

Lincoln Center Festival

July 10–30, 2017

Lincoln Center Festival lead support is provided by American Express

July 19–22 Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College

While I Was Waiting

North American premiere

Playwright Mohammad Al Attar

Director Omar Abusaada

Set Design Bissane Al Charif

Lighting Design Abdulhameed Khaleifa

Music Samer Saem Eldahr (Hello Psychaleppo)

Performed in Arabic with English supertitles

Approximate running time: 1 hour and 45 minutes, with no intermission

This performance is made possible in part by the Josie Robertson Fund for Lincoln Center.

The Lincoln Center Festival presentation of While I Was Waiting was made possible in part by FACE Contemporary Theater, a program developed by FACE Foundation and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States with lead funding from the Florence Gould Foundation, Institut Français, and the French Ministry of Culture and Communication.

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A co-production of Festival d'Avignon, Napoli Teatro Festival, AFAC Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, Pôle Arts de la scène—Friche La Belle de Mai (Marseille), Theater Spektakel (Zurich), Onassis Cultural Centre (Athens), Vooruit (Gent), La Bâtie Festival de Genève, Les Bancs publics—Festival Les Rencontres à l'échelle (Marseille), Festival d'Automne à Paris

LINCOLN CENTER FESTIVAL 2017 **WHILE I WAS WAITING**

Cast

Amal **Hanan Chkir**

Osama **Mohammad Alrash**

Nada **Nanda Mohammad**

Taim **Mohammad Alrefai**

Salma **Reham Kassar**

Omar **Mustafa Kur**

Synopsis

Having disappeared and been severely beaten after trying to go through one of the many checkpoints that dot Damascus, Taim reappears at the hospital, unconscious. Doctors call his family, and the incident forces them to confront painful realities and buried revelations. After surviving the tragic death of the father and the scandal it unveiled, Taim's family seems incapable of facing his coma without going through profound mutations. From his deep slumber, the young man watches as the various members of his family visit him and, joining his voice to theirs, tells us about the upheaval in their everyday lives, and about the changes that have struck the Syrian capital, now become strange and cruel.

To research this play about the omnipresence of absence, director Omar Abusaada met doctors as well as families facing the tragedy of a loved one's coma, in order to understand the mechanisms and uncover the mysteries of this strangest of states. With playwright Mohammad Al Attar, the director imagined this fable that weaves together different levels of consciousness, a thinly veiled metaphor for the state of his country, "neither alive nor dead, this grey zone somewhere between hope and despair," but also for his dreams of a political theater "whose values failed to become real when it was still possible." Theater becomes an act of resistance, to question again what fiction can do, without ever giving up on chronicling history.

A Note from the Playwright

I first discussed *While I Was Waiting* with director Omar Abusaada in October 2015 while we were in Tunis working on a play with children from a marginalized area on the old city's outskirts. Our journey with the children of the Al-Khariba neighborhood was primarily a search for hope in extremely difficult circumstances. They came from poor families whose parents worked hard to earn a living in harsh conditions within a socially conservative environment. The questions we pondered were: Could these children break the vicious cycle that conditioned their lives? Could they keep hoping and resist their harsh fates? Answers came as we worked with them, through games, stories, dreams, and imaginations that had not yet been tamed by the pessimistic realism of adults. Theater was our means to comprehend the grim reality around us in a different way and to push for change, even a little bit. Among the countries that witnessed the Arab Spring, Tunisia is the sole successful attempt at political change. Yet it was clear that the situation was still difficult and its stability fragile. However, the process of change had started and was worth building on.

In parallel, the situation in Syria was becoming increasingly complex and was worsening. The regime's excessive violence against protesters transformed the peaceful revolution against the most brutal dictatorship in the region into a fierce war, which soon turned into a proxy war waged at an international and regional level without involving the Syrians. In this horrible picture there are still Syrians in the country or in the diaspora who are trying to resist death and displacement. Their resistance, in its most instinctive form, lies in their insistence on surviving and in their refusal to give up the dream of positive change;

they refuse to choose between Assad's military fascism that has ruled the country for half a century and the religious fascism represented by ISIS and the like.

