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Opening Doors at Ballet Edmonton

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We premiere a new city report this issue — Seattle, which is just a few hours drive across the border into the United States from *Dance International*'s home in Vancouver, making it almost a neighbour. Writer Kaitlin McCarthy is a keen observer of Seattle's active dance scene and, in her inaugural report on page 46, fluently covers both smaller experimental groups and larger high-profile ones.

Kaitlin is the editorial director and a regular contributor to SeattleDances.com, and is also a choreographer and dancer. She is not the only practising dance artist on our roster. In this issue alone, we feature Kate Stashko, writing about Ballet Edmonton on page 6, and Jenn Edwards, with a profile of Toronto's Patricia Allison on page 21.

Insider knowledge can lead to additional levels of insight into an artist and their art. But there are cautions around writing from the inside. A "full disclosure" statement helps keep the ethics above board when the relationship between writer and subject is very close; for example, if the writer is part of a project included in their coverage. Other times, a writer will refrain from covering companies or individuals they feel too close to.

Reviewing from an inside perspective is almost always avoided. The required fair-mindedness and objectivity are elusive states of mind that are even more complicated by emotional or creative ties.

Despite the frailty of any one person's pronouncements, reviews remain one of the most popular forms of dance writing: the public wants to know what happened onstage and writers enjoy sinking their teeth into a work in this formal way.

As usual, we have some insightful commentary on dance in our review section here in the magazine and on our website. Should we be making room for more? With limited resources to allocate, I have only been accepting a fraction of the pitches by writers keen to ponder the exciting dance out there on the Canadian and global stage. Let us know if you have any suggestions for coverage: we're easy to contact on our social media channels.

Kaija

KAIJA PEPPER
editor@danceinternational.org

dance INTERNATIONAL

Ballet Edmonton in Wen Wei Wang's *Last Words*
Photo: Nanc Price

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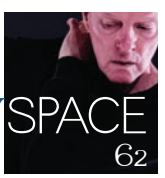

OPENING NEW DOORS

TOGETHER

Wen Wei Wang and Ballet Edmonton

Photo: Steven Lemay

Ballet Edmonton in rehearsal for Wen Wei Wang's *Last Words*
Photo: Emilie Iggiotti

On the September 2018 day that Wen Wei Wang arrived in Edmonton to start his position as artistic director of Ballet Edmonton it was … snowing. Although not typical weather for the northern Canadian city at that time of year, it was unnerving for Wang, who is more used to the rainy climate of Vancouver, where he has run his own contemporary dance company for about 15 years.

However, after a few weeks, Wang said he was feeling more comfortable in his new environment and looking forward to getting to know the community. He hasn't had much time for networking and socializing so far though; he hit the ground running with his two new creations, both for the full company of eight, with only six weeks of rehearsals to create them.

The pieces, which premiered in November, have a more contemporary feel than many of the works we have seen Ballet Edmonton perform in recent years, including intricate floorwork, sliding and inventive partnering.

The show took place at the company's new home at the Triffo Theatre in Allard Hall at MacEwan University. The 415-seat theatre is the perfect-sized house for this small group, and the design is stunning, with a dramatic curved entrance hallway and three levels of seating, giving it a formal auditorium feel despite its smaller capacity.

It is definitely fair to say that Ballet Edmonton is opening a new chapter in its story as a small to mid-sized contemporary ballet company based in the Canadian Prairies. In addition to the new performance venue, the company has hired new dancers and changed its name from the rather quaint Citie Ballet to one that "proudly defines the company's place in the Canadian arts ecosystem," as general manager Sheri Somerville puts it.

The name also defines the city's place: over the last 10 years, Edmonton has grown. There has been a strong theatre community, and the contemporary dance scene is coming into its own, after suffering a setback when the MacEwan University dance program closed in 2008. Small-scale companies such as Ballet Edmonton are flourishing and transforming along with the city.

The company has undergone a dramatic evolution since its founding in 1998 by William Thompson, once a dancer with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and former artistic director of Colorado Ballet. At that time, Citie Ballet was a vehicle to offer Edmonton-area dancers professional-level training and performance experience. Dancers were not paid, but gained valuable experience and many went on to have professional careers elsewhere.

Before 1990, Alberta Ballet had been based in Edmonton, but when it shifted its headquarters to Calgary, the city was without a ballet company (although Alberta Ballet always tours its shows to Edmonton and recently established an Edmonton branch of its school). This prompted Citie Ballet board member Lynn Mandel, a major arts supporter and former dancer with Alberta Ballet, to encourage the company to transition to professional status. It finally achieved this in 2012, meaning, especially, that dancers were paid. Since then, the company has been able to attract more experienced artists, both to perform with and choreograph on them.

The current transformation, however, is perhaps the most substantial the company has seen, led by Wang, an exciting contemporary choreographer who will guide Ballet Edmonton through a transition in both aesthetics and structure.

No small feat. Wang admits that the first few days in Edmonton were challenging, both for him and for the dancers, who all have strong classical ballet training from prestigious programs at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, the National Ballet of Canada and the Paris Opera, but less experience in contemporary dance. His two new works involved an intense introduction to Wang's aesthetic, which involves fluid use of the torso, sliding, rolling and moving in and out of the floor smoothly. The results, however, were encouraging: *X-Body* is an aggressive, demanding work performed on pointe that showcases the technical capabilities of the dancers. By contrast, *Last Words*, a more lyrical work on themes of loss and grief, was performed in soft shoes, set to music by the Peter Gregson Quartet.

Ballet Edmonton's Audrey Boccara and Mitchell Przybilla in Wen Wei Wang's *X-Body*
Photo: Nanc Price

Wang says the dancers — some of whom come from as far away as Jiangmen, China, and Mococa, Brazil, with two home-grown Albertans — were understandably nervous about getting to know their new artistic director. It was about building trust in both directions, and Wang has great confidence in his young collaborators. He describes them as open-minded, explaining that if the dancers want to explore a wider range of possibilities within ballet, they can open that door together.

Wang takes over the directorship from Jorden Morris, making him the fourth person to tackle the job over 20 years. His plans include expanding the number of dancers (there is an ongoing call for new dancers) and continuing the company's tradition of commissioning work from Canadian choreographers. Wang has already programmed a double bill by Vancouver artists Joshua Beamish and Rachel Meyer to premiere in March. These commissions benefit the company by broadening the dancers' skills as interpreters and expanding its repertoire, while offering opportunities to Canadian choreographic talent.

"We have great artists here," Wang says, "and they need work." He is excited about the choreographers the company will be commissioning in the coming seasons, although he is keeping this information close for the moment.

Wang feels that his role will involve elevating the calibre of the dancers and the work being created by Ballet Edmonton, transforming its reputation and place within Canadian dance. He is already teaching company classes in both ballet and contemporary, broadening the dancers' skillsets and helping them prepare to perform his work.

He also has a vision of Ballet Edmonton as a more integrated player in the Edmonton arts scene. He hopes to foster more connections and collaborations with local musicians, and the company has opened its classes to the public for the first time in its history. Wang has also begun inviting artists to view run-throughs in the company's spacious studio at the Ruth Carse Centre for Dance. "I knew that if I came here, I wanted to build a totally new, contemporary ballet company." And he seems to be doing exactly that.

Taking leadership of a regional ballet company as it transitions to a new level is a huge commitment. The challenge is amplified by the fact that Wang continues to manage and work with his own company, Wen Wei Dance, in Vancouver during breaks in his contract. In addition to the creative and administrative workload of maintaining both companies, there will be the potential fatigue from several trips back and forth flying between Vancouver and Edmonton. What motivated this change of pace?

It was, at least in part, due to an ongoing theme in Wang's life: facing newness with curiosity and a sense of adventure. Born in Xi'an, China, Wang studied choreography at the People's Liberation Army Academy of Art in China as a young dancer. In 1991, he came to Canada, dancing for several years with Ballet BC before founding Wen Wei Dance in 2003. The company was a vehicle for him to begin choreographing his own work. Since then, he has received commissions from Alberta Ballet, BJM Danse and, in the United States, Northwest Dance Projects, among others.

These commissions involve coming into a company, choreographing a work quickly and then leaving, often not seeing the dancers again for many years, if at all. So when an opportunity arose to work with dancers on a more consistent basis, creating contemporary ballet work, Wang grabbed it. The solid classical background of Ballet Edmonton's dancers provides a specific skillset that allows Wang to choreograph work on pointe, incorporating classical vocabulary and intricate partnering. "I want to do something interesting and see how much I can stretch myself."

While Wang, who is in his 50s, has an opportunity at Ballet Edmonton to create work in a more consistent and stable environment, through his nationally recognized name the company gets a boost to its reputation and builds its presence on a national level. However, leading a company as it navigates a major transition is a huge amount of work, and Ballet Edmonton is charting this course on limited resources. Wang is committed to helping the company reinvent itself; like most people in the arts, he's not in it for the money. But, of course, it's not really about the money.

He speaks about his late mentor Grant Strate — a founding member of the National Ballet of Canada and later a much-loved mover-and-shaker in Canadian dance — who passed away in 2015. Strate would remind him not to think too much about making money, but to remember his love for the art form. "I feel like Grant is always there pushing me … saying, 'Go, you will do it, you will be fine.' I think he would be proud of me."

Wang speaks about how we can move past grief by embracing community, creating a sense of openness and co-operation. His goals for the company are based in this ethos of connection. Already many independent dancers are attending company class, creating a broader sense of relationship with Ballet Edmonton and generating some excitement around the company's shows.

In fact, there was a real buzz in the air leading up to the November premiere. Among the people I spoke with, there was an agreement that Ballet Edmonton is on an exciting new track. The dancers looked fantastic — Wang has capitalized on their skills and strengths — and the company has already grown in depth and maturity since last season. Houses were nearly sold out throughout the run, and the audience provided a supportive and enthusiastic reception to this season opener for a transformed Ballet Edmonton. DI

The current transformation is perhaps the most substantial the company has seen, led by Wang, an exciting contemporary choreographer.

Her Wa

Cathy Marston builds her own brand of narrative ballet

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BY MAGGIE FOYER

Victoria Sibson as Bertha Mason and Javier Torres as Edward Rochester in Cathy Marston's *Jane Eyre*
Photos: Emma Kauldhar

Cathy Marston, on first appearance, could well be one of those immaculate matching swans gracing London's Royal Opera House stage, but see beyond her elegant appearance and you'll discover a determined dance-maker who stands out from the crowd. She has become a choreographer who does not conform to the classical mould, but has instead shaped her own destiny along a path that's uniquely hers.

Her parents, both English teachers, instilled in her a love of literature, which, combined with a sharp intellect and fluency in articulating ideas, fed her exceptional talent for telling stories in movement.

With a portfolio of more than 50 works performed in 11 countries, she is currently riding high as one of the most sought-after choreographers, known for her narrative contemporary works. The current emphasis in the ballet world on promoting women choreographers has done her no harm, but she attained her international status well before this need to address equality was even acknowledged.

Alongside her ballet training, Marston showed an early proclivity for both contemporary dance and choreography, with these two talents helping her gain entry to the profession. When she studied at the Royal Ballet School from 1992 to 1994, there was little contemporary dance on the curriculum. It was Marston who complained of the lack and drew up a petition, resulting in a meagre 10 classes delivered in her final year.

She had also showed initiative in auditioning abroad, but this did not result in a job offer. "No one told me you might not want to go [to an audition] in pink ballet tights with your hair scraped back," she says wryly.

However, as luck would have it, Bernd Bienert, director of Zurich Ballet, came to the Royal Ballet School looking for dancers and watched one of those rare contemporary classes. She was, by her own admission, "quite good in contemporary" and was placed on Bienert's shortlist. He returned to watch their ballet class but arrived late; still, Marston grasped her opportunity. "I don't know what got into me that day, I look back and think it was another person inhabiting me, but I went up to him and said, 'I'd really like to show you my choreography.'"

He watched a video of the duet that had won her the Royal Ballet School's Ursula Moreton Choreographic Competition in 1994 and offered her a contract with Zurich Ballet, a company with a varied repertoire of contemporary and classical works.

"It was just one of those moments," she says. "At that point students were certainly not encouraged to go abroad."

Things might have shaped up very differently if Marston had gained a contract at the Royal Ballet. "They did offer jobs to some young choreographers with talent, but the problem was, I was the girl." And those were the days when "girl" and "choreographer" were not in the same bracket.

But Marston had not been forgotten in London. Darryl Jaffray, then director of education and access at the Royal Opera House, commissioned her to make small pieces while on her summer holidays from Zurich Ballet. "Anthony Dowell ended up seeing one and asked me to make a piece for Dance Bites. I ended up doing three pieces, which was brilliant."

Dance Bites was a brave, if not entirely successful, experiment by the Royal Ballet to tour small groups of top dancers in new works to the provinces. Dance Bites didn't change the modern ballet landscape, but it kept Cathy Marston's name on a list of choreographers to watch.

Ballet Black's Mthuthuzeli November in Cathy Marston's *The Suit*
Photo: Bill Cooper

Along with the opening of the revamped Opera House in 2000 came the Linbury Studio Theatre, a smaller space for a diverse range of dance, and more commissions for Marston. Among these works was *before the tempest … after the storm* (2004), a startlingly new treatment of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In it, two duets — one a prequel of Sycorax giving birth to Caliban, the other a sequel of Prospero releasing Ariel — are told in inventive movement, resulting in a post-modern work presented in the realm of high classicism.

In Britain, her innovative works on the small stage — often enjoying the luxury of commissioned music, top designers and excellent casts — continued to be shown at the Linbury. Then, in 2007, she was appointed director of Bern Ballett, in Switzerland, a post she held until 2013.

"In Bern, I started with a very small audience, one that really wasn't interested in narrative work — but that changed. The open rehearsals I offered were one of the key ways I made that transformation, because people could see the process and understand how the narrative was working when I focused the rehearsal in different ways. With people sitting in front of you, you can see how they're responding."

Audiences grew and one of her proudest achievements was saving Bern Ballett when closure was threatened.

Never conforming to a stereotype, Marston has been happy to sit somewhere between the ballet and contemporary worlds. "For a long time, people haven't known quite where to put me. Was I a reliable person to ask for a big piece for a ballet company? Was I not too classical for a contemporary company?"

It may be this non-conformist streak that delayed her rise to prominence: too modern for the classicists and too classical for the modernists.

There is also the "narrative" label.

Marston admits, "I resisted this for a long time because I didn't want to be put in a box. When I was younger, my pitch was that I could do abstract and narrative. But, as a director, you want to know what you're getting. I think the success I'm having now is because I'm in my own shoes, I know who I am as a choreographer. I am sure the female thing has got something to do with it, but I'm a certain age, with a certain amount of experience behind me — and narrative has come back into fashion."

Now, at 43, with her career building momentum, she is starting to experience the backing of major companies. "As soon as one or two big companies commission you, everyone comes calling."

When it's time to get to the work of creation, Marston seldom arrives at the studio with movement phrases prepared. "I go into the studio with the scenario and I write lists of words that describe the character or the emotion I am trying to express. The dancers and I talk through this list of words and then work on movement, so each character has a vocabulary," she says. "But I have always got the music [ready]; every bar and every note is counted through."

She shows me a music score covered in notes. "It's all very clearly laid out because I've usually worked with the composer. There are often limited funds for commissions and I might suggest working on a musical arrangement with a composer like Philip Feeney, which we will anchor with music of the period. For *Jane Eyre*, we used Fanny Mendelssohn's music. I try to cut down on props and make the set and costumes suggestive rather than illustrative."

Cathy Marston in rehearsal
Photo: Sasha Onyshchenko, courtesy of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens de Montréal

Marston finds that in terms of character, pointe work brings an extra level of expression, as she explains with regard to her Northern Ballet production of *Jane Eyre*.

"Jane Eyre is on pointe, but it's obvious to me that Bertha [Rochester's mad wife who is confined in the attic] is in bare feet. She's grounded and wild, whereas Jane has been squashed into this formal shape. And, quite honestly, on big stages pointe shoes give extra shape and a sort of vigour."

This fusion of techniques is evident, too, in her pas de

deux. "I use a mix of ballet in strength-based lifting and contact in counterbalance and momentum. This mix enables me to express characters and situations that wouldn't have been possible in a traditional ballet vocabulary."

When it comes to the story selection, Marston looks for something with a central thread to grip the audience's attention. In *Snowblind* (2018) — a 30-minute work created for San Francisco Ballet based on *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton's novel about a tragic love triangle — that thread was found in an element from nature. "The idea of the snow having its own personality and how that impacted on the relationships and the characters felt like a gift for dance. I'm looking for stories that have that little extra ingredient."

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a recent commission from Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, the extra element was coal: the compressed carbon hacked out of the earth, heaved around, burnt, becoming smoke and finally embers. The work was done by women during the First World War, the time of the D.H. Lawrence novel on which the ballet is based, and Marston found connections to Lady Chatterley coping with the physical weight of her husband, disabled in the war, and the emotional weight of a marriage breaking down. "I don't expect the audience to articulate this, but I hope they feel the clarity in the movement and the intention from the dancer," says Marston.

In *Jane Eyre*, Northern Ballet's artistic director David Nixon was not happy with a cast list that at first had only a few male roles. "I needed to find a way to use the corps de ballet, so I created an imaginary ensemble of men to express the gist of the story in an expressionistic way," she says. "I also play with who is telling the story: first person narrator or a chorus? I find, more and more, in each new ballet, that it's a chorus. So, two things: I'm looking at how the story can be told. Is it linear, is it in flashbacks, is it a sort of layers of time and memory? Dance can do all of this, if you're really on it with the structuring. And then I'm looking for what qualities the group might bring."

Victoria, Marston's fourth commission from Northern Ballet (in partnership with the coproducer, the National Ballet of Canada), is set to premiere at the company's home base in Leeds in March. "It's 100 years of world history so you've got to find your angle. I'm working with dramaturg Uzma Hameed; we've both done a lot of reading and research and spent a wonderful week together when my house was covered in post-its!"

Marston was drawn to the character of Beatrice, Queen Victoria's youngest child, charged on her mother's death with editing, one might say censoring, her hundreds of diaries. "So, the version we have of Victoria is actually from Beatrice, which makes this particular mother/daughter relationship very interesting," she says.

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal in Cathy Marston's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*
Photo: Sasha Onyschenko

Never conforming to a stereotype, Marston has been happy to sit somewhere between the ballet and contemporary worlds.

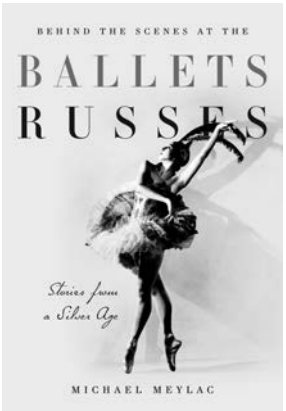
"I've looked at a fair number of stories that I know will present difficulties. Take *Hedda Gabler*, what a great character, so much passion, the repression, but then there is the stuff about money, and you just can't do it! The amount of bad mime and theatrical devices to get vaguely near that corner of the story just takes the point of it away for me."

What about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which Les Grands Ballets Canadiens premiered in September 2018 to ecstatic reviews? She describes the D.H. Lawrence novel as "a great story, about the body, about sensuality, but equally about the intellect and the mind. It seemed danceable in a narrative way and there was also an abstract level to it. The tension between class and between nature and industry added choreographic possibilities."

The 1928 book, controversial at the time for its frank depictions of sex and breaking of class conventions, brings different problems in the modern age. Marston mentioned a conversation with a fellow choreographer regarding the way the character of Lady Chatterley should be performed. "She was saying, 'Are you asking her to be sexy?' Well, how do you ask someone to be sexy? What is sexy? It's really difficult."

