

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 38 (2011)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Heinz Spoerli - ballet director, choreographer and creator of dance : the greatest figure in Swiss dance
Autor: Eckert, Heinz
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907333>

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The greatest figure in Swiss dance

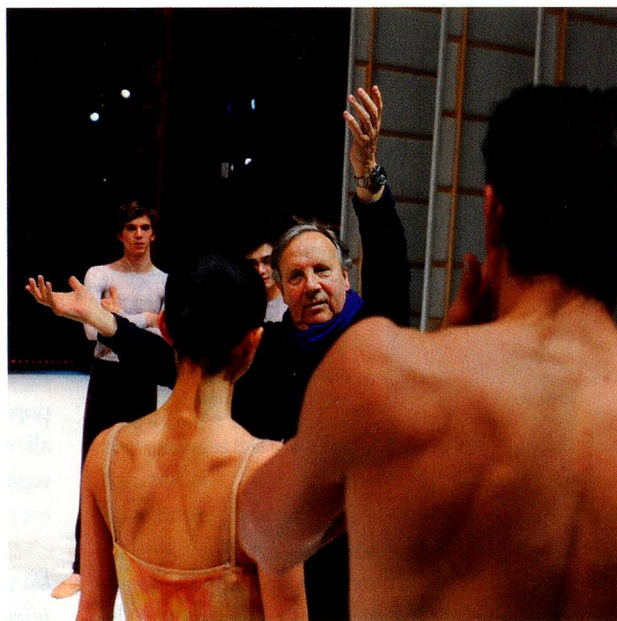
Heinz Spoerli has been a leading choreographer for decades and has had a major influence on ballet far beyond Swiss borders. He is entering his last season as Director and Chief Choreographer at the Zurich Ballet, but will remain the figurehead of dance in Switzerland. By Heinz Eckert

Nobody would think that Heinz Spoerli was 71. He is bursting with ideas, is agile and creative and continues to work hard in the ballet studio every day to ensure the Zurich Ballet remains among the most highly regarded ballet companies in Europe. Spoerli has been in charge of the Zurich ensemble since 1996. In this period, he has interpreted many abstract ballets as well as the classics, such as "Swan Lake" and "Peer Gynt". Guest performances have taken the Zurich Ballet under Spoerli's management to Amsterdam, Barcelona, Edinburgh, Cairo, London, Lyon, Paris, Tel Aviv, Warsaw, Madrid, Frankfurt, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Moscow, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Shanghai, Singapore, Osaka, Tokyo and Taipei. And the dancers and their choreographer from Switzerland have received exuberant praise wherever they have gone.

Basel-born Spoerli did his dance training – against the will of his parents – initially with Walter Kleiber in his home city before going on to continue his education in London and New York. The young Spoerli was given his first job by Wazlav Orlikowsky at the municipal theatre in Basel in the ballet company that he would later take to the very top of classical dance.

However, from 1963 to 1973 Spoerli left Basel, going first to Todd Bolender in Cologne, then on to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and the Grands Ballets Canadiens in Montreal and finally the Grand Théâtre in Geneva. Heinz Spoerli first worked as a choreographer whilst still dancing. He achieved his breakthrough in 1972 with "Le chemin"

to the music of Eric Gaudibert at the Grand Théâtre in Geneva. The ballet was even recorded by Swiss television. On the back of this success, Werner Düggelin, the Director of the Basel theatre at the time, appointed him as Chief Choreographer and Ballet Director at the largest theatre in Switzerland with three sections – theatre, opera and ballet.



Heinz Spoerli during a rehearsal at the Zurich Opera House

HEINZ SPOERLI

Spoerli, born in 1940, also serves the ballet world outside the studio. He founded the Heinz Spoerli Foundation, which seeks to make a contribution to maintaining the art of dance and fostering public interest in dance. It also regularly awards prizes to outstanding dancers and choreographers. He also founded the Zurich Junior Ballet as an

international springboard for young dancers and was Artistic Director at the Swiss Ballet School. Spoerli has won many awards for his work, including the Hans Reinhart Ring, the City of Basel Art Prize, the Jacob Burckhardt Prize, the Zurich Art Prize, the German Dance Prize and the German Critics' Prize.