For Syrians such as Omar Abusaada and myself, theater is our way to cling to hope and to resist despair. This has given us a renewed impetus to reflect on the meaning of theater today: What can it say and how? Before Tunis, we had performed the play *Antigone of Shatila* in Lebanon, another exquisite journey with Syrian and Palestinian-Syrian women living in miserable camps on the outskirts of Beirut. For more than three months, we worked with the people to present a contemporary adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone*. The women had been forcibly displaced from different parts of Syria, during which they lost their most precious possessions. Some lost sons and brothers. Today they live in extremely harsh conditions. Despite this, their work revealed an insistence to resist these conditions and create a better reality for themselves and their families. The similarity between their stories and *Antigone's* did not inspire any of them to follow her tragic fate. "With time, I understood that the part of *Antigone* inside each of us was the stubborn part that wanted to live, not to die," says Esraa, one of the actors, during the performance.

If theater is our space within which to defend hope without embellishing reality and our tool to fight despair without ignoring facts, why then are we performing a play about a "coma?" Why have we decided to start from a premise that might appear pessimistic? A young man in his late 20s falls into a lengthy coma after having been brutally beaten by unknown assailants in Damascus. I think the answer lies in the question itself. The more our reality deteriorates and the scenes in Syria become increasingly violent and bloody, the more we need to know about the conditions of

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ordinary people hiding behind the images transmitted to our television screens. Let's assume that those who see this play ask themselves these questions beforehand: "What do we know about Syria today? What's really going on there and why?" I am confident, following my recent move to Berlin, that most of the answers will come from the info conveyed via news channels and newspapers.

Syria features in videos and images of murder and destruction and of ISIS, the scarecrow that all forces know how to use for their own interests. Syria is, of course, about the refugee crisis, portrayed in the media as a crisis without context and cause! We read about thousands of people who risk their lives to cross into Europe, but we only discuss how to organize their reception, what borders to close, and what borders to open. We only discuss how to get Turkey to curb the tide of refugees and the best integration policies for those able to reach Europe. However, we rarely talk about how to end the crisis at its origin.

How can warplanes and helicopters continue dropping bombs or barrels of TNT on civilian communities in the 21st century? Everyone seems to master the management of the war and to figure out how to contain its repercussions, but no one is really interested in ending it.

While I Was Waiting is an attempt to tell the story of a people who are still trying to survive—the story behind the images on screens and in newspapers and beyond the complex political analysis, all of which often ignore the fate of ordinary humans and the deep transformations happening in their lives, thoughts, and beliefs. This story of a middle-class family is similar to many families in Damascus and Syria in general. Its members are trying to survive during a time of violence, war, and social change. In

this quest, they greatly transform as individuals; some decide to engage in long-deferred confrontations while others are content to observe.

It is also the story of the city of Damascus, whose center has remained under horrific security control by the regime while overwhelming bombardment and siege take place on its outskirts. The city has witnessed countless wars, invasions, and fires throughout its history and is currently witnessing new seasons of violent change. It's the city in which I was born and grew up, without ever feeling that I understood it well.

Omar still insists on living in Damascus and traveling to and from there. As for me, I left against my will in early 2012 and cannot return as long as the Assad regime is in power. My entire family still lives there and the city still lives within me wherever I go. The images of Damascus have been present in my long discussions with Omar and in our tireless attempts to understand its transformations and the future that awaits it.

In this endeavor and in our continuous attempts to understand the changes in Syria through theater, the story of the coma seemed to be the most appropriate framework for comprehending our absurd conditions. Throughout the coma, reality's cruelty and roughness can merge with our dreams and imaginings, which are our only escape from the harsh reality. The coma also seemed to be an entry point from which to think about the tens of thousands of Syrians who forcibly disappeared or were imprisoned or whose bodies lay somewhere without graves.

Taim, lying in a coma, watches his family members and friends struggle with the idea of losing him as well as a reality that is becoming fiercer every day. He's awaiting his fate and trying to understand what he

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could not understand when he was among them. Waiting may be the only thing that unites them. Like all Syrians, their fate does not appear to be entirely in their hands. They stand in a fragile state between life and death, tears and laughter, survival and departure. Yet they have not completely surrendered to despair—not today at least.