Marston expresses a concern that she might garner a Victorian label. But hearing about the many and varied projects (still under embargo at the time of filing this story) that she has coming up, I doubt this will be a problem. This is one choreographer successfully creating her own brand. DI

San Francisco Ballet in Cathy Marston's *Snowblind*
Photo: Erik Tomasson



BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE BALLETS RUSSES:
STORIES FROM A SILVER AGE
By Michael Meylac, translated by Rosanna Kelly
Foreword by Ismene Brown
I.B. Tauris Publishers
www.ibtauris.com

Michael Meylac, a Russian-born balletomane, came to his devotion after seeing Natalia Dudinskaya and Galina Ulanova at the Mariinsky Theatre as a young boy. He started his exploration of the Ballets Russes shortly after his release in 1987 from the Soviet gulag; he had been sent there because of his support of dissident writers. He travelled to France, where he became a Russian literature professor at the University of Strasbourg and translated Nabokov.

This English edition of *Behind the Scenes at the Ballets Russes*, first published in Russian in 2008, includes Meylac's interviews with 31 dancers and one company manager, Maria Kirillova de Fredericks from the Grand Ballet de Marquis de Cuevas. Of the dancers, two were English, and one each came from Australia, France and the United States, while the rest were Russian. Interviews occurred in Australia, Europe, the U.S., Russia and Latin America between 1989 and 2007. Meylac's adroit questions provoked lively responses, giving a clear sense of the strength of the émigrés comprising the exiled Russian ballet world.

Each interview opens with a quote from the dancers' comments, starting with Rachel Cameron's remembrance of Tamara Karsavina: "Her whole being shone with a marvelous inner beauty."

Cameron, an Australian dancer, had studied with Karsavina, a former partner to Vaslav Nijinsky and a mainstay of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in post Second World War London, which is where Cameron studied with her.

Alexandra Danilova, another of the interviewees, left Leningrad with George Balanchine and Tamara Geva in 1924 for what she thought would be a summer tour. When she decided to stay in Europe, she had the chance to join Diaghilev's company. Her pithy response to his suggestion that she audition was, "If I am good enough for the Mariinsky Theatre, I should be good enough for you."

During the Colonel de Basil era of the Ballets Russes, Balanchine insisted on having three barely teenage dancers, Tamara Toumanova, Tatiana Riabouchinska and Irina Baronova, featured in the reconstituted company. In Balanchine's *Cotillon* and Massine's *Jeux d'enfants*, their youth and technical facility electrified audiences. English dance historian Arnold Haskell dubbed them "the baby ballerinas," and, as Baronova says in the book, "That nickname stuck to us fast!"

In the last tumultuous years of the Ballets Russes — its final incarnation, the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, folded in 1962 — George Zoritch mentioned having been coached on a role by his partner, Nina Novak, during an actual performance. As Zoritch states, "I was able to step into a role at the last minute," clearly a necessary talent.

Meylac's love of ballet has gifted balletomanes with genuinely evocative reading, providing dancers' tidbits from this unforgettable ballet era. The preface contains a lineage of the Ballets Russes companies, emblematic of his thorough coverage. The book augments the 2005 *Ballets Russes* documentary by Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine, inspired by the 2000 Ballets Russes celebration in New Orleans, and featuring some of the same dancers Meylac interviewed.

— RENEE RENOUF

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Xuan Cheng Chases Classical Ballet

BY MARTHA ULLMAN WEST

A dancer's journey to Oregon Ballet Theatre

Xuan Cheng, wearing a rehearsal tutu and worn pointe shoes, lies cradling a guitar, seemingly unconscious, across the lap of another dancer. Cued by the sound of a horn, she wakes up, looks around, rises to her beautifully articulated feet and starts to run soundlessly on pointe, her whole body, including her face, projecting terror and bewilderment.

On an unseasonably warm day in mid-September, in Oregon Ballet Theatre's sunlit main studio, Cheng is learning to *be* Teresina, the determined heroine of Danish choreographer August Bournonville's 1842 ballet, *Napoli*, which opened the company's 29th season in early October.

Opening night in Portland's far-from-intimate Keller Auditorium, Cheng danced the story of the Neapolitan girl in love with a poor fisherman — in which she overcomes maternal opposition in Act I, an arrogant sea devil in Act II and accusations of witchcraft in Act III — with the same musicality, technical skill, attention to detail, intelligence and heart that characterize her performances in a wide swath of classical and contemporary ballets.

Over the seven years she has danced with Oregon Ballet Theatre, Cheng has inhabited, with every ounce of her five-foot-four body, such disparate parts as the title role in *Giselle,* the fleet, sparkling Dewdrop Fairy in Balanchine's *Nutcracker,* and the mysterious, wandering woman in William Forsythe's *The Second Detail.* She has danced a tragic Odette/Odile in former OBT artistic director Christopher Stowell's *Swan Lake*, and one who lives happily ever after in current artistic director Kevin Irving's idiosyncratic account of the same ballet.

In Nacho Duato's *Rassemblement*, Cheng cast classical placement aside, becoming a passionately protesting Haitian slave with every grieving muscle in her fine-tuned body, approaching the role with the same commitment to the technique, choreography and dramatic development that characterizes her preparation for traditional evening-length story ballets. And in Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, her joint-separating solo tells the audience exactly what that part of the ballet is all about.

"She is a workaholic, never resting on her laurels, and

Oregon Ballet Theatre's Peter Franc and Xuan Cheng in August Bournonville's *Napoli*
Photo: Jingzi Zhao

really and truly invested, mind, body and soul, in learning and growing with every opportunity," says Irving, who took over the company's leadership in 2013. "Every day. She sets a perfect example for the entire company — and is a total sweetheart at the same time. Her embrace of dance from sources as different as Bournonville, Forsythe and Duato makes her a tremendous asset to the company. In that as well, she sets a high bar for the company."

She was born in Chenzhou, China, and began her ballet training at age five. At 10, she started the Vaganova training program at the School of Guangzhou Ballet, compressing the eight-year curriculum into five years.

In addition to classical ballet, Cheng studied several Chinese dance forms as well as acting and character dance. "I was a baby ballerina in the school company," she says, laughing, somewhat ruefully, in an interview following rehearsal, keeping her feet warm in comfortable booties.

After graduating, she danced with Guangzhou Ballet, quite quickly becoming a principal dancer. It's also where she met Ye Li, who is now her husband.

In 2006, Édouard Lock offered her a contract with La La La Human Steps, and she headed to Montreal. "I wanted to get out of China and this was my bridge to the West," she says.

The company's contemporary aesthetic was also a bridge to new ways of moving, at first a difficult one for Cheng to cross; she still self-identified as a baby ballerina, Russian style at that.

"There was lots of athletic training, boxing, swimming," she says. "I developed very muscular arms and one day I looked in the studio mirror and burst into tears and said, 'I look like Popeye!'" Nevertheless, she soon embraced Lock's high-energy aesthetic and, in 2007, was cast in *Amjad,* in which Lock, Moroccan by birth, fused 19th-century European story ballet with what he called an "Orientalist" sensibility.

Critic Philip Szporer, writing in *The Dance Current*, said of Cheng's performance: "[She] embraces a theatrical sensuality and attack, with a crisp, technical precision. A strong core gives her freedom to execute Lock's quick turns, and the line, form and colour of her interpretation reveals her specific training … Refined and dynamic, her movement does not say 'watch me' but draws our eye nonetheless."

Cheng's dancing drew the eye of Gradimir Pankov, then artistic director of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens de Montréal**,** and in 2009 he offered both Cheng and Li contracts, enabling the couple to reunite. For the next two years, Cheng expanded her technical range in works by such diverse choreographers as Ohad Naharin, Jirí Kylián, Mats Ek, Mauro Bigonzetti and Christophe Maillot, in whose chic contemporary *Roméo et Juliette* she danced the title role. While both dancers respected the repertoire, according to Cheng they missed classical ballet.

In 2011, they came to Portland and took Stowell's class. "We fell in love right away with his artistry and the atmosphere of the company. He hired both of us and that is why we ended here."

Peter Franc and Xuan Cheng in Lev Ivanov's *Swan Lake*
Photo: Randall Milstein

For his part, Stowell was impressed by Cheng's "delicate and refined technique, tireless attention to detail and innate ability to make simple theatrical devices heartbreaking," he writes in an e-mail from Toronto, where he is now associate artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada. He adds, "She would happily spend hours [in the studio] refining the placement of a foot or subtlety of a glance."

Those qualities, plus her ability to develop and create a story ballet heroine, made her ideal for the role of Teresina. Possibly no technique in ballet is more delicate and refined than Bournonville's, and an evening-length ballet like *Napoli* certainly demands highly detailed performance of every step and every gesture to tell the complicated and fanciful story of lovers parted by a sea monster, then reunited by faith in God and each other.

"I have never prayed so much in my life," Cheng says. By mid-September, she and the rest of Oregon Ballet Theatre's dancers had been drilled relentlessly in the correct way to cross themselves, a small but important part of the highly detailed mime that is integral to this ballet, by stagers Frank Andersen, former artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet, and retired Royal Danish Ballet dancers Eva Kloborg and Dinna Bjørn, all of whom grew up with Bournonville technique.

Top left: Xuan Cheng in George Balanchine's *Nutcracker*
Photo: Blaine Truitt Covert

Below left: Xuan Cheng and Michael Linsmeier in Trey McIntyre's *Robust American Love*
Photo: Blaine Truitt Covert

Above right: Ansa Capizzi and Xuan Cheng in Nacho Duato's *Rassemblement*
Photo: James McGrew

All photos courtesy of Oregon Ballet Theatre

Andersen was delighted with the way the company absorbed the quick-footed, non-presentational technique, as well as the difficult mime, and particularly glad to be working with Cheng. "Xuan has ears like an elephant," he says, meaning she absorbs everything, from verbal instruction to music he says resembles a movie soundtrack, because it tells the story, too. Cheng's ability to be whatever person she is dancing, and to dance with heart, marks her as a true artist in his view.

Speaking with Cheng about how she views her roles, it's impressive to hear the amount of thought she puts into the development of each one, and the connection she makes between them. As Cheng understands Teresina, she is a real person, "fiery and brave and she strives, she's not like Giselle, who is frail," she explains. She compares Teresina with the American pioneer girl in Trey McIntyre's *Robust American Love*, a role she originated in 2013 and will dance again in June. When making the ballet, she says McIntyre kept reminding the dancers they were real people, and to move like them.

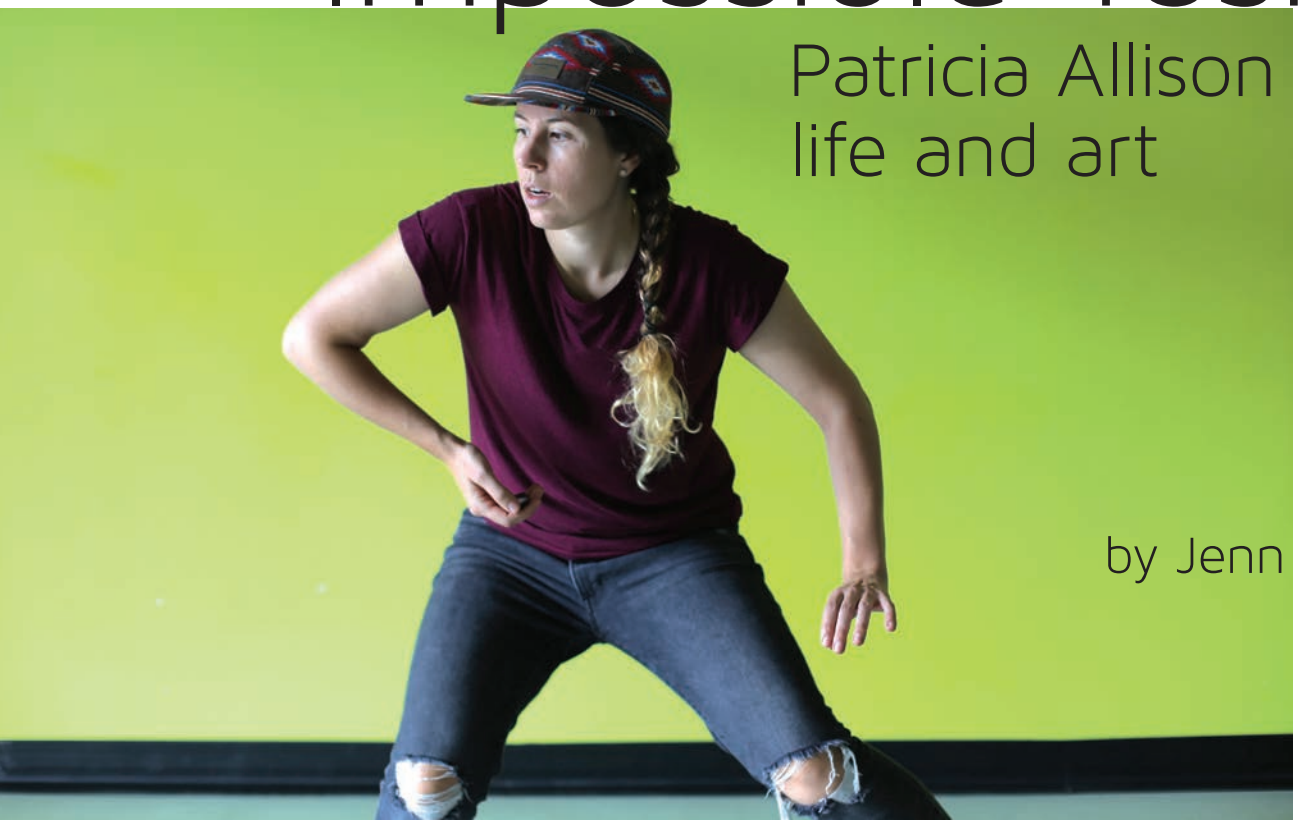
Cheng doesn't consider herself a workaholic, but she does seem to work all the time. During the summer 2018 hiatus, she and frequent Oregon Ballet Theatre partner Brian Simcoe spent six weeks guesting with Barak Ballet, the contemporary company founded by former New York City Ballet dancer Melissa Barak. They spent four weeks in Santa Monica making Barak's new work, *Cypher*, then performed at Los Angeles' Broad Stage, New York's Joyce Theater and Jacob's Pillow.

And four years ago, she and Li founded the Oregon International Ballet Academy. "We believe," Cheng says, "that we are not only teaching ballet, but we are passing on beauty, confidence, health, love and responsibility, inspiring the students to reach their dreams and future."

Li, now retired from performing, works full time at the academy; Cheng works there on weekends. "Teaching makes me a better dancer," she says. As for dancing itself, she is absolutely clear about why she works so hard: "I do it for the joy, for the process of working. I love it, to dance with my friends. OBT is my happiest place." *DI*

Impossible Tasks

Patricia Allison tackles life and art



by Jenn Edwards

Patricia Allison's choreography is a lot like the city she calls home: direct, complex, diverse and very human. She's been carving her own path as an independent artist in Toronto over the last eight years, working in dance, theatre and film. But extreme highs and lows have defined the past couple of years for the choreographer: she has been working toward a master of fine arts at York University, was recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and won a Dora Mavor Moore award in June for co-directing the play *pool (no water)* for Cue6 Theatre.

Born in Ottawa, Allison caught the theatre bug early and confesses to secretly wanting to be an actor as a child. While still in high school, she staged a show at the Ottawa Fringe Festival, intuitively layering movement and text in a way that echoes in her work to this day. Within the dance world, she has early memories of being inspired by Marie Chouinard's work, particularly the high production values that supported the very conceptual dance. The idea that a conceptual dance piece could be presented on the same technical scale as a mainstream play or musical opened up a world of possibilities in her mind, kickstarting her journey as a dance artist.

Allison studied for three years at École de danse contemporaine de Montréal. "I remember being at the audition, and I really respected the work of every person who walked in the door." Her instructors, including Marc Boivin, Linda Rabin and Tassy Teekman, tailored the curriculum to their students' interests. Those years in Montreal fostered a love for working collaboratively, which has served Allison well in Toronto, where she quickly found work after relocating there in 2010.

Allison often brings her choreographic eye to theatre. For instance, in 2017 she worked on Shakespeare in the Ruff's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in 2016 she and longtime collaborator Megan Watson staged *Far Away* by British playwright Caryl Churchill for the Toronto Fringe Festival. When not working with a script, Allison prefers to produce original physical theatre in collaboration with dancers, actors, musicians and lighting designers.

Text and personal narrative feature heavily in her creative processes. Often, she will start rehearsals by giving a topic or image to inspire 10 minutes of free writing, during which everyone must keep their pens moving on the page. This serves as a form of meditation, but the results might later inform the content of the work or even be made into dialogue. Free writing "is such a fruitful ground for generating material for later in the process, either in a direct or an indirect way," says Allison. Another common technique she uses is to assign verbs to the dancers, from which they create chunks of movement material that she then strings together and edits.

In Allison's experience, actors and dancers bring markedly different approaches to the creative process. Actors tend to be story-driven from the start, while dancers are less questioning and tend to jump right into movement without knowing what it may represent later onstage. "Actors have

Patricia Allison
Photo: Courtesy of Patricia Allison

Left: Allison Price, Daniel Roberts and Eva Barrie in Patricia Allison's *pool (no water)*
Photo: Samantha Hurley

Right: Patricia Allison and James Everett in Patricia Allison's *IMissYou*
Photo: Dahlia Katz

to give themselves a complete back story, whereas dancers won't ask for that until day two or three."

Allison's carefully crafted movement is imbued with a speech-like rhythm, even when not accompanied by actual spoken text. Each gesture or shape brims with intention, not just performed but experienced fully by the performer. There are moments when audience members are made to feel like voyeurs, not being entertained by a dancer but witnessing a person work through something. She's not afraid to be still and silent, to move glacier slow, to go on a rant, to be earnest or sentimental. She'll also throw in the odd ballet fifth position, pirouette or barrel jump into an otherwise conceptual work. Whatever serves the moment.

Allison's 2016 solo, *IMissYou*, jumps between jerky, urgent and sometimes grotesque dance vocabulary, heart-wrenching personal monologue and casual conversation with the audience. The work was performed at Hub 14, an intimate space in Toronto's vibrant Queen West neighbourhood. Set against a bare white wall to live acoustic guitar by James Everett, Allison physically and verbally rifles through autobiographical details surrounding the end of a relationship. Through choreography that taps into animalistic nurturing instincts, and monologues shedding light on the obsessive thoughts that can plague one's logical brain, the piece comments on the experience of being lost in a relationship. It's a vulnerable, highly relatable, feminist work.

Her own personal struggle also inspired a short film, *Grey Matter* (2018), created shortly after being diagnosed with MS at the age of 30. Using a projection of a giant brain, and layering footage of her smiling, pre-diagnosis self with poignant gestural movement performed by her present-day self, *Grey Matter* paints a courageous picture of a woman coming to terms with an uncertain future. The film was recently shown at Santa Barbara's 3 Minute Film Festival.

Allison is very open about the complications she experiences with MS. For instance, some days she inexplicably can't walk more than 100 metres and has no way of knowing whether or not it will be permanent. This openness about her condition, in person, in writing and on social media, has inspired unexpected support from the artistic community. "A lot of artists have MS and don't necessarily talk about it," she says. Through her own sharing, she has made connections with others who have the same condition. To open a gate for inclusion of all kinds, Allison always discloses her diagnosis on the first day of rehearsals for any artistic process.

Her personal experience with physical disability has also illuminated the need for integrated creation spaces and theatre work. "We, as an arts community, need to be pushing boundaries to integrate marginalized voices into the art we're making." This spring Allison began taking American Sign Language classes, inspired by her creative explorations with Dawn Jani Birley, a Deaf Canadian physical theatre performer, and a means of expanding her own understanding of narrative-based storytelling.

As an artist who continually defies categorization, it's fitting that her choreography for *pool (no water)* was recognized in the independent theatre category of the Dora

IMissYou is a vulnerable, highly relatable, feminist work.

awards. After winning Best of the Fringe in Toronto in 2015, *pool (no water)* was reworked for a run at the Citadel Theatre in October 2017. She won the award alongside co-director Jill Harper, with the play also taking home a statue for Best Ensemble Cast. The double win was such a surprise that no one had prepared a word of a speech for either category. Reflecting on the night, Allison says, "I want to be genuinely surprised always. I never want to get to a point in my career where I'm expecting to win."

The script for *pool (no water)* is one long stream of text by English playwright Mark Ravenhill. This open blueprint gave Allison and Harper the freedom to distribute lines and blocking among their five performers in ways that support the play's themes, such as guilt, jealousy and the politics of art, in abstract ways. At times the cast functions as one entity, while at others they are individuals with overlapping motives. The play is a wicked, rhythmic ride that seamlessly connects dance and theatre elements, often appearing like a moving painting.

Outside the studio, Allison recently celebrated her marriage to stage manager Tamara Protic. She also grounds herself in a multitude of interests beyond her artistic work. She's an avid tarot card reader. She has written two memoir pieces for *Intermission* online theatre magazine. And, for a season, Allison was a competitive weightlifter. For her, weightlifting and dancing are surprisingly similar feats. "When you're dancing, you're trying to do an impossible task. Dancing in its ephemeral form is impossible to fully do because you can always do better. It's the exact same thing with weightlifting. It's a never-ending practice. It gave me a kind of meditation that is incomparable in terms of how much you have to focus."

One ongoing interest is reworking classical dance pieces to take them in a more progressive direction. In 2010, she created a physical theatre adaptation of *Cinderella*, and for her master's thesis project she is staging a feminist dance theatre version of *Giselle*.

"While I love all these classic works, I don't think that we can use the guise of tradition to hide behind while keeping the work patriarchal and oppressive. I think we can honour the original work while moving it forward," she says.

Exploring what is still relevant about *Giselle* today, Allison used the personal experiences of the dancers, along with her own original text, to deconstruct the ballet's narrative arc and build a new work from the ground up. (I was one of the dancers in early research, so have first hand knowledge of this.)

Whether working to make the performing arts more accessible for Deaf audiences, baring her feelings over a breakup, mining the classics for relevant contemporary themes or opening up about her health, Patricia Allison thrives on realness and connectivity. Her work, like her way of speaking, is clear, bold and articulate without being the least bit pretentious.

As Allison says, "We grow as a community, and you grow in relationship with your audience, when you share a part of yourself … Cultivate a little empathy and create a little closeness in the world." DI

REIMAGINING POLE DANCE

Performance art that fuses pole work and dance

BY REBECCA KARPUS

She begins on the floor, curled in a ball as though fast asleep. In sweats and socks, she traces circles with her limbs, building breath and momentum to arrive on her knees. Arms stretching to the sky, she grasps the pole. With ease, she lifts herself up, arm and back muscles gloriously engaged, and spins around the pole, feet first and torso arched back in a stag position. It is reminiscent of a graceful ballroom sequence or ice-skating spin, yet there is no dance partner or ice. Finishing the spin, she returns to the floor as grounded as at the beginning.

Samantha Gray
Photo: Nick Mui

"Contemporary dance is always pushing boundaries and delving into topics that make people uncomfortable, and pole is one of many great ways to do that." — Samantha Gray

Samantha Gray, the contemporary pole dancer in the opening description, is reimagining this ever-controversial form of dance. Gray studied rhythmic gymnastics and ballet while growing up in Vancouver, later branching out into contemporary dance, including choreographic composition and contact improvisation. When she was finally introduced to pole, she was astonished by what she calls the "added dimensionality of movement," approaching the pole as an apparatus of extension, enhancing her movement possibility.

Adding the use of a pole, she says, enriches choreographic exploration. Classical ballet traditionally favours one (usually frontal) angle that has the performers facing the audience, and while contemporary dance forms typically include floor work and extensive use of back space, pole pushes the notion of dimensionality even further by adding extraordinary height into the equation. Rapid rotation on a specialized spin pole is also possible. Gray enjoys playing with the possibilities presented by the pole and her training, such as imagining the pole as a floor surface and attempting to do contemporary-styled floor work on it, or seeing it as a partner.

Contrary to common assumption, Gray believes there is a strong relationship between pole and contemporary dance. "Contemporary dance is always pushing boundaries and delving into topics that make people uncomfortable," she notes, "and pole is one of many great ways to do that." Although pole is usually performed solo, Gray looks to a future that includes more partner and even group exploration, concentrating on contact improvisation, rather than today's more popular acrobatic style.

Currently, Gray is a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, exploring the psychology of behavioural change, with a background in kinesiology. Jane Bull, a pole instructor and lawyer on Vancouver Island, was Gray's first instructor and followed a similar career trajectory, studying ballet and contemporary before making the decision to pursue academics over dance upon high school graduation.

In addition to teaching pole fitness classes, Bull also choreographs for competitions and performances. She believes in a collaborative choreographic process, and likes to involve both professional contemporary choreographers and pole experts. The fusion breaks potential movement clichés and, she finds, allows mutual appreciation and inspiration.

Bull feels the pole community can be a "positive environment for women to reclaim their creativity and dance skills," especially with showcases and competitions that encourage self-made pieces versus hiring a professional pole choreographer to create a routine. The pole community can also be considered a supportive place for many different body types; pole is physically demanding, but unlike ballet it does not discredit bulky muscle and is arguably easier on the joints, since most choreography is in the air on the pole and not pounding against the floor.

Mallory Linda at a Pole Sport competition
Photo: Alloy Images

Jane Bull feels the pole community can be a "positive environment for women to reclaim their creativity and dance skills."

Bull is also an advocate of pole as a vehicle of creative expression for former amateur and professional dancers of all genres. "It's a struggle when you leave dance, because you don't leave behind the love for art."

Mallory Linda, a Vancouver-based pole instructor who grew up studying several forms of dance, says that returning to ballet classes later in life was frustrating as her body could not work at the same technical level it used to. Pole, on the other hand, was a new beginning in which she could seamlessly incorporate her passion and knowledge of dance.

Another former ballet dancer, Elena Gibson, who danced with the National Ballet of Canada and Bavarian State Ballet, has achieved celebrity status in her transition to pole dance after injury. She can be seen in countless videos online, tutu and pointe shoe-clad, performing pole to Tchaikovsky.

With an influx of dancers and other creative artists, pole as art is evolving rapidly. What once was an underground activity has recently been ushered into the world of contemporary and performance art, being performed as installations in art galleries and with live musicians.

Kristy Sellars, an Australian poler and founder of a studio franchise called PhysiPole, is a leader in the artistic development of pole with her multimedia performances. Although often presented in competition settings, she refers to them as "shows" and implements a technique she calls projection mapping. Recruiting American tech "whiz kid" Ryan Talbot, Sellars has created numerous pieces that display complex moving projections on an upstage cyclorama, with which she interacts. An example is Sellars holding her weight mid-pole and suspending her legs as though running, while a fast-moving pan of landscape images behind her augments the illusion of travelling. The way in which she marries storytelling, pole, projection and music is inventive and intelligent. Akin to a professional actor, she delves deep into the characters she creates for her shows, knowing what they eat, where they live and their personality traits.

Like many polers, Sellars uses pole competitions as a setting to perform and promote her work. In most competitions, pole is referred to as a sport and is dictated by official rules and regulations that legitimize its hopeful future Olympic status. By contrast, Pole Theatre is an international competition that is unique in its purpose. Lauren Sarah, national organizer of the 2018 inaugural Pole Theatre Canada event in Edmonton, explains that the competition promotes "more relaxed rules … to enable competitors to focus on the art of performance." Original routines are encouraged, emphasizing creativity with partnering, props, backdrops and other production elements.

Jane Bull using aerial silks in *Eclipse,* produced by Electra Pole Art Productions
Photo: Lynda Allen

There are four categories, including classique (incorporating the exotic roots of pole, full nudity not permitted), comedy (incorporating humorous elements), drama (incorporating a storyline) and art (incorporating an artistic element, such as another dance style). Sarah adds that the art and drama categories have attracted a large number of trained dancers of all forms, and while the pole community does not want to erase its exotic history, "pole dancers today have the freedom to choose what kind of pole dancer they want to be." Exotic dancers have pioneered pole as a practice — without their work, pole would likely not exist today in its varied recreational and theatrical styles and possibilities. Women who practise pole as an athletic and artistic pursuit are benefitting from exotic dancers' groundwork.

Tammy Morris understands the politics of pole well. She began exotic dancing during her college years in Victoria, B.C., attracted to the pay, and ended up travelling the world in the field, particularly in Japan. Approximately a decade later, in 2004, Morris retired and opened a pole studio in Vancouver, inspired by the concept of recreational pole fitness she first saw on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

What Morris did not realize at the time of Tantra Fitness' opening was that within six months they would outgrow the original space and become the city's largest pole studio. Although a success story, Morris shares that it was not an easy process. Ten to 15 years ago, sponsorships were challenging to find due to the seemingly ever-present stigma of the form's relationship to exotic performance. In 2007, Morris founded the Canadian Pole Fitness Association in an effort to advance the form by introducing certification and training guidelines, including safety protocols. Morris would like the pole to be seen simply as an apparatus, a vertical metal pole without negative connotation.

Marlo Fisken, American poler and creator of lifestyle company Flow Movement, considers the word pole itself to be problematic. She prefers calling pole dancers experimentalists, movement investigators or, simply, artists. Her teachings centre around the concept of authenticity, simple movement that feels good in one's body, and on having an immersive experience. These qualities evoke a more natural context, more closely related to contemporary dance than the usual way pole is imagined. Fisken has a background in commercial dance, and works with concepts in her movement and choreography that "feed the goal of heightened sensitivity to movement and awareness."

Simply, pole is a form of fitness and art that, like dance, encourages unlimited creative possibilities. Like pointe shoes, the pole functions as a technical tool that adds options to a dancer's movement vocabulary. Pole can be a novel and therapeutic creative outlet for current and retired dancers of all forms. However, there is still much progress to be made in terms of scope. In addition to the current performance opportunities offered at competitions, many pole artists wish to grow the pole performance scene. They desire to elevate pole to the same theatrical level as dance or any other performing art by providing professional lighting, and sound and costume design, in a formal theatre setting.

Bull recently co-founded Electra Pole Art Productions with Linley Faulkner, which presented its first production in Victoria last November at the Metro Studio Theatre. *Eclipse* celebrated the diversity of pole and aerial arts, with performances ranging in styles, including exotic and contemporary. It is the hope for these pole dancers to eventually fuse the theatrical conventions and audiences of pole and dance, considering the fusion of pole and dance itself has been in momentum for years. DI

GUYS AND DOLLS WITH AN AERIAL TWIST

Bringing pole dance to musical theatre

BY JENNIFER SURATOS

This past summer, I delved into the Tony-award winning *Guys and Dolls* to search for an innovative way to tell the story. The show premiered on Broadway in 1950, was adapted into a film in 1955, and has had successful revivals on Broadway, in London's West End and beyond. Our show, produced by Vancouver's Fighting Chance Productions and presented at the Waterfront Theatre, included many traditional elements: Damon Runyon's memorable cast of characters; the romance between high-roller Sky Masterson and prudent Sister Sarah Brown; and Frank Loesser's iconic score with songs such as *Luck be A Lady*, *Take Back Your Mink* and *Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat*. But I wanted to give this classic American musical a twist. That twist presented itself in the art of pole dancing.

My directing concept was two-fold: first, I wanted to highlight women. I cast females in the typically male roles of mob boss Joey Biltmore, street cop Lieutenant Brannigan and a couple of high-stakes gamblers. Second, I wanted to set the show in a bleak, gritty locale. The 1930s setting was one filled with unemployment, bankruptcy and the threat of losing everything with one roll of the dice.

When performer Sari Rosofsky joined the production, she volunteered her own pole, as well as her talents as a competitive pole dancer. Incorporating pole dancing into a Broadway classic seemed implausible, but the idea quickly gained traction. Her pole was freestanding, so it did not need to be drilled into the stage and could stand with its top accessible and uncovered.

Co-choreographers Rachael Carlson and Amanda Lau worked to ensure that the pole moves helped tell a cohesive narrative. We liaised with music director Marquis Byrd so that the aerial manoeuvres worked to enhance the music. Set designer Chris Hall created pole "toppers" to signify different venues: a gas lamp to indicate city streets, a neon sign for the Hot Box nightclub, and palm leaves and coconuts for Havana.

Rosofsky infused basic scene transitions with pole dance moves such as the slowly spinning Genie and the upside-down Dragon Tails, which added visual interest, and continued to tell the story in a new and interesting way.

The climax of the show takes the audience from the streets of New York to its sewers below. The 24-hour crap game is about to come to a head, as Sky rolls his fellow gamblers one last bet. If he wins, they all attend a meeting at the Save-A-Soul Mission. If he loses, he pays them each $1,000, and loses his only chance at love.

To highlight the mounting tension, we featured the pole for a longer amount of time. Rosofsky performed bigger fanfares and flourishes, with moves like the Extended Butterfly, where she hung inverted and perpendicular to the pole, or the Tammy, another inversion, but this time where she gripped the pole with crossed thighs only, leaving her arms free as she spun facing and almost parallel to the floor. These various twists, passes and aerial stunts heightened the danger onstage, as the characters risk everything on a single high-stakes bet.

By blending contemporary aerial moves into the timeless tale of *Guys and Dolls*, we found a new and entertaining way to tell the story. The incorporation of the pole enhanced the overall singing, dancing and storytelling, and confirmed that even a classic piece of musical theatre can find new life with the exciting and innovative addition of pole dancing. DI

Pole "toppers," used to indicate three different locations, designed by Chris Hall, from Jennifer Suratos' production of *Guys and Dolls*
Photos: Courtesy of Jennifer Suratos

"CREATE, COMMUNICATE, COLLABORATE"

Healthy Dancer Canada's 10th anniversary conference

BY GDALIT NEUMAN

Ten years to the day of its inception in 2008, Healthy Dancer Canada opened what would turn out to be a packed two-and-a-half-day conference at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto. HDC's membership includes dancers, students, educators, healthcare professionals and researchers from around the world, with all groups well represented at this year's conference. In addition to formal talks, interactive workshops, casual panels, poster exhibits and dance performances by both emerging and established dance artists, conference organizers allocated just enough time for anniversary celebrations and networking with like-minded professionals.

A highlight was York University professor emerita and Healthy Dancer Canada co-founder Donna Krasnow's keynote, *Practical Steps in Communication and Collaboration Among Dancers, Educators, Researchers and Health Professionals* (co-written with Virginia Wilmerding). It emphasized the importance of teamwork among medical practitioners, dance teachers, choreographers and the dancers themselves in order to create optimal environments for dancer growth, wellness and injury prevention.

Krasnow also discussed the use of imagery to facilitate effective and efficient movement patterns. Imagery, she noted, often has little to do with what is realistically occurring physiologically. However, when utilized well, it can be a powerful tool, providing dancers with important information on bodily sensations, movement initiation, qualities and textures. These, in turn, translate to optimal muscular use.

To illustrate this, Krasnow provided the familiar example of a teacher asking a student to extend their leg to the front by "lifting the leg from the back" when, in actuality, it is the hip flexors at the front of the body that are used to elevate the leg. Following her presentation, Krasnow received the HDC Lifetime Achievement Award.

Physiotherapist Erika Mayall and ballet teacher Astrid Sherman contributed a workshop titled *Death of the*

Top: Murphy Dance Company's Amber Downie-Back and Tamar Tabori in *Murphy*

Bottom left: Terrill Maguire, Arwyn Carpenter and Claudia Moore in *DiG (Dance in the Garden)*

Bottom right: Justin Cancino leading a Krump lecture-workshop, Andrea Downie in background

All photos: Luca Papini, courtesy of Healthy Dancer Canada

Classical Port de Bras: A Generational Problem. Working collaboratively at the Pro Arté Centre in North Vancouver, the pair has identified a trend of rounded shoulders in adolescent dancers, thought to be provoked by a spike in the use of personal devices. Together, they have devised a program to enhance dancers' arm and upper body articulation, co-ordination and overall strength.

Beginning with teacher tips and tricks at the barre, Sherman demonstrated correct hand placement, and suggested incorporating supported allongé at the end of exercises, as well as additional port de bras, including épaulement, to barre work. She then guided workshop participants through a series of arm and upper body strengthening and mobility exercises, both with and without a theraband.

One theraband exercise had participants standing, holding the band in both hands, with the elbows bent at 90 degrees, so that the band was horizontal and parallel with the ground. Participants were then asked to externally rotate at both shoulder joints simultaneously, with the added resistance from the band. Maintaining this outward rotation for several seconds before retreating provides an additional opportunity to increase endurance in this position, which, when combined with stretching exercises at the front of the shoulder joint, can begin to correct rounded shoulders.

Physiotherapist Erika Mayall and ballet teacher Astrid Sherman have identified a trend of rounded shoulders in adolescent dancers, thought to be provoked by a spike in the use of personal devices.

York University dance department faculty member Jennifer Bolt presented *PRIMED for Transition — PRIMED for Life*, in which she explored pedagogical solutions to the complex web of potential psychological and emotional challenges faced by post-secondary dance students as they transition from high school to college or university. By subdividing this period into four stages (separation, transition, incorporation and transformation) and splitting strategies into three realms (social, psychosocial and cognitive), Bolt provided educators with an understanding of the issues at hand and useful techniques to encourage persistence, resilience, internal motivation and excellence (the PRIMED acronym) in their students.

Bolt spoke of avoiding learning paralysis by encouraging a growth mindset, thus advocating for an inclusive, positive and progressive space in which students are challenged to work to their fullest potential while cultivating a learning environment where communication, collaboration and peer mentorship can happen.

Karen Sudds and Sheahan Keinick, from Crossings Dance school in Calgary, presented *The Effects of Neuromuscular Conditioning on Landing Progressions in Ballet Technique*, based on Sudds' thesis research. Their collaboration incorporated a well-known sports training protocol for jumps and landings into classes of adolescent dancers. Conference attendees were able to learn about Sudds' work in theory, and also to try out some of the protocol for themselves. Afterward, ballet teacher Keinick showed how concepts learned in the protocol could be directly applied to a ballet class.

Notwithstanding the distinctions in sports-orientated exercises for jumping and landing, which use different postures and sources of momentum than do jumps in a dance context, Sudds' results highlight the benefits of teaching functional jumping and landing techniques to dancers. They improve lower leg strength and endurance, as well as biomechanical patterning for take-offs and landing through neuromuscular training. They also introduce cross-training, which promotes overall dancer health and cardiovascular conditioning.

In a post-workshop chat, Keinick noted that these sports techniques provide dancers with a sense of flight they may find difficult to attain in stylized dance jumps alone.

Overall, I was impressed with the quantity and quality of work being done around dancer health and wellness by a myriad of professionals in interrelated fields. One example is the work of Linda Bluestein, an integrated pain specialist from Wisconsin. Her talk, *What Every Dancer and Dance Educator Needs to Know about Hypermobility Disorders*, introduced attendees to this complex yet common phenomenon.

Describing the spectrum of diagnoses, from asymptomatic joint hypermobility to three types of symptomatic hypermobility disorders, and their diverse causes, Bluestein acknowledged the aesthetic benefits of hypermobility for dancers, but noted its disadvantages, which result in a predisposition to injury and fatigue. Dancers with hypermobility disorder may additionally experience pain, anxiety and sleeping disorders, as well as gastrointestinal and cardiovascular symptoms.