Basel, Düsseldorf, Zurich

Spoerli remained with the "Theater Basel" for 17 years and made "his" Basel ballet one of the leading classical dance companies in Europe. Spoerli quickly gained himself an international reputation as an outstanding choreographer for full-length narrative ballets, such as "La belle vie", and stylish new interpretations of classical works, such as "La fille mal gardée", "Giselle", "Coppelia", "Romeo and Juliet", "The Nutcracker" and "Swan Lake", which enjoyed international success, even in New York, the epicentre of ballet at the time.

Heinz Spoerli was the Director of Ballet at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf from 1991 to 1996. He produced some of his major ballets during this period. These include his "Goldberg Variations" to the music of Bach, a masterpiece of lucid, abstract dance.

In 1996, he moved to Zurich and quickly turned the Opera House's ballet company into a top-class ensemble. In Zurich, Heinz Spoerli consolidated his reputation as one of the most important choreographers of our time unfazed by trends. To highlight his artistic independence, Spoerli has referred to himself as a "Tanzmacher", or creator of dance, for the last ten years. "As a creator of dance, I can work across a wide spectrum of styles and am not tied to any one in particular, like other choreographers. This allows me to keep all my options open", says Spoerli of the change to his job title. "There used to be two movements in dance – modern with Martha Graham and classical with George Balanchine, Marius Petipa and the old Russian school. Everything has changed since the 1960s. Dance has become increasingly diverse and much broader, which is a good thing", explains Spoerli. The fact that classical dance is still very much alive is underlined by the success of the Zurich Ballet: "What other form of dance can fill a 1000-seat theatre for 50 performances a year?" asks Spoerli with a mischievous laugh.

When Alexander Pereira, the Director of Opera in Zurich, takes up his new position as head of the Salzburg Festival in 2012, Spoerli will also place the management of the Zurich Ballet in younger hands. "At my age, it is time to go", says Spoerli. His successor is the 40-year-old German, Christian Spuck, currently resident choreographer of the Stuttgart Ballet. Spoerli will not be an easy act to follow.

Dance perfection

Spoerli possesses enormous creativity and is an absolute perfectionist. He says: "My dancers are almost all soloists who have to be able to do everything. I demand absolute perfection from them. There is no room for mediocrity in top dance. And with ticket prices as high as they are in Zurich, the audience is entitled to an outstanding performance."

With new ballets, Spoerli always takes his inspiration from stories or music. "In the case of the former, I look for music to go with the story and, for the latter, I devise steps to the music. I listen to a lot of music, even for hours on end when I'm looking for something in particular", he explains. When the auditions begin for a new ballet, he does not have any clear notion of how the dance should be performed: "I know how the plot has to develop and who has to dance which roles, but I always work out the steps with the dancers." This makes the work more creative and interesting for everyone and often, by the end, he no longer knows which ideas have come from him and which from the dancers. However, there is one thing Spoerli has no doubts about: "The key success factor is always the quality of the dancers. If poor choreography is at least danced well, the evening can still be a success."

Heinz Spoerli's artistic work is characterised not just by his style and sense of aesthetics, but also by his creative ability to keep on renewing himself as an artist. The older he gets, the more relaxed and radical his approach to dance becomes. This will not change after he steps down as Director of Ballet in Zurich. He will continue to work at major opera houses as a guest choreographer. There are already offers on the table. Shanghai is also trying to entice him to train talented young dancers. So, Spoerli will not be lost to the international dance scene after the 2011/2012 season, his last in Zurich.



A perennial favourite in the repertoire – Swan Lake by Tchaikovsky dusted off and danced to perfection



In 2009, Spoerli created the ballet "Wäre heute morgen und gestern jetzt" to the music of Bach



A timeless classic: the Zurich version of Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps