

A Dancer's Director

Johan Kobborg has transformed the National Ballet of Romania.

BY GIA KOURLAS

Johan Kobborg was in Bucharest staging *La Sylphide* for the National Ballet of Romania in 2013 when, out of the blue, he received a job offer: to become its artistic director. He wasn't looking. "After I left The Royal Ballet, I was thinking, for the first time in my life, to not be part of a big institution," he recalls during a recent visit to New York. "Now I use the words: 'live my life.'" That meant anything—dancing, staging, choreographing. He adds, "I wasn't afraid of suddenly being without anything."

But those four weeks in Romania had gone so well that he happily accepted. Kobborg, 43 and engaged to Alina Cojocaru—the luminous Romanian ballerina who left The Royal for English National Ballet and is a guest artist with Kobborg's company—is two years into a four-year contract. So far, he's transformed the company, not only improving working conditions

but adding new repertoire by choreographers like Alexei Ratmansky, Sir Frederick Ashton, Jirí Kylián and Yuri Possokhov. In April, the troupe performs *Manon*; in June, it unveils William Forsythe's *In the middle*, somewhat elevated, George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations* and Jerome Robbins' *In the Night*. Kobborg knew it wouldn't be easy: "But," he says with a smile, "I've enjoyed every single moment."

So what hasn't been easy?

I was, in many ways, entering a place that was stuck in the past. There were not many outside influences or different ways of looking at things. They were used to the same class every day, by the same teacher. The productions were really looking like they were from the '40s and '50s. I didn't feel there had been any kind of, let's try making something better. ▶

Kobborg rehearses with Alina Cojocaru at American Ballet Theatre's studios for a gala in New York City.





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A gala to raise awareness of the company this winter included both Romanian dancers and stars from around the world, such as Daniel Ulbricht, at left.

What did you do?

I entered with a management group that did not believe that just because things used to be done like this, that this was how we should do it. So there was a different energy and approach: How do we sell ballets? How do we get people involved? How do we raise money? The people in charge don't want it the old way.

Also, I don't have to work with a board of directors. I don't have to ask anybody else's opinion. I've entered this room where I don't need to polish what's already made. I almost consider it a blank canvas. It's an extreme freedom. The only limits I have are financial.

What are the challenges of limited resources?

It is a huge issue. Just a few months after I took over, the building went into refurbishment. It's still being refurbished. Things take time. [Laughs] For the first almost-half year, the entire company would be changing in one room with a piece of cloth separating girls and boys. There were no studios; there was one room that had no sprung floor. And really, honestly, you don't make much money in Romania from being a dancer. People would be shocked. Shocked. I can't offer dancers much; what I can offer them is good rep. I

still think like a dancer, and I know what worked in my career: It was to get opportunities. This is not a place where you have to sit and hold a spear for years and years. I don't believe in waiting until you're certain someone's ready. Then it's too late.

Did you have sprung floors installed?

Yes. When I was staging *La Sylphide*, I was taking class daily, and I couldn't dance on those floors. It wasn't just not strong, there were big holes. Now we have Harlequin floors in all the studios. We have a masseuse now. What we don't have is a physio department. Alina has donated what I would call the beginning of a gym. Some weights. At first, we didn't even have an ice machine. We had nothing. But then again, sometimes if you have everything, then you don't appreciate it.

Did you think about how you didn't want to treat dancers?

Yeah. [Smiles] And this is where it's tricky. Sometimes it's not possible to make things happen the way you would really like them to no matter how hard you try. I think I knew more about how I would not want to do things. The ballet department consists of me and two people; it doesn't matter



if it's handing out pointe shoes, locking doors at night or making weekly schedules. So communication is very important. My door's always open. I've seen too many people who have been stuck in a place and slowly the passion in them dies. Day by day by day. I'm really trying to make that not happen the best I can. I'm not your usual director, I can tell you that.

How so?

I don't look like a typical director. I don't necessarily speak with people as one. I believe respect is not some attitude you put on and then get. It comes from honesty, openness. I don't like to play games. I don't hold a grudge. It's very important for me to hear what people think. Then, I'll go, "Am I doing something wrong?" And this is happening in a place where there was no communication. It was run on fear and intimidation. So I've lost a few people who can't function without power. When I'm in charge, I can't have people being intimidated.

What are your future plans for the company?

I'm in talks with people coming and creating on us. We have to have classics and newer pieces and not go into one extreme. What I would really like is

that, when or if one day I am no longer in Romania, the place doesn't go back to what it was. I'm not saying my way is the right way. But I hope that I will manage to leave a structure behind. I also hope that whoever comes after me would realize that you should not let people say, "It is not possible because this is Romania." It might not be the easy way, but anything is possible. What's important is that you can make a difference. I'm certain that if I'm asked to stay longer in Romania, I would. I love the city.

Why?

It's a little bit like Cuba. You walk around and go, Wow, with a bit of paint—and sometimes more than paint, unfortunately—this city could be one of the most beautiful cities. The architecture is stunning.

Where do you live?

I'm renting a flat in central Bucharest. I've got a cockerel outside my window. I'm bang in the middle of quite a big city, and there's a cockerel outside my window. It is fantastic. ■

Gia Kourlas writes on dance for The New York Times and other publications.