As this last example demonstrates, there is often a disconnect between aesthetic considerations of the art form and biomechanical limitations of the body. The more we educate ourselves using dance science, the clearer our priorities will be with regards to ethical considerations and teaching philosophies going forward. DI

DANCENOTES

Strictly Candoco

England's Candoco Dance Company was the first contemporary group to appear on *Strictly Come Dancing*, broadcast last November on BBC One. The company of disabled and non-disabled dancers partnered with the popular TV series' regular professional dancers in a choreography by former judge Arlene Phillips. The work was set to David Bowie's *Life on Mars*, using contemporary, ballroom and Latin styles.

Candoco Dance Company in rehearsal for *Strictly Come Dancing*
Photo: Camilla Greenwell

100 Solos

A Cunningham Event on April 16, 2019, on what would have been Merce Cunningham's 100th birthday, takes place in three cities with three distinct performances. In *Night of 100 Solos: A Centennial Event*, the Barbican in London, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York and UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance in Los Angeles will each present a 75-minute show comprised of 100 solos choreographed by Cunningham. There will be a livestream allowing anyone anywhere to experience each venue's performance in real time. Learn more at www.mercecunningham.org.

Merce Cunningham in *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three*, 1951
Photo: Gerda Peterich

ORDERS OF CANADA

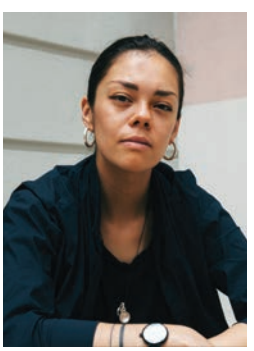
Bengt Jörgen and Jean Grand-Maître have been invested into the Order of Canada. Jörgen was cited for his commitment to promoting ballet in Canada as a choreographer and artistic director of Ballet Jörgen, and Grand-Maître for his creative contributions as a choreographer and for his leadership as artistic director of Alberta Ballet.

PRIX DE LA DANSE

Choreographer Crystal Pite is the winner of the 2018 Prix de la danse de Montréal's Grand Prix (a $25,000 cash prize). Louise Bédard was awarded a Prix Interprète ($10,000). Other awards went to Francine Bernier, the executive and artistic director of Agora de la Danse; Dena Davida, curator and educator at Tangente; and Cas Public dance company.

LEE AWARD

Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity awarded Andrea Peña the 2018 Clifford E. Lee Choreography Award, which is open to Canadian dance artists and companies. Peña, who was born in Bogota, Colombia, and lives in Montreal, will receive a cash prize of $14,000 for the commission of a new work and the support of two residencies at Banff Centre.



Andrea Peña
Photo: Bobby Leon

Fairy-Tale Queen

Eventyrdronningen (The Fairy-Tale Queen) **is at the royal Amalienborg Palace in central Copenhagen until May 19, 2019. The exhibition displays a large selection of costumes and scenographic designs created by Queen Margrethe II from 1982 to the present.**

Sketches and parts of costumes designed by Queen Margrethe II for Bournonville's *A Folk Tale* at the Royal Danish Theatre
Photo: Kamilla Bryndum

Dinna Bjørn's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* shot from the wings at the Tivoli Pantomime Theatre with Queen Margrethe II's costumes for a rocking horse and dancing flames in foreground
Photo: Kamilla Bryndum

POUFFER AT RAMBERT

Benoit Swan Pouffer is the new artistic director for Rambert, Britain's oldest dance company, following the 16-year tenure of Mark Baldwin. Pouffer grew up in Paris and is a former principal with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. During his decade at the helm of Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet in New York, the company had a strong reputation for its dancers and diverse contemporary repertoire.

ACOSTA AT BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET

Carlos Acosta will be the new director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, starting January 2020. Current director David Bintley will stand down in July 2019 at the end of the current season. Born in Havana, Acosta has enjoyed a celebrated 30-year career with many of the world's leading ballet companies. He was a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet for 17 years and danced all the major classical, and many contemporary, roles. Since retiring from the Royal Ballet he founded Acosta Danza in Cuba. His 2007 autobiography *No Way Home* tells the story of his progress from the poorest of beginnings in Cuba to world ballet star.

WAGNER-BERGELT AT WUPPERTAL

Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch has a new artistic director, Bettina Wagner-Bergelt, former co-director at Bavarian State Ballet. Wagner-Bergelt will be placing a strong emphasis on Bausch's legacy in the context of developing both new formats and of participative educational projects. Ensuring a living repertoire, she says, "requires intensive dramaturgical work with the legacy and thus a deeper collaborative relationship with the Pina Bausch Foundation when it comes to new works created by invited artists and guest choreographers, who will explore the wealth of pre-existing material to create something new — as radical and questioning as Pina Bausch."

Bettina Wagner-Bergelt
Photo: Claudia Kempf

MICHAEL CRABB'S

Notebook

The kerfuffle this past holiday season over the banning by a number of North American broadcasters of the popular song *Baby, It's Cold Outside* prompted reflection on the double standard by which cultural artifacts are held to account in this hyper-sensitized age of gender realignment.

The call-and-response song, written by Frank Loesser in 1944, was a personal party piece for the American *Guys and Dolls* composer and his wife, Lynn Garland. The latter was allegedly miffed when her husband sold the rights to MGM. The song's subsequent inclusion in the 1949 romantic comedy *Neptune's Daughter* turned it into an Academy Award-winning popular hit, closely associated with Christmas because of its repeated reference to winter weather.

Loesser's lyrics offer us an amorous couple. The woman has dropped by the man's apartment, but when she suggests with obviously little conviction that it's time to go, he urges her to stay. The line that has now earned the condemnation of today's self-appointed judges is the woman's, "Say what's in this drink?" Never mind that in the movie the song is performed a second time by a different couple, with the gender roles reversed.

Now, think for a moment about classical ballet, even in some of its more contemporary expressions. There is the gratuitously drawn-out rape scene in John Neumeier's 1983 version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. And in Kenneth MacMillan's 1974 *Manon*, see what happens when a woman tries to climb her way out of poverty in a world of patriarchal power: she ends up being forced to satisfy a horny jailor. How about John Cranko's 1969 *The Taming of the Shrew*? What about the philandering Albrecht in *Giselle*? He lives, she dies. Then we have that dumb monologue about stereotypical differences between men's and women's brains in Medhi Walerski's 2011 *Petite Cérémonie* for Ballet BC. But that was post-postmodern irony, right? Please don't groan.

As has repeatedly been observed, women in narrative ballets often exist at the behest and whims of men. They are fetishized Romantic fantasies, victims or "fallen women." Every now and then, they get to trick the men or forcefully assert themselves, like Swanilda in *Coppélia*, Kitri in *Don Quixote* or Tatiana in the final moments of Cranko's *Onegin* — although at a male-instigated emotional cost made clear in the original Pushkin novella.

One could argue that classical ballet's gender imbalances are genetic, physically embedded in the patriarchal codes, rituals and social assumptions of a bygone era; that they are still visible in the way classically trained dancers are mostly expected to interact onstage is hardly surprising given how men still predominate as power brokers, artistic directors and choreographers. (As a sidenote, Boston Conservatory at Berklee is challenging traditional gender constructs by inviting its ballet students to explore whatever mode of movement interests them via the simple process of calling a spade a spade and appropriately renaming some of its classes; thus Constructed Gender Identities in Classical Ballet: Men's Variations. The same qualifier is being applied to women's variations and pas de deux classes.")

Why is there not stronger pushback against an art form that too often perpetuates outdated and retrogressive representations of women? Why, you

might ask, do the women in ballet appear to accept them?

We return to that double standard.

Frank Loesser wrote popular songs with the goal of having lucrative hits. Any suggestion that ballet should be commercially motivated is, however, viewed with suspicion (although Diaghilev certainly didn't want to lose money and Matthew Bourne — of male *Swan Lake* fame — no doubt has few objections to making it).

In contrast, ballet likes to position itself as a "high" art, akin to opera, classical theatre and what the CBC used to refer to as "serious music."

Ballet claims to aspire to a higher purpose. Like broccoli, it is said to be good for us, thus justifying the infusion of taxpayers' dollars into the institutions that provide it; although it's instructive to note that the vast majority of people, whether forced to pay for it or not, pass through life oblivious of ballet without apparent damage to their health.

But should not the institutions underwritten to varying degrees from the public purse have an even greater obligation to contribute in a positive way to the ongoing struggle for real gender equality?

To be fair, some do. They engage choreographers who reject or intentionally subvert conventional gender roles. Most of those choreographers are male, though there is a push, sometimes sincere rather than motivated by political correctness, to commission more women. It's an artistic form of affirmative action. That, however, is a Band-Aid solution, not a remedy. The pervasive residue of historic patriarchy within so much of what is still presented uncritically and unrevised on ballet stages has to be thoroughly uprooted. We don't have to ditch ballet's cultural artifacts, but we should at least acknowledge them for what they are and learn how we can do better. DI

THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CUBA'S FÉLIX RODRÍGUEZ

Ballet master and first character dancer

BY GIGI BERARDI

The National Ballet of Cuba has thrived for decades within a national system very different from that of most ballet companies in North America. The centrally planned economy prioritizes the arts despite serious economic challenges. Below is a glimpse into the life of one of the company's longstanding dancers.

On a hot November afternoon in the National Ballet of Cuba's large and airy Havana studios, company class is over and the rehearsal for *La Bayadère* begins. Ballet master and rehearsal director Félix Rodríguez asks some of the principals to repeat a phrase. Members of the corps stand on the side watching as Rodríguez coaches the dancers in the company's hallmark precise yet emotional dancing.

Like most other National Ballet of Cuba dancers, Rodríguez trained in the company's National Ballet School before becoming a member of the corps. Later, as a principal, he was a captivating danseur noble, performing leading roles in classic and contemporary ballets to great acclaim. Since 1996, he has been ballet master and is now also a first character dancer.

Rodríguez is proud to be teaching in the school. It is impossible to talk about the National Ballet of Cuba, he believes, without talking about its school. "The future of the company is in the new generations, so it is important to nurture them. Our school creates its own identity by learning about and appreciating other styles, yet staying true to our artistic vision."

In rehearsal, Rodríguez concentrates on each dancer. He pays attention to skill and intent, and coaches for both. A staff member plays taped music from the balcony; it is scratchy, but the dancers make do.

His class is also part of Rodríguez's own preparation as a character dancer. "Teaching is the task that life has given me. I teach, I rehearse and I learn from the dancers as much as they learn from me."

Rodríguez' favourite role is Doctor Coppélius because, through this character, "I can create an emotional, imaginary world for the audience. Coppélius bares his soul to the viewers, and the audience can feel the true emotional weight."

He is not shy in discussing the challenges of being a dancer in Cuba: "I must say that over the course of my career I have had to overcome many difficulties, but one of the most important has been the male chauvinism of Cuban society. One needs to develop sufficient emotional intelligence to be able to live in such an artistic environment."

Rodríguez plans to continue with the company "as long as life allows it. I have dedicated my dancing life to the Ballet Nacional de Cuba."

He was recently seen onstage in *Giselle* as the Prince of Courtland (father to Bathilde) during the International Havana Ballet Festival Alicia Alonso. DI

Félix Rodríguez in the National Ballet of Cuba's *Giselle*
Photo: Nancy Reyes

ROCÍO MOLINA STAGES MOTHERHOOD

A flamenco performance that celebrates pregnancy

BY JUSTINE BAYOD ESPOZ

Over the past decade, many flamenco enthusiasts have had the pleasure of watching Rocío Molina grow from a talented young dancer into a fully realized, controversial artist. Molina has been widely considered a flamenco dance prodigy ever since she was awarded Spain's National Dance Prize at age 26. It was after receiving this award — usually reserved for those who have demonstrated lifelong achievement in dance — that Molina began to consolidate a style of choreography and storytelling that is entirely her own.

Molina's career has always been deeply personal. Her romantic partners have often accompanied her onstage, literary and artistic interests have informed the aesthetics of her performance, and her personal preoccupations have provided subject matter for some of her groundbreaking work. However, her most recent production, *Grito Pelao* (*Guttural Scream*), is possibly Molina's most personal to date.

Grito Pelao is Molina's homage to motherhood. She began creating the show in 2017 after a chance meeting on an airplane with Spanish singer Sílvia Pérez Cruz. Both women were fans of one another's work and decided a collaboration was in order.

"We began working together in the studio with a lot of improvisation, her with her voice, and me with my body. We began with nothing other than my desire to become pregnant guiding us," says Molina.

Throughout her work with Pérez Cruz, Molina was undergoing preparation for invitro fertilization. On her first try, Molina became pregnant with the help of an anonymous sperm donor, and as her life began to change, so did the production they were creating. Now there was a focus on her changing body, her fears and expectations, plus the experience of other mothers, including that of Pérez Cruz and Molina's own mother, ex-classical dancer Lola Cruz, who has become an integral third character in the production.

Molina is currently single and at the height of her career, which seems an odd time to begin a family. "Having a child is something I have desired for the last five years," says Molina, who is now in her mid-30s. "If I prioritize my dancing over my personal life, it's no longer worthwhile being an artist, I'd no longer feel inspired or motivated."

Molina gave birth in late 2018, and enjoyed her newborn at home for a few months before hitting the road with her daughter to begin touring an earlier work and ode to feminism *Caída del Cielo* (*Fallen from Heaven*).

As for *Grito Pelao*, its run officially ended at the Chaillot National Theatre in Paris on October 11, 2018. "I stopped performing *Grito Pelao* when I was eight months pregnant and was no longer able to dance," explains Molina, who spent most of her pregnancy touring Europe with the production.

"I've always liked the idea that the work dies when I give birth," she adds regarding *Grito Pelao*'s permanent demise. "I can't talk about pregnancy if I no longer have the baby inside of me." DI

Rocío Molina, Lola Cruz and Sílvia Pérez Cruz in Rocío Molina's *Grito Pelao*
Photo: Christophe Raynaud DeLage

Alan and Blanche Lund, October 1954
Photo: Geoffrey Frazer, courtesy of Dance Collection Danse

Blanche Lund 1921–2018

Blanche (Harris) Lund, who worked in television, film and theatre as a dancer and choreographer, died in Orillia, Ontario, on December 1, 2018, at the age of 97. With her husband Alan Lund, she performed in hotel floorshows in their native Toronto and in Montreal in the 1930s.

During the Second World War, the couple entertained troops in Europe as lead dancers in the revue *Meet the Navy*. At the end of the war, Blanche contracted polio and was told she would never dance again, but by the late 1940s, the Lunds were performing at the London Palladium and became household names in the 1950s on CBC TV variety shows.

While raising their four sons, Blanche ran the Lunds' dance studio in Thornhill, Ontario. Alan Lund, who was director of the Charlottetown Festival from 1966 to 1986, died in 1992. In 2018, Blanche Lund and Alan Lund were inducted into the Dance Collection Danse Encore! Dance Hall of Fame.

— KAIJA PEPPER

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INSIDE ED

Teaching to ability, not identity

BY CAROLYN HÉBERT

Dance education presents a space for the exploration and development of our physical, mental, emotional and expressive capabilities. Dance educators are responsible for creating a safe and inclusive environment within which students feel comfortable and confident enough to push themselves to a place of growth.

Gender-specific training techniques, whereby teachers consciously or subconsciously base their approach and content on their students' gender, tend to reinforce social and cultural norms. In dance education, this means we might set expectations, knowingly or not, for what it means to move and dance like women and men, which movements are perceived as "naturally" masculine or feminine, and which gender identities are more accepted in dance.

This might be as simple as giving male dancers choreography that emphasizes or affirms their "maleness," teaching them to jump higher and turn faster based on assumptions of their natural abilities, and special treatment to ensure they feel engaged and included in the studio, such as price discounts, leadership positions and preferred performance roles.

It could also be the way we present arm and leg positions to our female dancers, the language we use to describe movement qualities and the way we call our classes to attention. However our gender biases reveal themselves, it is important that we acknowledge and address them, so as to ensure we are encouraging our dancers to explore a diverse range of movement vocabularies and to provide them with equal opportunities for growth as they develop into creative, expressive and technical dancers.

Here are suggestions on how to create a more gender-inclusive dance classroom in three key areas.

LANGUAGE. Creating a gender-inclusive dance studio may be as simple as adjusting the language you use as a teacher. To call your dancers to attention, try using "dancers" or "students" instead of "girls and boys" or "guys." This way, you're addressing everyone in the room, and providing your students with the opportunity to identify with being dancers and students, rather than with their gender. When I was a young dancer, my ballet teacher taught us "princess walks" on demi-pointe across the floor. Now, I teach my young ballet students "ballet walks" instead. Something as simple as language can really go a long way to ensuring all students feel accepted, addressed and included in dance class.

MOVEMENT. Teach to physical ability, not gender identity. If you perceive your students to be physically and mentally ready and able to learn the next thing, it's time for them to learn it. Base the content of your classes, technique exercises or movement combinations on their level of ability using your judgment as the movement expert. Students should learn tricks, transitions, stylization, and to accentuate their strengths and challenge their weaknesses irrespective of their gender identities. We should be encouraging our dancers to explore all the movement possibilities of their bodies in motion without associating movements with masculinity or femininity.

CHOREOGRAPHY. Create choreographic works that challenge, rather than reinforce gender stereotypes. Show your students how to convey messages of love without specific male and female roles, or if your choreography requires characterization, avoid casting based on gender. Sometimes we may feel restricted by audience expectations, but resist conforming and, instead, inspire your dancers to be innovative.

Placing restrictions on a dancer's movement and education based on our assumptions of their gendered bodies may have negative effects on their growth and development not only as dancers, but as human beings. We need to encourage all dancers to explore movement outside their usual range and beyond social and cultural assumptions of their natural abilities as male or female bodies. *DI*

Carolyn Hébert, a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, teaches creative movement, ballet and tap. Her essay,"Boys only!: Gender based pedagogical practices in a commercial dance studio" was published in *Dance and Gender* by Wendy Oliver and Doug Risner, Editors (University Press of Florida, 2017).

GLOBAL REPORTS

Vancouver

BY KAIJA PEPPER

With its luscious outpouring of the dark and mysterious, Ann Van den Broek's *The Black Piece* is an unsettling immersion into shadows and shadowy figures. Having often railed against the gloomy stages of contemporary dance, I had misgivings about this presentation by the Vancouver Dance Centre's Global Dance Connections series, but Van den Broek (whose company WArd/waRD is based in Antwerp and Rotterdam) takes black to another level.

At first, you hear more than you see: steps, a crash, laughter. It's a while until you are able to get your bearings, but the movement toward understanding is an engaging puzzle as, over 80 minutes, the five dancers are slowly revealed. They begin as sexy ghouls from a Gothic noir, with flashes of light in the gloom that briefly expose feet or faces, and end up as individuals schlepping together in a punishing contemporary dance-styled routine in full illumination, having taken us through glimpses of the narcissism, humour and humanity of their characters.

In this 2014 work, Van den Broek orchestrates an immersion into black in which all parts — movement, lights, darkness, live and recorded film, sound — unsettle as they move the piece toward resolution. Only the last 10 or so minutes felt expendable; the choreography had concluded with more punch before then.

At the end of November, local choreographer Donna Redlick premiered her work *Blood from Stone*, also at the Dance Centre's Faris studio theatre. The inspiration of Blood Alley in the historic Vancouver neighbourhood of Gastown was visible only by implication, primarily with the use of blood red in costumes and props in the four vignettes that make up the 45-minute piece; red ribbons become ropes tied around necks, for instance. The last vignette, for all four dancers, featured a bucket of red apples, one of which was eaten with alarming relish by Salome Nieto in a strapless red gown. Nieto, known for her work with butoh, added a unique note of full-blooded embodiment that brought dramatic tension to the otherwise abstract contemporary choreography.

