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Beyond blackface: Paris Opera tackles race clichés in repertoire

Has the rarefied world of French ballet come under the sway of American-style “cancel culture?” The director of Paris Opera, home also to France’s top ballet company, has been accused of political correctness “gone mad” for appearing to suggest he will no longer stage classical ballets that perpetuate racial stereotypes. “Some works will no doubt disappear from the repertoire,” Alexander Neef said in an interview with Le Monde’s weekly magazine M about the recent push by black and mixed-race dancers and staff for greater diversity in the corps de ballet and its productions. Le Monde seemed to suggest that some audience favourites, including Rudolf Nureyev’s versions of “Swan Lake,” “The Nutcracker” and “La Bayadere,” could be affected by the “revolution,” sparking an outcry.

Right-wingers seized on the interview as proof of growing self-censorship by individuals or institutions fearing the wrath of anti-racism activists. Far-right leader Marine Le Pen slammed what she called the “anti-racism gone mad” of the “pseudo-progressive” camp in a tweet liked by thousands of people. The Paris Opera sought to quickly tamp down the controversy. In a statement it assured that there had “never been any question of dropping Nureyev’s works from the repertoire” and that Neef’s remarks had been misinterpreted. But the debate continued to rage regardless.

Edible insects move closer to European plates

The EU’s food watchdog on Wednesday paved the way for diners across Europe to tuck into insects as it gave safety approval for human consumption of dried yellow mealworm. The move by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is the preliminary step needed before officials can decide whether to allow the beetle larvae to be sold to consumers across the 27-nation bloc. The ruling is the first completed risk assessment of an insect food product application by the agency as it looks to approve a potential boom sector that could provide a sustainable source of protein. It could “pave the way for the first EU-wide approval,” Ermolaos Ververis, scientific officer in EFSA’s NUTRI unit, said in a statement.

“Risk evaluation is a decisive and necessary step in the regulation of novel foods by supporting policy makers in the EU in making science-based decisions and ensuring the safety of consumers.” The EFSA said it had found the mealworms—or *Tenebrio molitor* larva—were safe to be eaten “either as a whole dried insect or in the form of powder” after an application from French insect-rearing firm Micronutris. “Its main components are protein, fat and fibre,” the statement said, but warned that more research needed to be done on possible allergic reactions

‘Self-censorship’

Reacting to Neef’s remarks, Le Monde’s editor-in-chief Michel Guerrin warned that France was “slowly going down the American road, consisting of the runaway self-censorship of artists and programmers in order to avoid trouble.” Celebrities, brands, leaders and ordinary people on both sides of the Atlantic have fallen foul of “cancel culture”—calls to deny a public platform to people or products seen as objectionable. Examples range from the HBO Max streaming platform removing the film “Gone With the Wind” in order to add historical context about slavery, to a London museum notifying visitors to a major Gauguin exhibition about his sexually predatory behavior in the South Pacific.

In 2015, then Paris Opera Ballet chief Benjamin Millepied sought to tackle issues of racism and diversity in the French ballet scene head-on by banning dancers from blacking their faces for “La Bayadere” and renaming its “Danse des Nègrillons” (“The Dance of the Little Negroes”) as “The Dance of the Children.” Millepied quit a year later after encountering resistance to the changes, but his drive against what he called ballet’s “insidious racism” endured.

Colonial view

In the past five years the Paris Opera has ended the practice of blackface, and dancers of colour finally have tights and pointes in shades



In this file photo Dancers participate in a dress rehearsal of the ballet “Le Corsaire” by composer Adolphe Adam and directed by Alexei Ratmanski on the stage of Bolshoi theater in Moscow. — AFP

matching their skin tone. But the bigger challenge of how to tackle racial stereotyping in the repertoire still looms. Spurred on by the Black Lives Matter movement, a group of black and mixed-race dancers last summer issued a manifesto slamming productions that “exaggerate and deride” the characteristics of non-white dancers, among other issues. In “La Bayadere,” a ballet to music by Austrian composer Ludwig Minkus, Hindu fakirs are depicted as servile, even though in India the holy men are widely respected.

In Alexander Glazunov’s “Raymonda,” meanwhile, the Saracen—a term used in Europe in the

Middle Ages for Arab Muslims—is depicted as a sinister character. For dance historian Sylvie Jacq-Mioche, these 19th-century ballets reflect the “exoticism” with which non-European cultures were viewed during the colonial era and which also permeated other art forms, including the works of painter Eugene Delacroix. Neef has commissioned a historian and a rights advocate to come up with proposals on how to address works that contain “racist clichés or situations that could be deemed racist” as part of a major study on diversity in Paris ballet and opera. — AFP



In this file photo packs of pre-cooked insect burgers based on protein-rich mealworm are seen on a supermarket shelf in Geneva. — AFP

to the insects. The burgeoning insect farming industry in Europe welcomed the decision and said they hoped to see authorities give permission for yellow mealworms to be marketed to the public by the middle of this year. “The release of this document indeed represents an important milestone towards the wider EU commercialization of edible insects,” Antoine Hubert, president of the the International Platform of Insects for Food and Feed, said in a statement. The Italy-based EFSA has more insect investigations on its plate and is also set to examine if crickets and grasshoppers are fit for consumption. Insects are widely eaten elsewhere on the globe with an estimated 1,000 species finding their way onto dinner plates of some 2 billion people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. — AFP

US pigeon becomes feathered fugitive after straying 9,000 miles

An American pigeon believed to have strayed 9,000 miles (14,480 kilometers) from home had Australian authorities in a flap yesterday after it turned up in a Melbourne backyard having evaded strict quarantine rules. Kevin Chelli-Bird discovered the emaciated pigeon tagged with an ankle band outside his home on Boxing Day, local media reported. Dubbed “Joe” after US President-elect Joe Biden, the bird went missing during a US race in October, Chelli-Bird told the Herald Sun newspaper, and has been tracked to an owner in Alabama.

“The only thing we can think of is, in this race he was blown off course and out to sea, landed on a boat and hitched a ride,” he told the newspaper on Wednesday. “Perhaps he was sick of (Donald) Trump and decided to leave.” The pigeon’s epic journey sent local media into a flutter but as the news reached authorities, the bird became a fugitive for skipping Australia’s strict entry procedures. “As it was not legally prepared for import or imported, the health status of this bird and any others it has been in contact with at its origin and prior to arrival in Australia is unknown,” a Department of Agriculture spokeswoman said in a statement.

“It poses a direct biosecurity risk to Australian bird life and our poultry industry.” It will have to be humanely destroyed if it came from the United States without passing through quarantine, according to the department. Recent press coverage is unlikely to save Joe; Australian officials previously threatened to euthanise dogs belonging to movie star Johnny Depp and then-wife Amber Heard, after they failed to declare the pets on immigration papers. The Hollywood pair managed to save their Yorkshire terriers with a quick flight out of the country. However, as Joe’s owner is still to speak up, the feathered fugitive may have to wing it.—AFP

