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Keep on ‘Trockin’’ in the free world

The all-male ballet company Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo was founded in 1974. Inspired by the Stonewall Riots of 1969, The Trocks, as they’re now known, were fueled by the spirit of defiance and creative exuberance that the gay rights movement unleashed. They became an international dance sensation.

Amidst the group’s landmark 50th anniversary season, UCSB Arts & Lectures is presenting The Trocks two upcoming events: a free screening of the 2021 film “Ballerina Boys” on Thursday, Jan. 18, at Campbell Hall, and a live performance by the celebrated troupe on Thursday, Jan. 25, at the Granada Theatre.

“The Arts & Lectures Thematic Learning Initiative this year is Cultivating Connection, something that’s beautifully reflected in ‘Ballerina Boys,’ the 2021 PBS American Masters documentary about Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo,” said Celesta M. Billeci, Miller McCune Executive Director of UCSB Arts & Lectures. “The film follows the Trocks on tour through the Carolinas, where LGBTQ rights are under stress, all the way to New York’s Central Park Summerstage, where they performed at the 2019 Stonewall 50th anniversary concert. Now it’s The Trocks’ 50th anniversary season, and we wanted to bring them back both by popular demand, and in recognition of that milestone. The connections they have cultivated along the way, between classical ballet and comedy, between the LGBTQ community and their allies, and between dance fans and the gay rights movement are all ones that we at Arts & Lectures cherish as well.”

For over 45 years the company has shared their signature style and message of equality, inclusion and social justice with audiences around the world, growing from its roots in off-off Broadway into a global touring sensation. The men perform classical ballet en pointe and in drag, challenging the art form's rigid gender norms as they mix rigorous technique with comedy and satire. The film interweaves original interviews and contemporary and archival performance footage to tell the remarkable history of the company, culminating with their 2019 performance in Central Park.

"Every time the curtain opens we represent progress for equality. We just do it dancing," said Trocks ballerina Kevin Garcia.

Founded by a group of ballet enthusiasts to present a playful, entertaining view of traditional, classical ballet through parody and en travesti, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo first performed in the late-late shows in Off-Off Broadway lofts. They quickly garnered a major critical essay by Arlene Croce in The New Yorker which, combined with reviews in The New York Times and The Village Voice, established the company as an artistic and popular success.

By mid-1975, The Trocks' inspired blend of dance and comedy was noted beyond New York. Articles and notices in publications such as Variety, Oui, the London Daily Telegraph, as well as a Richard Avedon photo essay in Vogue, made the company nationally and internationally known. The 1975-76 season was a year of growth and full professionalization. The company added management, qualified for the National Endowment for the Arts Touring Program, hired a full-time teacher and ballet mistress to oversee daily classes and rehearsals and made its first extended tours of the United States and Canada. Packing, unpacking and repacking tutus and drops, stocking giant-sized toe shoes by the case and running for planes and chartered buses all became routine parts of life.

Since those beginnings, The Trocks have established themselves as a major dance phenomenon throughout the world. The original concept of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo has not changed. It is a company of professional male dancers performing the full range of the ballet and modern dance repertoire, including classical and original works in faithful renditions of the manners and conceits of those dance styles. The comedy is achieved by incorporating and exaggerating the foibles, accidents and underlying incongruities of serious dance. The fact that men dance all the parts – heavy bodies delicately balancing on toes as swans, sylphs,

water sprites, romantic princesses or angst-ridden Victorian ladies – enhances, rather than mocks, the spirit of dance as an art form.

Recently, The Trocks have performed on ABC News and for King Charles, then Prince of Wales, on the Royal Variety Show.

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