tinkering with the original choreography, especially in the rather strange middle act when Teresina is sucked down under the sea during a storm. (In fact, it has the slight air of one of those standard underwater pantomime scenes where fluorescent fish swim about on a darkened stage.) But the finale, the wedding in Act Three, is a riot of celebratory dancing in the best traditions of classical ballet.

There is a Danish twist, however. Performances like this are a tight squeeze on a rather small stage, and it was that constraint - I'm told - which has given a particular character to the dancing here. Bournonville compensated for the lack of space, but developing higher jumps and a more vertical style. And, in contrast to what was then the Russian tradition of using the men in more of a supporting role, while the ballerinas did all the showing off, he also gave more emphasis to male movement.

The innovative tradition lives on and ballet in Copenhagen isn't stuck in 19th-century aspic. Most productions now use more modern choreographies - Balanchine, Tharp and Neumeier feature, as do contemporary British choreographers such as Liam Scarlett and Gregory Dean (who is one of the company's principal dancers). And there's a progressive side to Copenhagen's dance scene too. Behtad the Old Stage is a studio theatre - the A-Salen - which is home to the contemporary company, Corpus.

I didn't see her in the audience either at the Old Stage or the A-Salen, but Queen Margrethe II has kept the royal connections as strong as ever. She not only attends often and enthusiastically, she is also a successful artist and set designer in her own right. She regularly works with Twirl Ballet Theatre, and among her credits are a Danish Royal Ballet production of Bournonville's *A Folk Tale*, for which she created both the scenery and costumes in 1961. And so far, she hasn't banished a single dancer or choreographer.

RAPHAEL CHRISTIAN/GETTY IMAGES; MOHAMED HANOUTI/REUTERS



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