REHEARSAL AS RESEARCH IN
THE RECREATION OF LES NOCES

The Arts Initiative project

At the turn of the twenty-first century, composer Stephen Hartke and I received an Arts Initiative Grant to produce Igor Stravinsky's rarely performed ballet Svadebka (The Wedding; generally known by its French title Les Noces). We had proposed a recreation of the 1923 Ballets Russes premiere in Paris at Le Théâtre de la Gaité Lyrique. We staged a fully mounted production of two acts: the first, an original dramatic collage about the ballet's creation and subject matter; the second, the ballet itself with choreography after Bronislava Nijinska and costumes after Natalia Goncharova (fig. 3). Our company performed at the Bing Theatre on the University of Southern California's campus in Los Angeles during February 2002.

Our production, The Wedding, depended upon a large collaborative team. Stephen assembled Stravinsky's unusual ensemble: a chorus of twenty-five singers with four soloists and an orchestra of four pianists and six percussionists. The musicians were students at the USC Thornton School of Music. William Dehning (Chair of the Choral and Sacred Music Department and conductor of the USC Thornton Chamber Choir) conducted. I set the choreography on eighteen dancers, who had auditioned from departments throughout...

1. I wish to thank Stephen Hartke for his comments on this article before its publication, Ritchie Spencer for his assistance with the illustrations, and the company of dancers without whose hard and devoted work the research presented here would not have been possible — Margo Caslavka (ballet mistress), Abel Delgado (musical consultant), Sarah Smith (bride), Greg Mooney (groom), Jennifer Boling, Jessica Clague, Yvonne Gaspar, Cori Haisler, Christina Kanelas, Claudia Valencia, Ivette Michelle Badgley, Kim Culotta, Alfredo Gutierrez, Laura Hummasti, Jennifer Kaplan, Nicole Marusiak, Lewis Stevenson, and Kai Young.

2. Stephen Hartke, Professor of Composition at the University of Southern California, earned degrees in composition from Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of California, Santa Barbara. His music has received major performances by such groups as the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, and the Moscow State Philharmonic. Among his many awards are those from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Academy in Rome, the Fulbright Senior Scholars Program, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 2004, he won the prestigious Charles Ives Award that allows him to devote his time exclusively to composing for three years. His music is performed worldwide and is available on compact discs. In Fall 2001, Stephen and I co-taught a special seminar on “Stravinsky and the Dance,” also funded by the Arts Initiative.
the university. Working as ballet mistress to the company was Margo Caslavka, who had been a professional ballerina before returning to college. The company also included an ensemble of twelve actors from the USC School of Theatre. Two designers, Ritchie Spencer for costume and Casey Cowan-Gale for lighting, both faculty at the USC School of Theatre, joined the team.

Given the limited amount of our grant, I had decided to emphasize costume and lighting design. I therefore eliminated Goncharova’s 1923 set: a platform, on which the principal characters sat during the wedding festivities, and a practical door, through which the bride and groom exited (fig. 4). We danced instead on a bare stage, sculpted by light and movement in costumes that recalled Goncharova’s drawings.

The first act was intended to bring our contemporary audience into the Russian context that the ballet’s three creators had shared. I wrote the collage as an interweaving of material from the memoirs of Stravinsky and Nijinska with passages from Russian literature, proverbs, and folksongs. In alternating scenes the play traces the story of the ballet’s creation and dramatizes an arranged marriage. While Stravinsky, dressed in tails to conduct the premiere of his new ballet, tells the spectators of longing for his native land, a young village couple who barely know each other swing from happy anticipation of their marriage to fear of what the future may hold. The play’s structure, like that of Stravinsky’s libretto for Svadebka, is a “Joycean collage of social and religious talk,” its mood, like that of the ballet, one of emotionally charged ambivalence.

I set the dramatic action against Russian choral music and wedding laments in order to introduce the audience to the sweetly dissonant church and folk music that Stravinsky so powerfully reworks in his score. I wanted our contemporary spectators to feel something of what composer Bela Bartók meant when he wrote in 1931 that “if among Stravinsky’s themes there exist some which are his own invention, they are extremely clever and extremely faithful imitations of popular song.” I brought Nijinska on to tell of her empathy with the bride, balanced on the edge of joy and despair. As Nancy Van Norman Baer writes, for Nijinska “the pain and finality of separation [from her homeland] was offset by the expectation of new beginnings. [...] She and the bride are suspended between an old and a new home, an old and a