Joe Laughlin, another local contemporary choreographer, is — as he calls himself in the program note — "an aging dancer" (he's in his 50s), whose knack for suggesting dramatic overtones has enriched his performances over the years. In October, the Faris was home to *Joe: A Solo Show*, made up of three separate pieces by Canadians Amber Funk Barton and Gioconda Barbuto, and South African Vincent Sekwati Koko Mantsoe, all good friends and colleagues of his. In each, Laughlin presented a relaxed, friendly presence, investing wholeheartedly in the articulate quirkiness he always seems to delight in dancing.

Finally at the Faris, the Dance Centre's Iris Garland Emerging Choreographer Award supported the premiere of Julianne Chapple's *Suffix*. Chapple transformed the black box theatre into an open arena with small collections of the four performers' DNA and moulds of their faces on plinths at one end and the performers themselves in the brightly lit middle area, the audience seated on the floor or on a few chairs on all four sides. Ed Spence, a gallery artist in several visual art disciplines, collaborated with Chapple on the design elements and doubled as a performer. For much of the time, he lay sprawled on the floor, which added a note of stillness to the action of the three dancers, who explored different ways of moving with unwieldy props. One was a large silver ball that seemed to become a body part when an arm was sucked into its empty core.

This experiment in presenting dance as installation — rather than as narrative or with proscenium stage formality — needed more of a pulse to propel the action forward, but its thoughtful ambiance was an intriguing introduction for this writer to the emerging choreographer and her company, Future Leisure, newly established in 2018.

On the city's largest dance stage — the Queen Elizabeth Theatre — Ballet BC fully embodied the juicy abstractions and drama of William Forsythe's *Enemy in the Figure*, made in 1989 but barely looking its age. This Canadian premiere of an important Forsythe work was part of a November program celebrating artistic director Emily Molnar's 10th year at the helm. Molnar, a former Forsythe dancer, premiered her own work, *To this day*, a brightly costumed, free-wheeling galumph set to the powerhouse sounds of three Jimi Hendrix songs from his *Blues* album.

Next door at the mid-size Playhouse, the DanceHouse season opened with Company Wang Ramirez in *Borderline*, created in 2013 by artistic directors Honji Wang and Sébastien Ramirez. Highlights were the intimate hip-hop based duets, and the use of ropes and an onstage rigger (Alister Mazzotti). Clad in black, Mazzotti's presence frankly but discretely facilitated the increased movement bestowed by the ropes. At the end, I was left pondering his identity: was he a manipulator or a facilitator? Did the five dancers, including Wang and Ramirez, have more freedom to move because of him, or, reliant on his handling of the cables, less? DI

Antonio Somera Jr. in Julianne Chapple's *Suffix*
Photo: Andi McLeish

Winnipeg

BY HOLLY HARRIS

Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers paid homage to one of Canada's dance legends this fall, launching its 55th season with Margie Gillis' Legacy Project: Evolutions. The touring production, which first launched in Montreal in March 2017, features a Rubik's Cube of rotating solo and group pieces choreographed by the now 65-year-old Gillis. They showcase the depth and breadth of her "dance poems," which have moved hearts and minds since the 1970s.

The 75-minute mixed bill, performed by her eight-dancer ensemble culled from Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg and Montreal on November 3-4 at the University of Winnipeg's Asper Centre for Theatre and Film, celebrates Gillis' legacy, while passing the torch to a new generation of dancers. The production included, for the first time, two male dancers.

The evening opened with Gillis taking the stage in silence, her face radiant as she invited the dancers onstage. Their initial presence immediately evoked a sense of them as silent witnesses, before seguing into the first of two ensemble pieces, *Une Présence Si Absente* (2017), with program-closer, *A Complex Simplicity of Love* (2003), also featuring Gillis as performer.

One highlight was Élise Boileau's tour de force performance of *Bloom* (1989) performed to her own French narration, excerpted from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The soloist deeply internalized the work's intricate, gestural movement vocabulary as she took ownership of this Canadian classic.

Neil Sochasky breathed new life into *Broken English* (1980), with the original solo now re-imagined as a potent group work gaining in visceral power and polyphonic texture. Boileau, Geneviève Boulet, Caitlin Griffin and Ruth Naomi Levin (who also performed *Circular Labyrinth* from 2017) appeared as dutiful foot soldiers, falling into lockstep and mirroring Sochasky's all-guns-blazing performance.

The Little Animal saw a barefoot Everyman, Marc Daigle, garbed in crisp business attire instilling a meta-narrative of lost worlds — or dreams — through his series of hard falls and crawls along the floor. His final image chilled as self-recognition and despair shuddered across his face, punctuating his solo like a silent scream.

Several pieces drew on evocative animal imagery, with Gillis' idiosyncratic dolphin swoops and dives laced throughout her choreography. *Loon* (1999) showcased Griffin's dramatic sensibility and elegant, balletic lines juxtaposed with a naturalistic soundscape of crickets and haunting loon calls. An equally compelling 2018 piece, *Crow*, featured Susan Paulson dressed in an inky Victorian-style dress; every mercurial head twitch and jagged gesture evoked a wary, watching bird, capped by her delicious beating of arms as though wings in flight.

The sole Winnipeg dancer, Kathleen Hiley, reprised an excerpt of *August is Dangerous*, depicting the knotty complexities of a love relationship, set to American singer/songwriter Lucy Wainwright Roche's *A Quiet Line* and *Call Your Girlfriend*. Hiley commissioned the originally nine-minute character-based solo from Gillis for her own inaugural solo show presented in February 2016.

Her rapturous sweeping movement filled the stage with joyful abandon, while dressed in a costume created out of leftover fabric from a dress Gillis wore when she performed *Duet*, choreographed by the late Paul Taylor for the dance artist and her late brother Christopher Gillis.

Finally, Gillis treated the capacity crowd to *Life is a Fleeting Moment* (2017), with her ecstatic solo set to music by Erich Kory proving once again that her renowned artistry has grown more luminous over time, revealing a wholly intimate portrait of an artist still very much in her prime of deeply felt artistic expression.

NAfro Dance Productions opened its 16th season with *Return of the Dead*, a full-length production choreographed by founding artistic director Casimiro Nhussi that explores immortal questions of the afterlife. The three-show run, held November 2-4 at the Gas Station Arts Centre, featured a six-member company as well as non-professional dancers drawn from the local community who periodically filled the stage with their own vibrant energy.

The roughly 45-minute piece was a much darker, more sombre show than NAfro audiences are used to seeing, including ghoulish dancers with sunken, blackened eyes to coffins "magically" slipping across the stage.

There were many startling images, as in the opening section Birth and Death, dramatically lit by Gabriel Cropley, where dancers' limbs punch through crackly, papery casings as though emerging from a womb, set to Cam MacLean's electro-acoustic score. Their tattered rags designed by Carla Oliphant also suggested mourning shrouds, further underscoring the show's concept of cradle to grave — and back again.

Some of Nhussi's choreography became tough to watch, such as during the Return, where dancers, clutching at their throats, rolled their eyes back into their heads. However, this was mitigated somewhat by compelling dancer Sale Almirante Alberto, whose fierce athleticism ignited the imagination during Urn in which he clambers out of a large cairn. Celebration of the Living Dead, the show's jubilant finale, came as welcome relief, allowing dancers and audience members to shake a leg with the spirits — a life-affirming moment appreciated by the crowd as well as this writer. DI

NAfro Dance Production's Nicole Coppens in Casimiro Nhussi's *Return of the Dead*
Photo: Leif Norman

Toronto

BY MICHAEL CRABB

Toronto's popular $15-per-ticket Fall for Dance North festival, an offshoot of the New York City Center original, goes from strength to strength. The latest event, FFDN's fourth, saw the festival expand from four to six days, including two Saturday shows, and embrace Ryerson Theatre as a second venue. Compared with the 3,200-seat Sony Centre, FFDN's mainstage home, the 1,240-seat Ryerson Theatre feels intimate, allowing artistic director Ilter Ibrahimof to program work whose impact might be diminished in a more cavernous space. There were three discrete programs, each presented twice.

The only company appearing at both theatres, but in very different guises, was Holland's Introdans. At the smaller venue, this admirably versatile troupe performed American modern dance doyenne Lucinda Childs' rigorously abstract and clinically austere *Canto Ostinato*. The troupe's lyricism and sublime musical sensitivity blossomed at Sony Centre where it danced Jirí Kylián's 1982 setting of Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer*, less well known internationally perhaps than Maurice Béjart's version, made in 1971 for Rudolf Nureyev and Paolo Bortoluzzi. However, in its choreographic expansiveness — each song, different in tone, has its own male/female couple — is emotionally far more rewarding.

Among other festival standouts were Ballet Kelowna making its Toronto debut with Alysa Pires' suitably jaunty *Mambo*, the apparently double-jointed and aptly named Soweto Skeleton Movers and the hyper-kinetic, testosterone-supercharged 13-member all-male cast of North African dancers of Compagnie Hervé Koubi in the namesake French choreographer's *What the Day Owes to the Night*.

The National Ballet of Canada, sparsely represented at previous festivals and only days before its debut tour to Russia, appeared in full force and with live orchestra to dance Justin Peck's *Paz de la Jolla*.

On its return from Moscow and St. Petersburg, the company launched its 2018-2019 hometown season in November by adding to its John Neumeier collection with the North American premiere of the American-German choreographer's *Anna Karenina*.

Neumeier made the two-act, three-hour-long adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's literary masterpiece for his own Hamburg Ballet in July 2017 (see Silvia Poletti's review in the winter 2017 issue). The fine print describes it as "a cooperation" with the Bolshoi, which performed it in Moscow in March 2018, and the National Ballet of Canada. The arrangement differs from a conventional co-production. Instead of contributing to the cost of a single physical production that gets shipped around as required, in this instance each company has built its own. The officially cited cost for the National Ballet of Canada was $1.9 million.

Presumably this means that Toronto audiences have not seen the last of Neumeier's problematic, vaguely post-modernish, aesthetically jarring "inspired by" take on Tolstoy. Audiences were enthusiastic — there's enough vapid spectacle and hyperventilating melodrama to assure that — but the critical response ranged from lukewarm to excoriating. One can only sympathize with an irate audience member, presumably of Russian origin, who very volubly denounced what she judged to be Neumeier's desecration of one of her motherland's most iconic literary works. If only more audience members harbouring such heartfelt objections were willing to express them as loudly as supine audiences appear eager to express their satisfaction.

No such protest occurred during the second part of the National Ballet's fall season when it tabled a mixed bill comprising two revivals, principal dancer and choreographic associate Guillaume Côté's Jean-Paul Sartre-inspired *Being and Nothingness* from 2016 and Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*.

Ashton's 1964 work to the charming Mendelssohn score was made for the Royal Ballet to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. Ashton assumed it would be a one-off. It has since joined the ranks of his most

Ballet Kelowna in Alysa Pires' *MAMBO*
Photo: Bruce Zinger

beloved and often-performed ballets, and for good reason. In its distillation of the play, *The Dream* is beyond dramaturgical reproach. It is choreographically brilliant, crowned by its ravishingly poetic concluding pas de deux for Oberon and Titania. It combines with wry wit and, above all, is infused with profound humanity.

Ashton was once a mainstay of the National Ballet's repertoire after several of his ballets were acquired during the 1976 to 1983 artistic directorship of his friend, Alexander Grant. In recent years, they have been little seen. It had been 17 years since the company last danced *The Dream*, making its 2018 reappearance akin to a second company premiere. Not surprisingly, subtle nuances, so vivid in 1978 when the company first performed it under Ashton's supervision, were occasionally lacking, but overall the dancers did justice to *The Dream*'s often quicksilver choreography and intentionally stylized physical characterizations. Puck, of course, is a central role and thus often given to a principal dancer. First-cast Skylar Campbell delivered a laudably detailed and intelligent interpretation. Next up, precociously accomplished South African-born corps member Siphesihle November offered less detail, yet his Puck had a charm, buoyancy and mischievousness that made the role very much November's own.

In the search for "relevance," it's almost de rigueur for today's opera directors to reconceive historic works through a contemporary prism. The results are occasionally illuminating but more often tediously tendentious. On the whole, when choreographers dip into opera, they play it pretty straight and often avoid direct comparison with the source by retaining the plot while abandoning the actual score or at the very least by having it re-arranged to the extent that audiences are not left wondering if a dancer is about to sing to the strains of a favourite aria.

ProArteDanza is more ambitious in its latest production, *Figaro 2.0*, an evening-length re-imagining of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Re-imagining is perhaps too generous a description. The setting is modern without exactly being contemporary. Projected captions evoke silent movies. Women in headscarves and sunglasses are redolent of Fellini.

The choreography by company artistic director Roberto Campanella and Robert Glumbek lurches stylistically, possibly a reflection of who did what. There's spoken text and substantial helpings of Mozart's score, along with ham-fisted efforts to retain some of the work's opera buffa character with lame humour; yet, *Figaro 2.0* tries to run in so many directions its focus remains blurry.

There's nothing particularly imaginative about the way the two Roberts attempt to underline the gender power imbalances of Mozart's 1786 original from a #MeToo-era perspective.

Even a very traditional production of the actual opera would prompt similar reflections in the mind of any thoughtful audience member. Nothing prevented Campanella and Glumbek from carving away the sub-plot elements to concentrate their attention on the core themes of class, power and patriarchy. It would have made for a more powerful statement.

Anyone who has had the pleasure of watching veteran dancer/choreographer Louis Laberge-Côté perform knows that his command of a stage is such that he can take risks lesser mortals would wisely avoid. There is no better proof of this than his latest Danceworks-presented meditation on self-identity, truth, illusion, delusion, fame and aging.

Billed as an evening-length solo, Laberge-Côté's *The Art of Degeneration* is marginally a duet with his partner, Michael Caldwell, who scurries around like a worrying mother hen in a performance that is pitched almost as a rehearsal or work-in-progress, although it is emphatically not. Combining sometimes self-mocking, often poignant autobiography with pure invention, Laberge-Côté establishes an intimacy with his audience that allows him to assume different characters, stepping from past to present and from fantasy to reality in a manner that is simultaneously de-stabilizing and utterly compelling. It's a tour de force by any standard. DI

Montreal

BY VICTOR SWOBODA

Urban dance lacks the royal pedigree of ballet and the intellectual pretensions of contemporary dance, but two Montreal-based troupes, Rubberband (formerly Rubberbandance) and Tentacle Tribe, have taken urban dance to new heights of expressive form and creative variety.

Rubberband choreographer Victor Quijada and Tentacle Tribe's Elon Högland and Emmanuelle Lê Phan all grew up participating in urban dance battles, absorbing their free-for-all creativity and revelling in the camaraderie as each performer showed off flashy moves. The November and December premieres of their latest hour-long creations in the distinguished Danse Danse series at Place des Arts (their largest and most ambitious to date) showed the remarkable extent to which they have refined aspects of urban dance into rich vocabularies with strong contemporary dance accents. Quijada has codified his style into the Rubberband Method.

Quijada's *Vraiment doucement* for five male and five female dancers had two distinct parts accompanied by a compelling mix of violin, guitar, percussion and keyboard played live. Dressed in grey coveralls, the dancers initially rose from the floor and languidly moved as individuals. They touched lightly, then more and more vigorously, creating a group mass of simultaneous lightning-brief duets that filled the stage with more activity than the eye could easily distinguish — a panoply of tumbling, hopping, jumping and intricate partnering. Synched to the music's flow and beat, the choreography was a delightful visual extravaganza. The first part ended with the dancers, stripped to undershirts and briefs, in a pile from which they rose and walked dreamlike away.

After a blackout, an utterly different tone. Still in underwear, the dancers one by one lifted a neighbour by the waist, half-swiveled and lightly deposited the person — a repeated tender motif whose action recalled the weightlessness of classical ballet. There were expressionistic turns for individuals twitching in distress, laughing hysterically or shouting madly. Such theatrical displays of emotion are unusual for Quijada, who has characteristically implied emotions more subtly through the creation and release of physical tension. This sequence suggested the hand of Quijada's dramaturg collaborator Mathieu Leroux, who worked earlier with Montreal urban dance troupe Solid State Breakdance.

True to his roots and probably to his heart, Quijada could not resist including a brief urban dance "battle" with men and women showing off their individual moves. If the second half was something of a hodgepodge of diverse scenes, it revealed Quijada stretching his creative parameters ever further.

Tentacle Tribe's *Ghost* for three male and three female dancers, including Lê Phan and Höglund, also had two parts. Initially dressed in dark hoodies, the group moved in close quarters, interacting in intricate and delicate ways with the fluency of a coterie of snakes. Arms, legs and torsos touched and released in long flows of movement, showing the dancers' exceptional timing and sense of being grounded. Locking occasionally punctuated the flow, but far less frequently than in previous Tentacle Tribe works such as *Fractals of You*, where locking served to imply an impulse facing a resistance.

Here, the flowing figures in semi-darkness gave the impression of phantom spirits passing over, under, even "through" each other. The masters of such movement, of course, are Lê Phan and Höglund, who performed a duet of such interconnected fluidity that their two bodies appeared to have one mind. Their control of their limbs has become so refined that the very tips of their fingers came into expressive play.

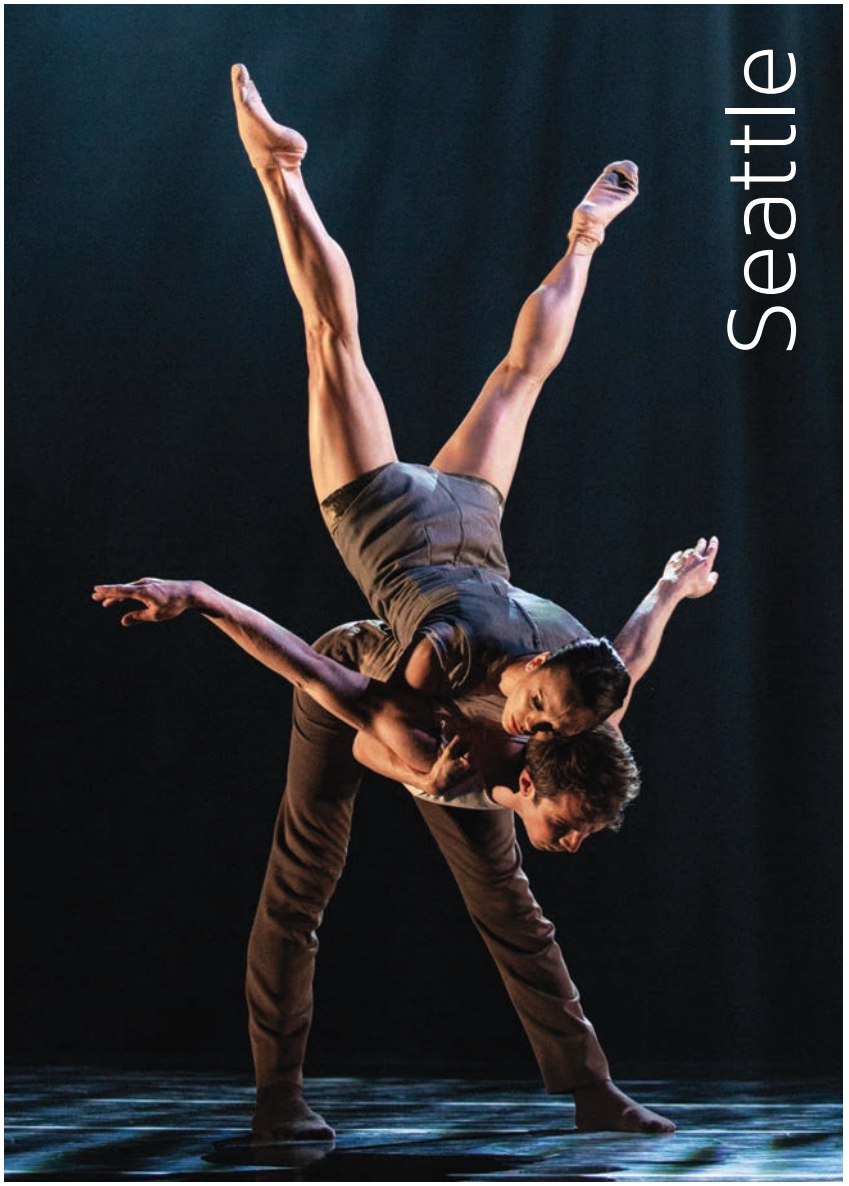
In the second half, the group became alien-like beings. Instead of their faces, white balloons stared from under their hoodies. Swaying slightly in a line on the spot, like sailors on a rolling ship, they made a comic scene, dispelling the spiritual solemnity of the first half. The audience giggled, amused and fascinated by unearthly beings who were also down to earth. When the hoods were withdrawn and the balloons released, it felt like spirits were being set free.