—**Mohammad Al Attar**, April 2016

About the Creative Team

Mohammad Al Attar (Playwright) is a Syrian playwright and dramaturg. He graduated with a degree in English literature from Damascus University in 2002 and a degree in Theatrical Studies from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2007. He also received a master's degree in Applied Drama (with special focus on the political and social role of theater) from Goldsmiths, University of London in 2010. His theatrical works—which include *Withdrawal*, *Samah*, *Online*, *Look at the Streets...This Is What Hope Looks Like*, *Could You Please Look into the Camera?*, *A Chance Encounter*, *Intimacy*, and *Antigone of Shatila*—have been performed in Damascus, London, New York, Seoul, Berlin, Brussels, Edinburgh, Tunis, Athens, Marseilles, and Beirut. His play *While I Was Waiting* premiered at the Kunsten Festival in Brussels in May 2016 and was selected for the 70th edition of Festival d'Avignon. He has written for numerous magazines and newspapers, with a special focus on the Syrian uprising. Along with his writings for the stage, he uses theater in special projects with marginalized groups across the Arab world.

Omar Abusaada (Director) is a Syrian director and playwright. After finishing his

theatrical studies at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, he started working as a dramaturg, then moved into directing. He cofounded the company Studio Theater in Damascus and in 2004 directed his first theatrical work, *Insomnia*. He has also directed *Al Affich*; *Samah*, an improvisational work with a group of boys in a reform school; *Almirwad Wa Almikhala*; *Look at the Streets...This Is What Hope Looks Like*; *Could You Please Look into the Camera?*; *Intimacy*; *Syrian Trojan Women*; and *Antigone of Shatila*. He directed *While I Was Waiting* for its premiere at the Kunsten Festival in Brussels in May 2016 and at the 70th edition of Festival d'Avignon. He has introduced different ideas of contemporary writing, documentary, and Theater of the Oppressed in Syria, and has worked for years in remote villages and local communities in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen. He also leads workshops in contemporary theater writing and directing.

Bissane Al Charif (Set Design) graduated from the Department of Architecture at the University of Damascus in 2000, then earned a master's degree in archaeology from the University of Lyon II in 2002. In Syria, she has participated in many performances and theater festivals as set designer, director, and costume designer. She has worked as a decor designer in many Syrian films. In 2008, she directed and designed Theater Street project ALKAAR, as part of the artistic program of "Damascus, Arab Capital of Culture." She currently lives in Lyon and works as an independent artist in set design and installation.

Abdulhameed Khaleifa (Lighting Design) graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 1988, and later studied lighting design in Avignon. He taught at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts from 1991 to 2014 and was head of the Technical Department at the Institute

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from 2012 to 2014. He has worked as a lighting designer for productions in Syria and for several international festivals. He has also worked as an actor in many plays in Syria, including mobile and children's theater, as well as on several television shows. He has also directed at the National Theater in Damascus.

Samer Saem Eldahr (Hello Psychaleppo) (Music) hails from Aleppo, Syria—alluded to in his current project, Hello Psychaleppo—and makes his home in Minnesota. His music uses melodies of the Arab bedouin “Mawwals” and the ecstatic strains of *tarab*, threaded through industrial structures made from dubstep, drum and bass, electro, and trip-hop. Hello Psychaleppo has released two albums, 2013's *Gool L'ah* and 2014's *Ha!*

Souhir Hamzaoui (Technical Director) has a master's degree in theater and performing arts from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Art in Tunis, and also graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts (Scenography Department) in Damascus. She worked for several years as a technical director for many festivals in Tunisia, including International Festival of Carthage, International Festival of Hammamet, and Carthage Theater Days. She currently works as a freelance general and technical coordinator at the International Festival of Hammamet.

Reem Al Ghazzi (Video) is an actress and filmmaker from Damascus. She is the founder of Eyenfilm, an organization dedicated to documentary filmmaking. Eyenfilm's main activity is teaching young Syrians the skills and knowledge needed to make their own documentaries, which are a powerful tool for self-expression and a means of increasing awareness of important social issues.

About the Artists

Hanan Chkir (Amal) graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 1994, has acted in more than 20 plays for the National Theater in Damascus, and has participated in workshops with theater luminaries such as Ariane Mnouchkine. She has acted in several films, including Yusri Nasrallah's *Bab Alshams*, Riad Shia's *Allajat*, Nidal Aldibs' *Under the Roof*, and Aliaa Khachouk's *I Was Once Told*. She has also appeared in several television series and has taught acting since 2009. She has worked with director Omar Abusaada on several projects since 2011.

Mohammad Alrashi (Osama) is an actor, theater director, and musician who graduated in 1995 from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus. He began as an actor at Damascus's National Theater and performed in director Riad Ossmat's *Sharayar's Nights*, *The Voyage of Narcissus*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In 2000 he acted in *Gilgamesh* under director Pascal Rambert at the Festival d'Avignon. In 2008 he appeared in *The Immigrants*, directed by Samer Omran, in Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, and Sharjah. Other theater credits include *Krapp's Last Tape* in Damascus and Beirut (2009); *The Novel of Baibars* in Paris and Marseilles (2010); and *The Just* in Germany (2014). Theater composing credits include *Small World*; *The Diplomats*; *Chitra*, *Daughter of Rabindranath's King*; and *Assemblywomen*. In 1999 he directed and wrote music for *Steps* in Damascus, which later traveled to the International Festival of Carthage. He has been in 20 films for television and starred in *The Immigrants* and *Four Hours of Firdouss* by director Mohammad Abdelaziz. He is a founding member of the association Moktabar Damas de Théâtre, where he also teaches.

He has taught theater at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus.

Nanda Mohammad (Nada) graduated from the Acting Department of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2001. She has worked with Syrian theater directors Naila Al-Atrash, Amal Omran, Samer Omran, and Jihad Saad, and began working with Omar Abusaada in 2009 on various projects. She has regularly worked with international theater directors including Tim Supple (U.K.); Jean-Michel Pesenti, Catherine Schaub Abkarian, and Henri Jules Julien (France); Nullo Facchini (Denmark); Khaled Al-Tarefi (Palestine); and Laila Soliman and Ahmed El Attar (Egypt). She has been a voice and acting trainer in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt since 2004. Although she moved to Egypt in 2012, she continues to work on projects in Syria.

Mohammad Alrefai (Taim) graduated from the Acting Department of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2012. He has since worked with Syrian theater directors Ghassan Massoud and Samer Omran and has starred in several Syrian television series and movies. He was part of the "Home Grown" theater project with the Kevin Spacey Foundation and Middle East Theater Academy. Since 2014 he has also worked as a movement trainer in Syria and Lebanon.

Reham Kassar (Salma) studied acting in Damascus and graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in 2014. Her theater work includes *Hysteria* and *Farewell Salomon*. She has also directed amateur actor training workshops in Germany and has worked as a dramatic consultant. She has acted in several films including *The Man Who Lost His Shadow*. She is currently studying for her master's degree at Weissensee School of Art in Berlin.

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Mustafa Kur (Omar) graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2014. He has performed in *Hysteria* by Jihad Saad, *Out of Control* by Same Oran, and the Al Caravan Street Theater Project in Beirut. He also wrote and directed the play *Trip*, which was produced by the National Theater in Damascus last year. He has appeared in the movies *Four O'Clock at Paradise*, directed by Mohamad Abdul Aziz; *The Day I Lost My Shadow*, directed by Soudade Kaadan; and *Insyriated*, directed by Philippe van Leeuw. He began working with director Omar Abusaada in 2015 with the play *Youssef Was Here*.

While I Was Waiting Production Team

Technical Director **Souhir Hamzaoui**

Video **Reem Al Ghazzi**

John Jay College of Criminal Justice of The City University of New York and the Gerald W. Lynch Theater

John Jay College of Criminal Justice of The City University of New York, an international leader in educating for justice, offers a rich liberal arts and professional studies curriculum to upwards of 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students from more than 135 nations. In teaching, scholarship and research, the College approaches justice as an applied art and science in service to society and as an ongoing conversation about fundamental human desires for fairness, equality and the rule of law. For more information, visit jjay.cuny.edu.

Since opening its doors in 1988, the Gerald W. Lynch Theater has been an invaluable cultural resource for John Jay College and the larger New York City community. The Theater is dedicated to the creation and presenta-

tion of performing arts programming of all disciplines with a special focus on how the artistic imagination can shed light on the many perceptions of justice in our society. The Theater is also a member of CUNY Stages, a consortium of 16 performing arts centers located on CUNY campuses across New York City.

The Theater has hosted events in the Lincoln Center Festival since its first season in 1996, as well as New York City Opera, Great Performers at Lincoln Center, Gotham Chamber Opera, Metropolitan Opera Guild, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater/Ailey II. The Theater has also been the site of many television and film specials including A&E's *Live by Request*, *Comedy Central Presents* and *Premium Blend*, *Robert Klein in Concert* and VH1's *Soundtrack Live*. For more information, and to view a schedule of events, please visit GeraldWLYnchTheater.com.

