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A New Spin on Spin: Reviving a Bolognese Folk Dance



By Brian Seibert



Two dancers doing polka chinata, or the crouched polka, in “Save the Last Dance for Me,” a work by the Italian choreographer Alessandro Sciarroni.

Credit: Claudia Borgia

The polka chinata, in which two men whirl together in a crouch, is revived in a dance by Alessandro Sciarroni, coming to PS21 in Chatham, N.Y.

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Two men arrive on the dance floor, holding hands. Slowly, they embrace in a ballroom position and begin gliding in large circles, rotating, their feet doing a little scooting, chasing step. Sometimes, one man turns the other under his arm or sends him spinning like a top. Sometimes, they grasp each other by the upper arms, bend into a squat and whirl like that — as if on a revolving teacups ride. The faster they turn, the bigger their smiles.

This is the polka chinata, or crouched polka, a nearly defunct Bolognese folk dance. Or rather it is the polka chinata as presented in “Save the Last Dance for Me,” a work by the Italian choreographer Alessandro Sciarroni that is to have its United States premiere at PS21 in Chatham, N.Y., on July 29.

When Sciarroni first discovered the dance in a video posted online, in 2017, he was immediately captivated by it, he said during a call from Italy. He had made other works using folk dance, but he had never heard of an Italian couple dance for men. “I was fascinated by the intimacy between the performers, spinning so fast and keeping each other in some kind of hug,” he said.

He sought out Giancarlo Stagni, a dance teacher in Castel San Pietro Terme, near Bologna. Stagni told him that the number of people who danced the polka chinata had shrunk to just five.

Dance is notoriously ephemeral, leaving no record of itself, passed down from person to person. But, Sciarroni said: “It has this capacity to disappear for generations and then come back again. You think it’s over and then it’s not.”

Stagni had first encountered the dance in the 1970s, when it was already in decline. “Some elderly people knew it, but they were no longer able to dance it,” he recently said in an email. “A few guys, including me, started to bring it into the squares again.”

Stagni traced the origins of the polka chinata to the early 1900s, when men challenged one another under Bologna’s covered walkways to see who could spin the lowest and fastest. It became part of filuzzi, a local partner-dance style characterized by speed and lots of turns, always to the left. At parties and ballrooms, where young men were not allowed to dance with unmarried women, they danced with each other instead, using the conjoined spinning as a way to attract the women’s attention.

Later, as mores loosened, and men and women could dance together in public more freely, the polka chinata lost some of its courtship function, but it survived for a while, more as a competition or sporting activity.

“In the ‘90s, I stopped dancing it and starting teaching it,” Stagni said. But there weren’t many people interested in learning, partly because of the difficulty. “Today unfortunately I believe — indeed I am sure — that I am alone.” He knows of only three pairs who dance the polka chinata, including the two men performing in “Save the Last Dance.”

Those men, Gianmaria Borzillo and Giovanfrancesco Giannini, the contemporary dancers that Sciarroni sent to study with Stagni, can attest to the difficulty. “Our legs were crying at the beginning,” Borzillo said. But every Monday for six months, they practiced the dance.

Then Sciarroni came in. Little known in the United States, he is renowned in Europe, the recipient of the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement in dance at the 2019 Venice Biennale. His works often rely on borrowed techniques, which sometimes come from folk dance but also from circus and sports. They tend to involve repetition and endurance. A group of dancers might spin for half an hour, gradually cycling through various positions and styles of music. Or they might do the self-slapping Tyrolean Schuhplattler dance to exhaustion, until one dancer remains or the audience has left.

“My interest in folk dance is that it tells me a story that is very much older than me but at the same time tells something that belongs to everyone and so to contemporary society,” he said. When using a folk dance like polka chinata, he doesn’t change the steps. But he does supply what he called interventions.

One is the music. Where polka chinata is normally danced to Bolognese accordion songs, “Save the Last Dance” has an original score by Aurora Bauza and Pere Jou, electro-swing with a four-on-the-floor beat. “It’s not that I don’t like traditional music, but it is connected to clichés about the dance,” Sciarroni said. “If you replace it with a different soundscape, you are able to discover many details.”

At the end of “Save the Last Dance,” the dancers repeat the polka chinata to a traditional song. “Because this dance is so unknown, I thought it was important for the audience to be aware of the original version,” Sciarroni said.



Gianmaria Borzillo and Giovanfrancesco Giannini performing at the Santarcangelo Festival in the town of Santarcangelo di Romagna, in Emilia Romagna, Italy.
Credit: Claudia Borgia

Another intervention is duration. Where a traditional polka chinata song lasts around two minutes, “Save The Last Dance” lasts around 20. The extended duration “makes something different appear in the dance,” he said. He and the dancers settled on 20 minutes because it was on the outer edge of the dancers’ point of exhaustion. “I want push that a bit, to feel the insistence of extending time. The more tired they get, the more they feel joy.”

In the work, the two dancers cycle through the steps methodically, adding the turns and the crouched spin, clutching each other in resistance to the centrifugal force that pulls them apart. Then they reset to start again, and again. During the spinning and resets, they lock eyes, avoiding dizziness by focusing on their connection. They perform in the round, with the audience nearby. “Sometimes they can feel a bit of danger, because we are spinning so close to them,” Borzillo said.

“We feel very naked in front of the public, and they can see our fragility,” Giannini said. “It’s about trust. If you don’t trust your partner, you’re lost.”

“But after a while, we start smiling at each other and the audience smiles with us,” Borzillo said. “The repetition takes you into — I don’t want to say ecstasy — but into pleasure.”

Sciarroni said that his favorite response to the show came from a curator in Paris, who told him that at the end of the piece everyone wanted to go outside and fall in love with someone.

But earlier, before the work was first performed, as soon as Sciarroni let friends watch rehearsals, he was faced with a seemingly predictable response, but one he had not expected: a queer reading. “We were not thinking about a gay connotation at all,” he said. “We don’t want to underline it or make any comment.”

“We are queer people,” Borzillo said, “so it emerged without our addressing it.”

“Alessandro told us to keep it our secret,” Giannini said.

The dancers have now performed “Save the Last Dance” more than 100 times, in a variety of settings, indoors and outdoors, in plazas and at least one cathedral. Recently, they danced it at a queer festival in the south of Italy.

“It was very emotional for us to perform it inside our community,” Borzillo said. “Some other places, you can feel that the gaze of the audience is full of prejudice. But after five minutes, you feel that they are fascinated, because they recognize it is tradition. It’s like a meeting point, also between generations. Something that belongs to the past really belongs to the present.”

“You can’t quite place it,” said Elena Siyanko, PS21’s executive and artistic director. “It’s not the past. It’s not nostalgia. But it’s not the present exactly. There’s a subversion of your expectations.”

The 20-minute run time, Siyanko acknowledged, makes the dance a little difficult to program. “People expect a delivery of a product, a proper performance at least one hour,” she said. It helps that at PS21, as at most places “Save the Last Dance” is performed, it will be paired with a workshop during which Borzillo and Giannini teach polka chinata to the public. This will be followed by a dance party, a chance to try spinning with a partner while DJ Joro Boro spins records.

“The workshop is for every kind of body, every age,” Borzillo said. “The dance is difficult. It took us six months to learn. Mastering it isn’t the goal of the workshop.”

“The goal,” he continued, “is to save the dance — maybe not from extinction, but from memory loss. A folk dance survives as long as someone has a memory of it. People who come to the workshop may not be able to dance it completely, but they will know what it is, and that’s how it survives.”