Both *Ghost* and *Vraiment doucement* were creations of deep thought and complexity. It was fitting that Montreal recently recognized Högland and Lê Phan with its 2018 Prix de la danse award for best choreography for *Threesixnine*. In 2017, Quijada won the Prix de la danse Cultural Diversity prize.

Montreal's fall season saw another significant urban dance event when Les Grands Ballets Canadiens opened its studios and theatre in the Wilder Building to host a breakdance display celebrating the 10th anniversary of ILL-Abilities. This group includes its organizer, Montrealer Luca Patuelli, aka Lazylegz, and seven other dancers with disabilities from six countries. The event was the first time that all eight dancers shared the same stage.

Whatever the dancer's disability — a single leg, shortened limbs or, like Lazylegz, a muscle-and-joint affliction — the sight of these dancers enthusiastically performing difficult breakdance moves with or without crutches was awe-inspiring. DI

Rubberband in Victor Quijada's *Vraiment doucement*
Photo: Sasha Onyshchenko



Seattle

BY KAITLIN McCARTHY

In a city renowned for its futuristic tech industries, the dance scene in Seattle has been looking to the past this season. Pacific Northwest Ballet opened its season with a Jerome Robbins Festival, choreographer Dayna Hanson reprised an early 33 Fainting Spells work, and Hypernova Contemporary Dance Company presented a nostalgic look at adolescence, ripe with 30-year-old cultural references. Another huge event this fall has been Merce 100 — an international project where 100 artists respond to the Cunningham legacy in honour of his centennial birthday.

Perhaps this interest in legacy was catalyzed by the rapidly changing city and a period of transition in the dance scene. Skyrocketing costs of living and property values have made it significantly harder for artists and organizations to survive. Aside from a few notable exceptions, the dance scene is largely disconnected from the mass of tech wealth, partially because many workers are new to the city and lack the cultural connections that form the basis for philanthropy.

The tide of incoming young dancers moving to Seattle has waned, and there has been a notable uptick in dancers who have decided to relocate. However, Seattle's more established technical dance companies, like Pacific Northwest Ballet, Donald Byrd's Spectrum Dance Theater, Olivier Wevers' Whim W'him and Kate Wallich's YC Studios, continue to be a draw for exceptional and virtuosic talent.

It is Seattle's identity as a place for fringe experimentation that is perhaps most at risk. In a facilitated community conversation following the restaged excerpt of 33 Fainting Spells' 1996 work *The Uninvited,* veteran artists reflected that a large part of the 1990s Seattle dance boom was due to the affordability of space, describing a daily dance practice that would be completely unsustainable to an independent dance artist in today's scene.

Julia Sloane and Madison Haines performed the reprised work, choreographed by Hanson and Gaelen Hanson (no relation). A rigorous and economical physicality punctuated escalating tension between the two characters. Complex rhythmic sections in oxford shoes recalled the iconic, boundary-pushing work of Seattle's dance theatre legacy.

Despite the shifting city dynamics, there is plenty of evidence that Seattle remains a stronghold of experimentation. Several new spaces have popped up in the last few years, including Base: Experimental Arts, founded by Dayna Hanson, Peggy Piacenza and Dave Proscia. Base now hosts the celebrated informal showcase 12 Minutes Max, ongoing since 1981. It still offers a low-barrier entrance point for artists trying out new ideas at any stage in their career. Similar outlets, like On the Boards' new program Performance Lab, the open mic-style performance night Sh*t Gold or Studio Current's Sessions series means you can see works-in-progress any week of the year.

Several large organizations are also in periods of transition. Pacific Northwest Ballet hasn't seen the internal controversies that rocked so many established ballet companies in 2018, but is not exempt from a rising expectation of social responsibility. PNB faced criticism last season for Yuri Possokhov's *RAkU*, a double whammy of out-of-touch Asian caricatures and poorly contextualized sexual violence, and its 2018-2019 season embarrassingly includes only one female choreographer. Artistic director Peter Boal says he has "invitations out to half a dozen women and choreographers of colour" for upcoming seasons, which would go a long way toward keeping PNB a relevant and respected institution.

On the Boards, the Pacific Northwest's premier experimental performance venue, is presenting its first season under new

Pacific Northwest Ballet's Noelani Pantastico and Lucien Postlewaite in Alejandro Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost*
Photo: Angela Sterling

artistic director Rachel Cook and executive director Betsey Brock. The 2018-2019 season has been well received so far, with new programming including Solo: A Festival of Dance, which presented 16 solo works over four nights, representing artists from across North America.

Velocity Dance Center's executive and artistic director Tonya Lockyer, a major player in Seattle dance, stepped down this winter. Velocity is hiring a new executive director and will spend the year identifying the best path forward in artistic leadership.

Velocity's final presentation with Lockyer at the helm was Merce 100, a showcase of Seattle artists responding to Cunningham. True to the spirit of the innovator, the show took a multi-disciplinary approach, including poetry, interactive lectures and seven dance works with a dynamic range of Cunningham influence.

Taking inspiration from Cunningham's use of chance, Louis Gervais opened the evening with the perfectly over-the-top *Merce Bingo*, drawing bingo balls to determine the order and location of 10 scores. He and his showgirl style assistant (Molly Sides) performed dances of accusatory pointing, outrageous clown faces and dive-cartwheeling over the laps of audience members seated in a grid across the stage.

Also using chance as a choreographic tool, Ella Mahler performed *Absolute,* a solo of constantly changing staccato accents. Every momentary pause felt alive, reconsidering, before shifting intention on a dime between precise rhythm, athletic rebounding and graceful pedestrian gestures.

The delight of unpredictability was also present in Christiana Axelsen's solo, which took inspiration from the Cunningham Event structure, where old and new material is recombined. For her "MinEvent," she compiled one minute from seven works she's performed over the last seven years, all tied seamlessly together with her dropped-in Cunningham technique.

The weekend prior, Spectrum Dance Theater also presented a work inspired by the Cunningham Event. Byrd's *Occurrence #6* may not have been the most cohesive production, but it showed his penchant for choreographic play and experimentation. Clearly, Cunningham's influence is alive and well in the legend's home state of Washington.

Even with the many references to the past, there was plenty of new to celebrate last fall. Whim W'him's annual Choreographic Shindig commissioned three new works as chosen by the company dancers. Alice Klock, Omar Román De Jesús and Brendan Duggan put both the company's extreme technique and acting ability on display. Duggan's *Stephanie Knows Some Great People,* a parodic commentary on contemporary social climbing, was particularly lauded by local press.

PNB's All Premiere mixed bill showed two works new to the company, Alejandro Cerrudo's contemplative *Silent Ghost* and Alexander Ekman's cheeky *Cacti,* along with a world premiere, *A Dark and Lonely Space*, choreographed by company soloist Kyle Davis.

YC Studio's second company, YC2, presented New Dances II, showcasing six phenomenal young dancers, particularly in the explosive Sidra Bell work *Beyond the Edge of the Frame.* New company, the gray, lead by Beth Terwilleger, debuted *The Midsummer,* an intricately choreographed but ultimately confusing take on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Velocity.

Also fairly new to the city is Noelle Price, but her work is popping up everywhere, including at Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute. Her evening-length *Remember Me Young,* a work about teen suicide, was thoughtfully paired with free mental health workshops.

One of the most affecting premieres flew a bit under the radar, but deserves mentioning. The independently produced *two hours,* by Alexandra Madera, portrayed an intimate look into the relationship between the choreographer and her mother, who passed away from complications of alcoholism in 2017.

Naturalistic voiceovers were paired smartly with stoic ballet sequences that subtly reinforced the story. One performer simply walked away mid-dance. An intertwining pair grew around each other like vines, until one dancer dropped the other like a stone. In one heartbreaking passage, Madera begins a leap sequence over and over, only to stop short of the apex each time.

Madera*'s two hours* shows dance as a powerful tool to process and communicate complicated histories, transforming hardship and love into something beautiful and profound. DI

33 Fainting Spells' Madison Haines and Julia Sloane in Dayna Hanson and Gaelan Hanson's *The Uninvited*
Photo: Michelle Smith-Lewis

New York

BY ROBERT GRESKOVIC

Balanchine: The City Center Years played out over five days of mixed bills, offered by 13 invited ballet companies from both the U.S. and Europe. The run helped mark the 75th anniversary of the theatre originally known as New York City Center of Music and Drama.

The now historic years of George Balanchine and his New York City Ballet, which began at City Center in 1948, loom large in the venue's history. True, Balanchine eventually found the facilities unideal, in particular the theatre's problematic sightlines, the limited orchestra pit and the tight backstage wing space, which led to his move in 1964 to the newly built New York State Theater, in Lincoln Center. But happily, and often thrillingly, what City Center brought to the 13 ballets in rotation for this event was a show of its unique stage-to-auditorium proportions, making any number of Balanchine's ballets look freshly alive and theatrical.

Miami City Ballet kicked off the opening gala with a windswept rendering of *Serenade*, the 1935 Tchaikovsky-inspired ballet that was Balanchine's first effort for an American company. All of Jeanette Delgado's stirring energy and individuality as she breezed through what is known as the ballet's "Russian" role, got greatly enhanced by City Center's intimate stage-to-audience proximity. As Simone Messmer, another of the work's three leading women, capped her vivid performance by being carried off by three attendant men, the centre's stage framed the elegiac closing moments at once intimately and majestically.

Given its advantage of having Balanchine's four-movement *Symphony in C*, to Bizet's ebullient music, as a staple in its repertoire, NYCB closed the gala with fleetness of attack and deftly calibrated energy. Balletgoers had long heard of the exciting effects NYCB made at City Center with *Symphony in C*, first given in 1947 by the Paris Opera Ballet and titled *Le Palais de Cristal*, before being rechristened in 1948 for NYCB's inaugural season. On this occasion, Tiler Peck opposite Tyler Angle, Sara Mearns with Jared Angle, Ashley Bouder alongside Anthony Huxley and Lauren King with Taylor Stanley led the charge of their respective movements with confident art and expertise. Each made for a high point duly focused by the theatre's proportions and arrangement.

The run proceeded with an engagingly individual display of Balanchine's dance-making from the 16-year time period being honoured here. San Francisco Ballet brought stirring radiance and finesse to two somewhat differently cast performances of the Mozart accompanied *Divertimento No. 15*, initially seen on the City Center stage in 1956. Amidst the fine work the troupe made of this filigree showcase, special mention needs to be made of the gossamer geometrics delivered by Sasha De Sola in both the side role originally danced by Tanaquil Le Clercq and the central one, originally Patricia Wilde.

Similar freshness and authority came with the Joffrey Ballet's rendering of *The Four Temperaments*, Balanchine's modernist-tinged suite to the music of Paul Hindemith. Special mention here to the detailed presentation Greig Matthews made of partnering during the ballet's Third Theme and of delineating its featured Phlegmatic variation. As scrupulously staged for the company earlier in 2018 by Colleen Neary, this nowadays key "black and white" creation, first seen at City Center in 1948, projected into the wide but shallow auditorium with compelling clarity.

American Ballet Theatre offered Balanchine's *Symphonie Concertante* (to Mozart), with Devon Teuscher bringing distinction and precision to the role fashioned to the music's viola part. Thomas Forster, the lone male in the ballet's female world, shone with attentiveness and elegance partnering Teuscher and Christine Shevchenko as the second leading woman, all framed by an ensemble of 22 women.

Of the European participants, Paris Opera Ballet brought some distinction to a repertoire that is admittedly not its daily bread. Only two dancers from the troupe participated, Sae Eun Park and Hugo Marchand. The duets they performed, the 1957 *Pas de Deux from Agon* (to Stravinsky) and the 1962 *Divertissement Pas de Deux* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (to Mendelssohn) were mostly remarkable because of Marchand. The aristocratic danseur made unaffected and memorable work of the cool dancing partner in the *Agon* excerpt and lustrous effects as the solicitous cavalier in the shimmering Mendelssohn choreography, which floats on its music like a skein of sighs.

Anna Rose O'Sullivan and Marcelino Sambé represented Britain's Royal Ballet agreeably but without much impact in *Tarantella* (1964, to Gottschalk) and in *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* (1960). The biggest misses of the run came from the Mariinsky Ballet's performances of *Apollo*, Balanchine's 1928 ballet first seen at City Center in 1951, and *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*. Impressive schooling was on display throughout these two works, but most of it resembled classroom intentions aimed at displaying the dancers' athleticism at the price of Balanchine's musically modulated and inspired choreography. DI

The Joffrey Ballet in George Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*
Photo: Paul Kolnik

Copenhagen

BY ANNE–MARIE ELMBY

In September, the Royal Danish Ballet premiered Marcos Morau's highly entertaining, but somewhat chaotic, new *Carmen*. Morau brought assistants from his Barcelona-based company, La Veronal, to introduce the Royal Danish Ballet dancers to his movement style. Creating this *Carmen* in Denmark gave Morau the opportunity to cast an ironic glance on Spanish culture and stereotypes. For instance, Silvia Delagneau's spectacular costumes turned up the Spanish volume in colour and layers of material with oversized hats.

The setup was the filming of a *Carmen* ballet, with a cameraperson moving around on the stage. The film was projected live on a huge screen that covered the whole upper width of the proscenium, during which Edith Piaf's song *Carmen's Story*, which describes the drama of the eternal love triangle, is heard.

The dancers jumped in and out of character and impersonated both male and female Carmens, Don Josés and toreadors at different times. They even multiplied into a corps of Carmens whirling around in overloaded red and gold skirts. The dancers also served as film crew talking privately to the camera, before starting a scene with a clapperboard or breaking one up with a "Cut!", underlining the blending of realism and fiction in the ballet.

The fragmented storyline included a photo shoot section of posing main characters and chorus line routines, one ending with "Carmen" written with silver pompons. Two stout widows in old-fashioned black dresses glided in a lyrical twin dance with dreamy expressions and dainty steps, with hilarious results.

Everybody knows that Carmen must die in the end, but she does not want to, and here denial sends the last Carmen impersonator storming off the stage and out of the theatre to meet her shocking end in traffic, filmed and projected on the screen, and so realistic that the audience gasped. Happily, all dancers appeared for the curtain call.

George Bizet's familiar opera music was supplemented by Rodion Shchedrin's *Carmen Suite*, with an extra percussion section, as well as other Spanish-flavoured compositions.

Besides his dance career at the Royal Danish Ballet, Oliver Starpov has a special choreographic talent. His work always evokes strong feelings, whether pain or happiness, and leaves a very personal mark. In his new creation for Dance2Go in October, *My Daddy Loves Sugar*, Starpov's all-male ballet played on the dichotomy between outer perfection and inner darkness. The sombre story of a dysfunctional relationship between MacLean Hopper's Sugar and Meirambek Nazargozhayev's Daddy featured raw physicality that went to the bone. An organic group of nine men — appearing as the subconscious — harassed the tormented Sugar and repeatedly sent him to the ground. A body in a glass coffin suspended high above them, together with the piece's allusion to drugs, was a reminder of the reality of death.

A quite different mood pervaded Starpov's duet for Eukene Sagüés and himself, which was performed at the National Gallery of Denmark and inspired by the exhibition, *Take My Breath Away*, by the renowned Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh V. From opposite galleries, the dancers paced through V's artefacts. Then crawling beside her on the floor, Starpov offered his hands for Sagüés to step on so her bare feet avoided touching the cold marble floor. There was a vulnerability and a feeling of loss as she continued alone, before they reunited in a sensitive duet that displayed both intimacy and joy in their exhilarating embraces.

Company B consists of the eighth and ninth grade students of the Royal Danish Ballet School and on November 10 it celebrated a 10-year anniversary. The company, which is probably the first of its kind — it's for children, by children and about children — was initiated by artistic leader Ann Crosset to develop the dancers' performance skills and to teach their peers about the art of ballet. They work and perform with young people in different parts of Denmark (recently with sports students), and there has been international exchange with children in Greenland, Brazil and China.

Breakfast with Bournonville is normally danced for school classes, but on this occasion, it was performed for the general public. The responsibility of both choreography and staging was left to the teenagers with minor help from the technical staff of the Old Stage. The backdrop displayed large cards that featured the dancers as strength, light, insanity, pain, dreams and so on. Solos choreographed or chosen from repertoire by the students matched the topics and were accompanied by voiceover reflections. Crosset did not appear for the curtain calls, proving her trust in the kids, which was fully deserved. DI

Royal Danish Ballet School in Company B's *Breakfast with Bournonville*
Photo: Camilla Winther

London

BY SANJOY ROY

London saw some marvellously understated dance this autumn. William Forsythe's *A Quiet Evening of Dance* at Sadler's Wells had a bare stage, low-key lighting and soft sounds, yet it revealed a kind of introverted virtuosity that left you speechless. Act 1 opened with an intimate duet for Parvaneh Schafarali and Ander Zabala, its small steps and darting swerves as soft and exacting as the birdsong on its soundtrack. Then followed a breathtaking duet by senior dancers Jill Johnson and Christopher Roman who, accompanied only by their own hushed breath, articulated detailed sequences of moves based on balletic geometries (pointed foot, angled leg) and anatomical actions of the joints: the swivels and folds of shoulder, knee and elbow.

Morton Feldman's atonal plinks formed a sparse accompaniment to the subsequent more idiosyncratic danced episodes, one solo keeping the arms and hands close to the face, another showing, without flash, just how the extraordinary b-boy Rauf "RubberLegz" Yasit earned his nickname. Act 1 ended with a reprise of a 2015 duet (to birdsong again), with Brigel Gjoka and Riley Watts echoing each other as if giving different expressions to the same choreographic template of slips, skitters and knots.

Act 2, to courtly music by Jean-Philippe Rameau, showed a gentle theatricality. Johnson and Roman became a kind of couple: she preoccupied, he rather particular. There was humour in Yasit's lock-limbed, floor-bound interruption of an elegant duet; sadness elsewhere, with bodies weighted as if by inner burdens. Though the style, staging and effect were more conventional here, you could almost see through them to the sparse structures of Act 1, lying beneath like a choreographic skeleton.

Similarly low-key but more profoundly emotional was Shobana Jeyasingh's *Contagion*, performed by eight women in the public hall of the British Library. Having been commissioned by the 14-18 NOW program to mark the centenary of the First World War, Jeyasingh's curiosity was piqued not by the familiar drama of trenches and shellshock, but by the more sidelined story of the global Spanish Flu pandemic that began just as the war was ending, killing more than twice as many as the entire conflict.

The performance space was strewn with white plinths: sickbeds or morgue slabs, scattered like dice, and used as screens to project archival footage of the war, images of the flu virus itself (it looks uncannily like a naval mine) and the solarized outlines of fevered bodies. In simple bandage-like costumes, the dancers sprawled awkwardly over these boxes, limbs twisted and heads dangling as if left lying where they fell. Audience members were given headphones to listen to the soundtrack — a practical measure with an unsettling emotional effect, making the piece feel like a private rather than a public experience.