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Lincoln Center Festival, now in its 22nd season, has received worldwide attention for presenting some of the broadest and most original performing arts programs in Lincoln Center's history. The festival has presented 1,465 performances of opera, music, dance, theater, and interdisciplinary forms by internationally acclaimed artists from more than 50 countries. To date, the festival has commissioned 44 new works and offered 145 world, U.S., and New York premieres. It places particular emphasis on showcasing contemporary artistic viewpoints and multidisciplinary works that challenge the boundaries of traditional performance. For more information, visit LincolnCenterFestival.org.

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (LCPA) serves three primary roles: presenter of artistic programming, national leader in arts and education and community engagement, and manager of the Lincoln Center campus. A presenter of more than 3,000 free and ticketed events, performances, tours, and educational activities annually, LCPA offers 16 series, festivals, and programs, including American Songbook, Avery Fisher Career Grants and Artist program, David Rubenstein Atrium programming, Great Performers, Lincoln Center at the Movies, Lincoln Center Emerging Artist Awards, Lincoln Center Festival, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, Lincoln Center Vera List Art Project, Midsummer Night Swing,

Mostly Mozart Festival, White Light Festival, the Emmy Award-winning *Live From Lincoln Center*, which airs nationally on PBS, and Lincoln Center Education, which is celebrating 40 years enriching the lives of students, educators, and lifelong learners. As manager of the Lincoln Center campus, LCPA provides support and services for the Lincoln Center complex and the 11 resident organizations: The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Film Society of Lincoln Center, Jazz at Lincoln Center, The Juilliard School, Lincoln Center Theater, The Metropolitan Opera, New York City Ballet, New York Philharmonic, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, School of American Ballet, and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Lincoln Center has become a leading force in using new media and technology to reach and inspire a wider and global audience. Reaching audiences where they are—physically and digitally—has become a cornerstone of making the performing arts more accessible to New Yorkers and beyond. The re-imagination of David Geffen Hall will play an important part in these efforts. For more information, visit LincolnCenter.org.

Acknowledgments

Lighting, Sound, Video Equipment

Production Resource Group

Lighting Interpreter **Zakaria Al-Alami**

Translator **Lana Abdo**

Supertitle Operator **Tarek Hefny**

Looking Ahead: Compagnie XY's *Il N'est Pas Encore Minuit*



From July 19–22, the renowned French circus collective Compagnie XY will present its newest work, *Il N'est Pas Encore Minuit*. In collaboration with choreographer Loïc Touzé, 22 acrobats will use their uniquely rhythmic and expressive brand of physical theater to explore the ways in which humanity deals with instability and imbalance. *Il N'est Pas Encore Minuit* is an incredible experience for audiences of all ages. *Le Monde* calls it “a pure marvel conquering the sky.”

For more information and a complete schedule of Lincoln Center Festival events, visit LincolnCenterFestival.org

Looking Ahead: *Nomadic Nights: Music at the Crossroads*



Maria Pomianowska

Photo: Aleksander Wyszynski

From July 25–29, *Nomadic Nights: Music at the Crossroads* showcases an eclectic assortment of modern-day musical explorers. Maria Pomianowska blends ancient Polish folk music with international inspirations (July 25). Chamber music is infused with jazz and Latin forms in the Cuban-American Bohemian Trio's original works (July 26). Tcheka revisits the African griot tradition through the song styles of his native Cape Verde (July 27). H'Sao ornaments the traditional cappella harmonies of Chad with new-world funk, soul, and R&B (July 28). And oud ensemble Le Trio Joubran combines music and poetry in *In the Shadow of Words* (July 29). Crossing continents and genres, the series offers a sonic meditation on the dynamic interplay of deep roots and the thrill of discovery.

For more information and a complete schedule of Lincoln Center Festival events, visit LincolnCenterFestival.org

Looking Ahead: Le Trio Joubran



On July 29, in the final event of the *Nomadic Nights* series, the oud ensemble comprising Nazareth-born brothers Samir, Wissam, and Adnan Joubran and percussionist Youssef Hbeisch performs an immersive tribute to the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. *In the Shadow of Words* is a soulful dialogue between worlds, with the trio's unique blend of traditional Arabic music, jazz, rock, and flamenco responding to Darwish's recorded voice, all within a rich multimedia environment. *The Guardian* ranks Le Trio Joubran "among the most inventive musicians in the Arab world," while *NPR* calls the trio "hypnotic and bliss-inducing."