A story of sorts threaded through, loosely stitched by fragmented voiceovers from diaries and medical records. If the dancers' opening gestures formed funereal images of pleading and loss, the piece soon turned more biological. The sound of gasps mixed with the fluttering of birds (it was an avian flu), while the performers transformed into inhuman agents executing sequences of set moves, spines flexing and elbows jutting.

The consequent contortions and rictus spasms suggested bodies occupied by unseen invaders, no longer in command of their own territory. Yet such grotesque, disturbing images broke, like a fever, into a final scene of unacknowledged labour and infinite tenderness: women attending to the sick. For the war that this spare, poetic work commemorated had no nation, no victory, no surrender. Its battleground was the human body, its unsung heroes the people — mostly women — who nursed it.

Dance Umbrella, London's annual autumn festival of contemporary dance, turned 40 this year. Still innovating in a much-changed dance scene, its headline act was *The Great Tamer*, by Greek choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou, a follow-up to his 2016 Umbrella hit *Primal Matter*. Like that earlier duet, *The Great Tamer* was based more on imagery than action, but here on a much grander scale, filling the Sadler's Wells stage.

The Bauschian set was a broad bank of loosely overlapping tiles, which the 10 performers walked over, emerged from or disappeared beneath. Like Bausch again, the action took the form of short, repetitive and often nonsensical actions: the draught from a flipped tile blowing a piece of gauze to reveal a naked man beneath; a woman wandering about in a tunic, like a lost Greek nymph, followed not long after by an astronaut in full space suit.

Particularly striking was a scene where the variously exposed body parts of several dancers clustered together to form a ghoulish composite of limbs, and one in which a rain of feathered arrows shot across the stage to land in the tiles, like trembling golden ears of wheat. A surreal, painterly work that could have benefited from more variety of pacing, its images stayed in your mind long after, quivering like those arrows. *DI*

Shobana Jeyasingh Dance in Shobana Jeyasingh's *Contagion*
Photo: Jane Hobson

Milan

BY SILVIA POLETTI

The Milan dance season could not have opened in any better way than with the Bolshoi Ballet on tour. After 11 years, the company returned to La Scala with two ballets — *La Bayadère* in Yuri Grigorovich's version and *The Taming of the Shrew,* created for them four years ago by Jean-Christophe Maillot. Both proved to be terrific vehicles to celebrate the Russian company's current state of grace.

Grigorovich's production of the Petipa classic and Maillot's of the Shakespeare play represent two pillars in the structure of the company in the last few years. Maillot was invited to create for the Moscow company by then artistic director Sergei Filin; Grigorovich has been determining the style and the appeal of Bolshoi productions for almost 60 years, since he arrived in Moscow from Leningrad. Now the Bolshoi Ballet is ruled by Makhar Vaziev, former director of both the Mariinsky Ballet and La Scala Ballet, which he left to go to Moscow two years ago. Vaziev's personal touch on the Bolshoi company was evident in the casting and the performances of the entire ensemble.

The exotic idiom of *La Bayadère* combined with the breathtaking poetry of Petipa's purest classic vocabulary in the ballet blanc Kingdom of the Shades scene were perfect to test Vaziev's well-known nurturing of the corps de ballet and of budding stars. It is typical of his vision from both his years at the Mariinsky and at La Scala, where he gave precious opportunities to the youngest talents. At the Bolshoi, he is doing the same.

Although the opening night of *Bayadère* was devoted to the Bolshoi star Svetlana Zakharova with a fierce and handsome Denis Rodkin, and the second featured the dream partnership of Olga Smirnova and Semyon Chudin, the third night was actually more anticipated by the Italian audience. As Solor, Vaziev cast 23-year-old Italian Jacopo Tissi, who followed Vaziev to Moscow after starring in a principal role at La Scala as Prince Desirée in Ratmansky's *Sleeping Beauty.* He is now a leading soloist with the Bolshoi. At the Italian press conference, Vaziev sent a clear message to La Scala: "I'm working with him also for you, as I really hope that soon Jacopo can come back as a Scala étoile." A true endorsement; will La Scala think about it?

Tissi returned to his homeland following amazing reports from New York, where in summer 2017 he was the talk of balletgoers for a thrilling performance in *Diamonds* during the celebration of Balanchine's *Jewels* golden anniversary. Extremely long limbed (he's six-foot-two), Tissi has improved his technique and confidence since joining the Bolshoi, and in *Bayadère,* his Solor with his feline jetés and bold attitude conquered the audience. His partner was Alena Kovaleva, who he danced with in New York. Also long limbed, she has a lyrical and exquisite musicality that makes her movements vibrate and shine — her dance is intimate and heartfelt.

The successful *Taming of the Shrew* by Maillot, the French director of Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, had the witty and glamorous touch of a Hollywood musical (I thought of Stanley Donen's *Funny Face*). His clever musical choice — a selection of Dmitri Shostakovich's movie and jazz music — freed the dancers to indulge their most theatrical characterizations, from Anna Tikhomirova as the sophisticated Housekeeper, to Smirnova as the graceful Bianca, who was seemingly delicate but at the end truly tyrannical with her shy and dreamy Lucentio, danced by Chudin.

In the central role as the passionate Katherine, Ekaterina Krysanova was bold and independent, with French chic reminiscent of stars like Zizi Jeanmaire in the way she used head and shoulders. Her character's sudden tenderness and sensuality came out strongly next to Vladislav Lantratov as Petruchio, an alpha male in boots and fur, passionate, rude and virile. Often acclaimed as a romantic danseur noble or an iconic hero, here Lantratov is free to enjoy himself with this impulsive and larger-than-life comedic role, confirming him as one of the greatest dance artists of his generation.

While the Bolshoi was in Italy, La Scala Ballet was touring in China. Back home in October a few weeks later, the company presented Kenneth MacMillan's blockbuster *Manon.* The revival was interesting above all to test the latest generation of principals and soloists, some of whom had obtained their first opportunities to dance big roles thanks to Vaziev himself in his La Scala years.

After a very touching interpretation as Armand in John Neumeier's *La Dame aux Camélias,* Timofej Andrijashenko debuted as Des Grieux, partnering principal dancer Nicoletta Manni, who had already danced the title role a few times. She was crisp, feminine and quick, and used the details of the choreography expressively to create her character. Andrijashenko, with a melancholic, intimate colour in his interpretation of Des Grieux, seemed a little unsure technically in the dance, but the chemistry between him and Manni (his fiancée) promises much potential for the future. DI

La Scala Ballet's Timofej Andrijashenko and Nicoletta Manni in Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*
Photo: Brescia Amisano

Sydney

BY DEBORAH JONES

Antony Hamilton's *Forever & Ever* lays siege to the senses with a bracing display of shock and awe. It was immediate, visceral stuff that put order and chaos on a collision course and exploited the might of the entire 17-member Sydney Dance Company ensemble, looking fabulous. Hamilton's movement language can be ultra-precise and mechanistic, but it also has a juicy, sultry quality that suits SDC to a T.

Hamilton started things quietly. Jesse Scales was onstage alone, moving to a private, silent beat. Who was she? What was she thinking? Where did she come from?

Then kapow! The score, written by Julian Hamilton of Australian electronic music duo the Presets (he's the choreographer's brother), started with a galvanizing boom as a line of heavily shrouded figures shuffled onstage in strict order of height, invoking influences as diverse as Cistercian monks, mad cults, monster puppets and the KKK. Costume designer Paula Levis clearly has a mischievous streak.

The all-enveloping music thumped with an insistent beat that underpinned an evolving sonic cloud. Lighting designer Benjamin Cisterne responded boldly with vivid explosions of colour that quickly bloomed and dissipated.

As dancers started shedding their gear, layer by layer, they gravitated toward others dressed like themselves. The vibe was of haughty fashion models on mind-altering drugs at an exclusive nightclub. When the company finally stripped down to basic black with touches of body paint, the music was stripped back, too, and a sense of calm emerged — although the witty concluding image suggested the cycle might just start all over again.

The nicely balanced program began with a revival of Sydney Dance Company artistic director Rafael Bonachela's *Frame of Mind* from 2015. The moody, contemplative piece registered strongly, particularly as Bryce Dessner's score was this time played live by the Australian String Quartet.

Five years ago, Bonachela instituted New Breed, an annual showcase for emerging and independent choreographers. In the most recent iteration, Holly Doyle's sweet, sad, funny, goofy, utterly captivating *Out, Damned Spot!* showed exactly why New Breed exists and why it works. Doyle doesn't have an extensive choreographic résumé but does have an original voice worth nurturing.

Five people shambled onto the stage, mumbling. They were wearing hazmat suits, or something vaguely resembling them. The thin transparent material seemed to be more psychological crutch than useful against dangerous substances, but at the same time there was a gallant, sporty atmosphere as the group split and regrouped, sometimes breaking into exaggerated dance or gymnastic moves. Whatever they were doing, it was them against the world, trying to save themselves from pollution of all kinds.

Out, Damned Spot! was surprisingly moving and, even better, never signalled what it was going to do next. It was a delight, achieved in just 11 minutes.

Janessa Dufty (like Doyle a dancer with the company) and Katina Olsen (formerly with Bangarra Dance Theatre) presented heartfelt works that drew on nature for spiritual nourishment and inspiration.

The shapes in Dufty's *Telopea* echoed that of the Australian wildflower for which it is named, and fecundity and regeneration were at the heart of a striking central performance by Ariella Casu. Tobias Merz, singing his own compositions onstage, added to the warm glow of an attractive piece that was a little too conventional in form to linger long in the memory.

Olsen's *Mother's Cry* was a lament for a lost planet, but it was also consoling in its vision of female energy, mystery, sensuality, wisdom and unity. There was the possibility of a world reborn when the six women of the cast gathered closely together, pulsating with life. The deliberately slow start was wonderful. Olsen refused to rush, and in this one could see elements of her Bangarra background and her Indigenous heritage. Time is given its due as the fourth dimension; stillness is pregnant with anticipation; there is beauty and meaning in watching and waiting.

Prue Lang also looked ahead in time and space with the tautly constructed, coolly cerebral *Towards Innumerable Futures*. The well-travelled Lang is a long way from being a neophyte, and her experience was abundantly demonstrated in the assurance and elegance of her construction.

Three women and two men were dressed almost identically from top to toe, sporting severely bobbed hair, form-fitting pants, slightly blousy tops and sneakers. Lang constantly redefined the space with the dancers moving robotically, mathematically and enigmatically within it. They managed passing moments of human connection, but you'd place your money on the future belonging to the machines.

The all-female lineup was encouraging. It could be noted that women are far from achieving parity with men if you look at Bonachela's mainstage programming over his decade at the Sydney Dance Company's helm, but he hasn't pretended there isn't a problem — and he's working on it. DI

Sydney Dance Company in Antony Hamilton's *Forever & Ever*
Photo: Pedro Greig

Singapore

BY MALCOLM TAY

In the course of programming shows and commissioning new creations, the annual da:ns festival has helped facilitate unexpected partnerships. While Bangladeshi-British dancer-choreographer Akram Khan was performing at the festival in 2015, his company producer Farooq Chaudhry was invited to watch *SoftMachine*, a series of documentary performances featuring four Asian dance artists. Among them was Rianto (he goes by one name), whose background in Javanese court and folk traditions inflects his contemporary work. Chaudhry was so impressed with the Indonesian native that he asked a gobsmacked Rianto to replace Khan in the company's touring production of *Until the Lions*.

Presented at the Esplanade Theatre during the da:ns festival in October, *Until the Lions* is based on a tale from French-Indian poet Karthika Naïr's female-centric retelling of the *Mahabharata*. Rianto played the prince, Bhishma, who kidnaps the princess, Amba (Ching-Ying Chien), and ruins her life. Swearing revenge, Amba kills herself and is reborn as Shikhandi (Joy Alpuerto Ritter), who becomes a man by swapping genders with a forest deity and slays Bhishma in battle. While Khan's Bhishma was a stolid warrior, Rianto brought an ambiguity to the role that added a certain tenderness to his clashes with Chien.

A similar ambiguity was amplified in the premiere of his evening-length *Medium*, co-commissioned by the festival. At the Esplanade Theatre Studio, the focus fell on the shifting physicality of Rianto's lone body, accompanied by the spare percussions and vocals of Indonesian musician Cahwati. His cryptic whispers in darkness yielded to other sounds and gestures evoking feathered and feline creatures. The shapes and dynamics of his solo varied between hard and soft, reflecting his training in lengger, a folk dance in Central Java often performed by men in drag. But, here, Rianto stood for something not quite human or animal, male or female, as he moved compellingly between the borders of form and gender.

In November, the opening of *Minimalism: Space. Light. Object.* brought the efforts of some postmodern-dance pioneers to the public's attention. Featuring a few works by Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer, this blockbuster exhibition — jointly organized by the National Gallery Singapore and the ArtScience Museum — included screenings of *Breath Made Visible*, a 2009 biographical film about Anna Halprin, and *In the Steps of Trisha Brown*, a 2016 documentary about Paris Opera Ballet dancers learning Brown's *Glacial Decoy* (1979). The pared-down conceptualism of Brown's early oeuvre, in particular, was highlighted in a lecture by Leah Morrison, an alumna of Brown's eponymous troupe, and in two weekends of free performances.

Morrison restaged three Brown classics for two groups of 12, comprising local dancers and dance majors from LASALLE College of the Arts. Wearing navy-blue pullovers and pants, they performed at two different sites in the National Gallery Singapore while visitors stopped to watch. In *Leaning Duets I* (1970), a couple walked slowly while grasping each other by the hand, their bodies slanting outward and the sides of their bare feet touching with every step, before five more pairs of performers appeared. Those who fell over regained their balance with the help of their partners in a placid yet palpable struggle with gravity.

Sticks (1973) saw the dancers trying to keep long sticks in contact while joining them in a horizontal line. Then each performer poised one end of their stick at an angle against the floor, aiming to transfer the other end from the head to the shoulder without dropping it.

And in *Spanish Dance* (1973), five women evenly spaced in single file gradually pressed themselves into a tightly linked chain, their hips swaying to Bob Dylan's cover of Gordon Lightfoot's *Early Morning Rain*. Curving her arms overhead, the backmost performer inched forward and bumped into the one in front, who did the same to the next until the quintet reached a pillar.

The task-oriented structures, the everyday movements, the spontaneous give and take of weight: these ideas by Brown and her peers have inspired more than a handful of contemporary pieces made in Singapore over the years. Their influence could also be felt in Australian choreographer Alison Currie's *Close Company* for local group Raw Moves. The show, which premiered at Goodman Arts Centre's multipurpose studios a month before the exhibition, happened to be a fitting complement to and extension of the Brown revivals.

Dressed in stone-grey tops, dark blue pants and matching sneakers, dancers Matthew Goh and Stephanie Rae Yoong completed three sets of six tests, the performing and viewing space shrinking by half after each of the first two sets.

In one assignment, an inversion of Brown's *Leaning Duets*, the duo attempted to advance while bracing one another by the foot. Others had them probing the edges of personal boundaries and tipping into more expressive territory. Following each test, Goh and Yoong graded and mused on what they had done using score charts tacked to the whitewashed walls.

"I am glad that the discomfort is lessening with every performance," Yoong scribbled. "Does the discomfort have a link to the connection I feel?" DI

Trisha Brown's *Sticks* at the National Gallery Singapore
Photo: Malcolm Tay

Kansas City Ballet

Septime Webre / *The Wizard of Oz*

Nearly 80 years after the iconic film *The Wizard of Oz* was released, choreographer Septime Webre has created a fantastical ballet based on the cherished story that is both familiar and unlike any other.

The $1-million-plus joint production between Colorado Ballet, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Kansas City Ballet, who premiered it in October at Missouri's magnificent Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, was visually akin to a Cirque du Soleil spectacular, with stunning scenic design by Michael Raiford, glitzy costumes by Liz Vandal and spot-on atmospheric lighting by Trad A. Burns. Loaded with adroitly performed high-energy dancing, humour and top-notch special effects, the production has all the makings for box-office gold.

Webre, the artistic director of Hong Kong Ballet, based the two-act ballet on Book 1 of L. Frank Baum's *Oz* series as well as the film. As with many of his story ballets, including the critically acclaimed *Alice (in wonderland)*, Webre added a host of new characters to advance the story and create more dancing roles.

The original score by Obie Award-winning composer-violinist Matthew Pierce, performed live by the Kansas City Symphony, was perhaps the largest hurdle to acceptance in this version of *Oz* — you couldn't help but miss the famous songs from the film. Stylistically, Pierce's music hop-scotched about from Philip Glass minimalism to full-on sweeping orchestral drama, but always seemed to capture the mood of each scene.

The opening of the ballet on Raiford's skewed-perspective Kansas farm scene — evocative of Missouri regionalist artist Thomas Hart Benton's paintings — was the first volley in an explosion of eye-popping visuals that would come to define the production. Here we were introduced to the main characters: Dorothy, danced by effervescent Lilliana Hagerman, who stole hearts with her unbound hopefulness; Elysa Hotchkiss as the spiteful Miss Gulch and later the deliciously devilish Wicked Witch of the West; Liang Fu as Professor Marvel/the Wizard of Oz; and Taryn Mejia as Aunt Em and the benevolent Glinda.

Three farm hands were also part of that homespun scene, men who would later become the Scarecrow (Cameron Thomas), Tin Man (Dillon Malinski) and Lion (Humberto Rivera Blanco). The lifelike, scene-stealing Toto — Dorothy's beloved dog — appeared in the form of a puppet controlled onstage by Jeremy Hanson costumed as a farm hand.

The ballet briskly moved through familiar scenes from the film, including Dorothy's encounters with Miss Gulch and Professor Marvel

Kansas City Ballet in Septime Webre's *The Wizard of Oz*
Photo: Elizabeth Stehling

before being swept up by an animated tornado projected on a backdrop screen. Into the tornado's vortex flew the passing images of cows, farm implements and Miss Gulch, who flew midair across the stage atop her bicycle.

Flying sequences were prevalent throughout the production for many of the characters. Also in heavy use in Webre's multi-styled choreography, which was disappointingly lean on substantive dancing, were an awkward array of acrobatic partnered lifts, many involving Hagerman, who was often foisted upside down in the air.

Landing in Oz (noticeably without any reference to squashing the Wicked Witch of the East), Dorothy was greeted by Glinda, the Munchkins and a slew of other characters, with children from the Kansas City Ballet School appearing as a swarm of Grasshoppers. Through a bit of stage magic, the ruby slippers suddenly appeared on Dorothy's feet and her memorable journey down the yellow brick road began.

One of the more unique character additions were the Yellow Brick Roadies — dancers costumed as pieces of the road — who were also used to drive some of the ballet's action and interacted with the main characters, including an apple passing dance in the Haunted Forest.

Webre infused the production with more than a few pop culture references. The Emerald City's gatekeeper had an Austin Powers-like "mini-me" assistant and the Emerald City itself resembled a discotheque, where Dorothy and the gang did the popular Floss (or Washing Machine) dance seen everywhere these days on YouTube and social media. While kitschy in places, Webre's allusions to pop culture as well as other ballets (such as *La Bayadère*'s Kingdom of the Shades opening scene), all seemed to work as the multi-generational audience at the matinée performance I saw ate it up.

In a ballet with few serious dance moments, the finest came in a brief but lovely classical pas de deux in the second act between Mejia as the Emerald Ballerina and partner James Kirby Rogers as the Emerald Officer, which was a delicate oasis in a ballet full of non-stop action.

Choreographically more on the level of *The Nutcracker* than *Swan Lake*, in the end, Webre and Kansas City Ballet's *The Wizard of Oz* hit home where it counted, delivering the *Oz* story as most of us know it and in visually grand fashion.