For more information and a complete schedule of Lincoln Center Festival events, visit LincolnCenterFestival.org

Looking Ahead: Bolshoi Ballet's *The Taming of the Shrew*

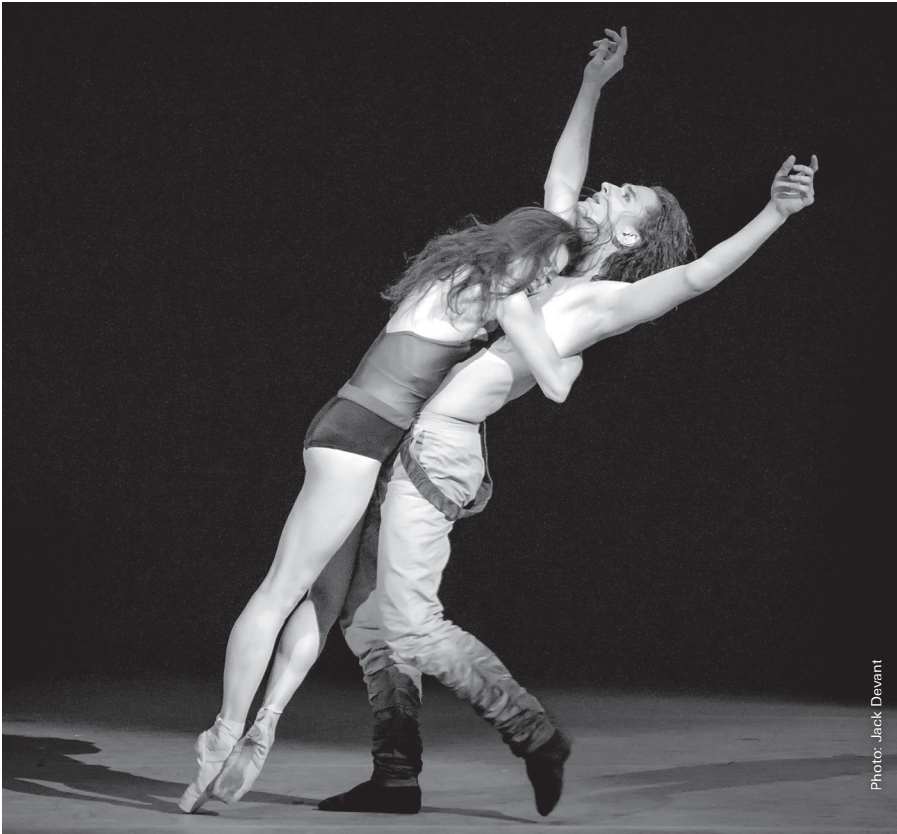


Photo: Jack Devant

From July 26–30, the legendary Bolshoi Ballet will present its effervescent production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, choreographed by Jean-Christophe Maillot (artistic director of the Ballets de Monte Carlo). The Bolshoi's incomparable dancers bring their signature bravura to this adaptation of Shakespeare's classic, transforming the famously chauvinistic comedy into a feisty battle of wits between the well-born Kate and the rough-edged Petruchio. *The Telegraph* (U.K.) calls it an "eclectic, high-octane, and often witty fusion of classical and modern."

For more information and a complete schedule of Lincoln Center Festival events, visit LincolnCenterFestival.org

Welcome to Lincoln Center



Inaki V/naixa

The world's leading performing arts center hosts some five million visitors annually. Located on 16.3 acres, the recently transformed Lincoln Center campus is home to 11 resident organizations: The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, The Film Society of Lincoln Center, Jazz at Lincoln Center, The Juilliard School, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center Theater, The Metropolitan Opera, New York City Ballet, New York Philharmonic, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and The School of American Ballet. There is something going on 365 days a year at the 30 indoor and outdoor venues spread across Lincoln Center.

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jazz.org 212.258.9800

Juilliard School
juilliard.edu 212.799.5000

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts
AboutLincolnCenter.org 212.875.5000

Lincoln Center Theater
lct.org 212.362.7600

Metropolitan Opera
metopera.org 212.362.6000

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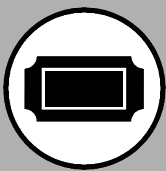
Martin Schott

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