Colorado Ballet danced *Oz* in February and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet will have their turn in May.

— STEVE SUCATO

Akram Khan Company

Akram Khan / *Xenos*

Xenos — directed, choreographed and performed by the U.K.'s celebrated Akram Khan — commemorates the more than four million racialized men who fought for the European and American armies in the First World War. The hour-long solo, presented at Ottawa's National Arts Centre in October, pays specific tribute to 1.5 million Indian soldiers, whose war effort had been buried during the rise of India's nationalism and subsequent rejection of colonial rule. The erasure of these soldiers' contribution to a war fought on foreign soils for the myth of the British Empire turned them into xenoi — strangers in their homeland and abroad.

Khan positions *Xenos* within today's political Brexit climate to speak for those who have become outsiders in Britain. His work also confronts the contemporary refugee crisis. These themes, recounted in the program notes and by Khan himself in promotional videos, envelop *Xenos* even before the performance begins.

Xenos unfolds in a succession of scenes that recreate the trauma of an imagined Indian soldier, embodied by Khan, who was a dancer in his pre-war life. The piece begins with his sudden appearance onstage — it's as if he has been violently thrown in front of us. Dressed in white with ghungroos, the small anklet bells tied to the feet of Indian classical dancers, Khan performs a traditional kathak dance at a wedding celebration in India.

The poise and elegance of the dance break down as Khan's shell-shocked soldier

Akram Khan in his solo *Xenos*
Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez

relives the nightmare of the war.

Convulsions fracture the dancer's composure as he absorbs the sounds of roaring explosions. He unwraps the strings of the ghungroo bells, which become chains that shackle his body. The familiar kathak rhythms give way to Vincenzo Lamagna's fissured and frantic acoustic score. The chairs, cushions and a low table — props in the wedding dance scene — are pulled off the stage. A ramp transforms into a ghostly and ghastly vision of First World War trenches.

The eeriness of the battlefield materializes through Michael Hulls' atmospheric space-shaping lighting and Mirella Weingarten's magnificent monolithic set design. Eventually, we watch the soldier as he re-experiences the labour of the trenches, digging and carrying artillery.

A gramophone perched on top of the ramp plays a recording that calls out names of Indian soldiers who died in battle. In fleeting moments, the five musicians positioned high above the ramp become visible, each one bathed in a golden light. They are phantoms — perhaps dead soldiers.

A recording of the poetic and poignant verse of Canadian writer Jordan Tannahill echoes the staged psychological toll, violence and futility of war, weaving its way into the choreography and drama: "Whose war, whose fire, whose hand is this, whose leg, who walks my legs, whose handgun, who breathes, who points my gun, who fires, for whom, what is my end?" Near the end of the performance, Khan performs a mournful and macabre dance to Mozart's *Requiem*.

The narrative that strings these scenes together is recounted through a choreography that is often not evocative enough for the message *Xenos* purports to convey. Basic bodily moves — walking, crawling, crouching, pulling, lying down — structure a large part of the movement vocabulary. Khan's executions of these movements and poses are at times uncompelling. When the gramophone summons the names of dead soldiers, Khan merely walks on the top of the ramp while pulling on ropes hanging above. The stance that Khan assumes to perform these everyday movements is too unpoised. These moves also lack energy: they are flat. When he lies still, he appears to be merely lying on the ground. In times of inaction, the dancing body should be resonating, taut and vital, exuding the momentous pain and alienation that *Xenos* seeks to incarnate. Such uneventful choreography weakens *Xenos*.

However, Khan's dancing is glorious when he performs his contemporary style infused with kathak, cutting the air with spins originally derived from Sufi whirls. Here, his breathtaking turns exude precision and power. He carves mesmerizing patterns on the ground in his floorwork. Each one rapidly metamorphoses into other equally dazzling impressions. He suddenly picks his body up off the ground to quickly rework his choreography into standing poses and movements. At one point, Khan dances to the beats of gunshots. We feel the weight of his steps and the force of his bent arms as they reverberate from the stage to the audience. I felt his moves resound in me.

Xenos is to be Khan's final solo performance: at the age of 44, he says, his body is failing him and he is no longer the performer he once was. Yet Khan's virtuosity, strength and technique are unsurpassed in the resplendent choreographic punctuations that are scattered throughout the piece. But more of these magnificent moments are needed. The performance falls short of capturing the magnitude of its ambitious political themes, and the choreography does not consistently reach high enough levels of artistry to do justice to its vision.

— SHEENAGH PIETROBRUNO

Gärtnerplatztheater

Erna Ómarsdóttir and Halla Ólafsdóttir / *Romeo and Juliet*

Kammerspiele

Trajal Harrell / *Juliet and Romeo*

The story of Romeo and Juliet has seen innumerable interpretations in dance, most focused on the love between the young couple. But two new interpretations presented at the end of November in Munich showed Shakespeare's tragic love story from the perspective of the pain and grief caused by loving the wrong person. One was by Erna Ómarsdóttir and Halla Ólafsdóttir from Iceland, and the other by American Trajal Harrell.

Ómarsdóttir, director of Iceland Dance Company, has been called a force of nature with her powerful pieces like *Sacrifice* and *We Saw Monsters*, rich in imagery from the darker sides of human existence. Ólafsdóttir is known for her experimental work as a dancer and choreographer, including with the Swedish band the Knife. In their *Romeo and Juliet*, created for the Gärtnerplatztheater, they focused on certain themes, which they described in an interview as gender roles, the freedom to love and the rebellion of the young couple.

They also defied any narrative. The result was a nightmarish horror show. Had it not been for Prokofiev's familiar emotive music of the same name, I would never have guessed that this piece was based on Shakespeare's drama.

It opened with the dancers standing in front of the curtain clad in flesh-coloured leotards with padded bums, thighs, calves and rippling chest muscles, designed by Sunneva Ása Weisshappel. They introduced themselves by their actual name and role; for example, "My name

is Anna, I am dancing weird sounds" and "My name is Guido, I am a Mexican wrestler." To a soundscape by Skúli Sverrisson, the dancers started walking, running or posing like blood-sucking vampires. Then Prokofiev's music set in, compassionately conducted by Daniel Huppert, and mass scene followed upon mass scene. There was never one Romeo or one Juliet, and couples (man-woman, man-man, woman-woman) were never together long enough to be identified as lovers.

With a reference to ballet, some dancers promenaded across the stage on half-toe with undulating arms like lost swans, while others dressed at the sides of the stage. The action mutated into a wrestling scene between combatants clad in red and pink latex leotards urged on by a cheerleading mob. Sometimes a woman took the winner's pose, sometimes a man.

There is no scene with Tybalt killing Mercutio, nor one with Romeo killing Tybalt in revenge. Instead, the whole cast in unison raised their arms over their heads, hands together, to plunge them down as if stabbing themselves in the stomach while thrusting their pelvises forward in sexually suggestive movement. There is no gentle friar giving Juliet the poison, but a sun-crowned goddess pressing couples to her naked breasts as if to drink her milk, but leaving with blood-smeared faces. When they are all through, the goddess was lifted up and carried out like the crucified Christ.

The second act started with the full cast visiting the grave, a steel construction in two levels (set is by Chrisander Brun). Under a dripping heart made out of pink neon tubes, they brought flowers and heart-shaped red balloons. The dancers, pristinely clad in white, sat down as couples, gently caressing each other. The lyrical scene soon changed to horror when they smeared themselves and each other with blood, and develop aggressive movements suggestive of brutal sex. Then a screen came down, with a video shot in rehearsal showing the blood smearing excesses in closeup. This was in no way integrated into the performance and I could not help thinking that the two choreographers had been in want of steps and needed to fill time. The piece ended with half the cast handling the other as if they were dead stiff bodies, constantly changing roles.

Throughout, the 20 dancers were fantastic, bringing energy to every scene and making the wild and violent images come to life.

While Ómarsdóttir and Ólafsdóttir's *Romeo and Juliet* was based on speed and quick changes, Harrell's *Juliet and Romeo* was quite the opposite. For long stretches the dancers expressed a single emotion, grief, with miniscule movements. Harrell draws his inspiration from butoh and voguing, and this piece, like many of his others, had the all-male cast of eight either show off on the catwalk with several quick changes of clothes or brought to almost stillness.

Harrell, a guest choreographer with Munich's Kammerspiele since 2017, premiered *Juliet and Romeo* in October of that year. He tells the story from the viewpoint of Juliet's nurse (danced by Harrell) after the couple has committed suicide. It is an exploration of her grief and thoughts about what Juliet was and could have become, and according to the program notes it is also intended

Gartnerplatztheater in Erna Ómarsdóttir and Halla Ólafsdóttir's *Romeo and Juliet*
Photo: Marie-Laure Briane

to be an exploration of womanliness.

The stage floor was divided by two large grave-like holes, each adorned with a marble-like slab. The space around these served as a catwalk. (The set is by Harrell and Erik Flatmo.) Harrell, as the nurse, sat at the side of the open stage on a bench in a black mourning dress reminiscent of the Renaissance, which he kept changing while watching the other members of the cast. Every time a scene changed, he got up and performed a sorrowful dance, sometimes to a woman's song accompanied by a lone guitar, sometimes to a pop song. Most moving was one solo where he sat twisting and turning his torso and hands with great expressiveness — you felt like sharing his tears at the end.

The men appeared in typically female attire, either walking on tip-toe in catwalk fashion or dancing. At one point, one dancer lay half in the grave. The others began to grieve, bending and distorting their limbs so that they slowly mutated into strange abstract forms. There were no protagonists, just jackets with the names Romeo, Juliet and Tybalt being handed from person to person during a fierce dance. And the fight between Romeo and Tybalt turned into a fight for attention on the catwalk.

It was interesting how my perception of the cast changed during the performance. At first I saw them as men dressed like woman. Then imperceptibly I just saw them as women. Perhaps it is because we are so used to perceiving gender in terms of fixed stereotypical ways of behaviour.

Both productions used Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a springboard to create something new. They played with expectations, defying narrative and the use of individual characters, instead turning feelings and fateful occurrences into a gloomy collective happening. Their focus was not on the love between two young people, but on the pain that human relationships can also involve. If these contemporary choreographies are a premonition of the future of relationships between two people no matter in what gender constellation, the outlook is bleak. The message seems to be: individuals are interchangeable and at the end each person is alone.

— JEANNETTE ANDERSEN

Kammerspiele in Trajal Harrell's *Juliet and Romeo*
Photo: Orpheas Emirzas

National Ballet of Cuba's Daniela Gomez (left) in the title role in Cathy Marston's *Prospera*
Photo: Nancy Reyes

International Havana Ballet Festival Alicia Alonso

Held every two years in Havana, the 26th International Havana Ballet Festival was renamed this year, with the intrepid 98-year-old Alicia Alonso — the founder and star of the National Ballet of Cuba, which produces the festival — honoured in its title.

With 26 productions, the festival showcased new and familiar dancers from around the globe, offered contemporary dance premieres, and celebrated popular pas de deux and exciting older works. It also paid homage to the Romantic era ballet *Giselle* and the 75th anniversary of Alicia Alonso's first performance in the central role for Ballet Theatre in New York City in 1943, partnered by Anton Dolin. Replacing Alicia Markova at short notice, Alonso's debut was considered a triumph. She first performed the ballet in Cuba in 1945 and staged her own version of the piece in 1958, which is the version the Cuban company dances today.

Alonso and her signature ballet *Giselle* were very much at the heart of this year's festival, which ran from October 28 to November 6. A number of performances of Alonso's version of the ballet were given, but the most exciting was the one designated as a tribute to Alonso, in which six dancers played each of the two central roles. If that sounds strange, believe me it wasn't. Sadaise Arencibía, Grettel Morejón and Viengsay Valdés tackled the title role, weaving in and out of the performance with their respective Albrechts (Raul Abreu, Rafael Quenedit and Dani Hernandez).

Though slightly different in tone, this trio of partnerships complemented each other perfectly, the women suggesting the exquisite Alonso herself, who danced this work with both passion and lyric grace. The use of several dancers in the same role gave the work a feeling of fluidity and suggested a universality about the lead characters that brought a surreal quality. Best in its second act, with the female corps de ballet exemplary as the wilis — those stalking spirits of the night who dance unfaithful lovers to death — the Cuban dancers created an organic force, moving and breathing as one.

Though poor health prevented her from attending the performance in the Teatro Nacional de Cuba, Alonso's spirit was there. Preceding the production, film of Alonso dancing Giselle with various celebrated partners, from Erik Bruhn to Vladimir Vassiliev, on important world stages, attested to the genius of her interpretation of what is frequently called the ballerina's Hamlet. The tumultuous

reception to both the film sequences and the live stage presentation was thrilling.

If the performances of *Giselle* suggested the genius of old-world dance, there were plenty of new performers and works to stimulate the modern imagination, suggesting National Ballet of Cuba is embracing modernity, not just providing a museum for the past.

Ely Regina's *Anyali* and *La Forma del Rojo* offered an erotic and tensile look at the Cuban company's dance and dancers. Physical and muscular, these works challenged classical connections, offering a visceral new look. On subsequent evenings, principal dancer and elegant technician Hernandez explored new vistas of modernity with Maria Rovira's *Anima* to Alberto Iglesias music. These two Cuban choreographers provided vital exploration of movement for the dancers of this primarily classical company.

British dancemaker Cathy Marston also offered a look at new vistas with *Prospera*, a work based on the final lines and images of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Marston typically creates works tethered to complex literary themes that, at first, seem impossible for ballet. In abstracting *The Tempest*, she never tries to tell its linear story, but deals with the imagery of the final lines spoken by Prospero. Here she mixes the characters, and a sense of male and female identities meld into a limbo land, not allowing gender to take precedence over movement, meaning and metaphor.

The work is dark, poetic and elegant with lifts that cause us to fly high with the dancers. If the piece is enigmatic, it is intended to be. Music by Lera Auerbach *(Dialogues on Stabat Mater)* is married superbly to the movement, with its gliding stretches and delicate footwork. Rumour has it American Ballet Theatre plans to stage the piece. [See the feature article on Marston on page 10.]

Spectacular moments along the way to the festival's grand closing gala included a mixed bill called Stars of the American Ballet, with Denys Drozdyuk, Joseph Gatti and Daniel Ulbricht bringing the house down performing their co-choreographed *Three Hombres*. Ulbricht reportedly wanted to bring American-style dance to Havana with this piece and the ultra-masculine, visceral dancing certainly did that.

The late Cuban choreographer Alberto Alonso (Alicia's brother-in-law who is credited with helping to create the Cuban style, a blend of Russian and Western ballet forms) was represented through his *Carmen* from 1967. The performance by Morejón and Quenedit proved this vintage choreography isn't dated, it's just of its time. There was a passionate quality to the performance and a ferocity of spirit, with the dancers connecting with the work's undercurrent of darkness.

On the downside, Danish Dance Theatre brought *Sirena*, a ho-hum resurrection of 1960s kitsch, with dancers rolling on the floor, walking relentlessly into infinity and flailing their arms while framed against a grainy filmed sequence of abstract images, lines and blotches projected onto a flapping piece of cloth. It was a bust.

What was most annoying about the festival? The way the audience erupted in applause and screamed for every technical achievement, leaping from their seats in the middle of a variation. Also irritating were the Russian-style bows at the end of every segment of a variation. Yes, quadruple fouettés are thrilling. Yes, tours en l'air that hang in space are exciting, but the build of a ballet is undermined by this sort of hysterical response. Dancers marching to the foot of the stage for approval and celebration, then returning to the footsteps of the ballet seem to be courting approval.

Bravest festival moment? Hearing dancer Petra Conti, a La Scala star turned international freelancer, talk about her bout with kidney cancer at a press conference. Told she'd never dance again, she has disproved her doctors, looking exquisite in *Paquita*, with the Royal Ballet's Fernando Montano partnering.

Most promising moment for the future? When 16-year-old Elisabeth Beyer of New York's Ellison Ballet sailed through Victor Gsovsky's choreography for *Grand Pas Classique* like a veteran of dance.

Most triumphant moment? Viengsay Valdés dancing in a thrilling tribute to Alonso, *For Alicia*, with original choreography by Tania Vergara, set to commissioned piano music by Frank Fernandez. An upstage screen showed film of the now wizened but still beautiful Alonso, her hands bird-like talons. Sitting in a large wing chair, she personified the aging dancer remembering her glorious past.

Downstage, Valdés explored the depth of Vergara's riveting dance imagery, which sometimes suggested Alonso performing her legendary Giselle. When the piece finished with a deep Alonso-style bow, it brought this festival full circle. It also raised the roof of the theatre.

— GARY SMITH

Daniel Sarabia and Elisabeth Beyer in Victor Gsovsky's *Grand Pas Classique*
Photo: Megamedia

Finding Tjimur Dance Theatre

JAY HIRABAYASHI, CO-PRODUCER
VANCOUVER INTERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL

In October 2017, I was invited to Akita, Japan, along with presenters from eight other countries, to attend Odoru Akita (Dance Akita), otherwise known as the Baku Ishii and Tatsumi Hijikata Memorial International Dance Festival. Baku Ishii is considered one of the primary founders of modern dance in Japan, and Tatsumi Hijikata, along with Kazuo Ohno, introduced a radical re-envisioning of dance that he called butoh.

Sixteen choreographers from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Canada and Costa Rica were invited to perform their works at the festival. The visiting presenters were asked to choose one or more of these works for presentations in their respective festivals or series. The choreographers were also vying for the first Tatsumi Hijikata Memorial Award, with the winner selected by a panel of judges that consisted of Akaji Maro, artistic director of Dairakudakan, Japan's largest and oldest butoh company; Natsu Nakajima, a renowned independent butoh artist; and festival director Santa Yamakawa.

I assumed, incorrectly, that most of the artists would be primarily influenced by butoh. As it turned out, most were influenced by street dance moves like breaking, locking and popping. Josh Martin, co-artistic director of Vancouver's Company 605, showed his own street dance influence and turned out to be the presenters' favourite, with invitations to perform in Costa Rica, Hungary, Bulgaria, Taiwan and Korea.

The jury, however, gave the Memorial Award to a butoh-influenced dancer/choreographer named Ruri Mito from Japan. They also gave a Special Award to Seoljin Kim from Korea, another dancer/choreographer sharing Mito's butoh intensity and her ability to move limbs and joints in ways they are not supposed to.

My choice was Tjimur Dance Theatre, formed in 2006 as Taiwan's first professional dance company dedicated to the Indigenous Paiwan culture. One of our curatorial interests at the Vancouver International Dance Festival is in work by under-represented or marginalized communities, including Indigenous artists; in 2019, six of our 13 presentations will be by Indigenous or Métis artists. The work that Tjimur Dance Theatre will bring is *Varhung – Heart to Heart*.

Choreographer Baru Madiljin was inspired to create this work after noticing that oppressed people in his hometown, Sandimen in Pingtung, Taiwan, often hide their emotions inside. After a few songs and drinks, however, the repressed emotions begin to flow. Externally, movements might appear tipsy, but, internally, there is the sober communication, from heart to heart, of joy, sorrow, anger and elation.

Dance has always been a primary conveyer of culture. Traditionally, this cultural transmission has been within one's own tribal community. Preserving and honouring traditional values while communicating them to others is the kinetic path taken by Tjimur Dance Theatre.

One of my mentors, seminal Canadian choreographer Paula Ross, said that great dance conveys "universal tribal metaphors." This is meaning transmitted from heart to heart that requires no language translation. Tjimur Dance Theatre's performance in Akita did that to me. I was absorbed into their singing and dancing. I got to know them through their heartfelt movement and songs. When they came up onstage at the end of the festival to acknowledge my choosing them, what did they immediately do? They took me in their arms and began to sing and dance.

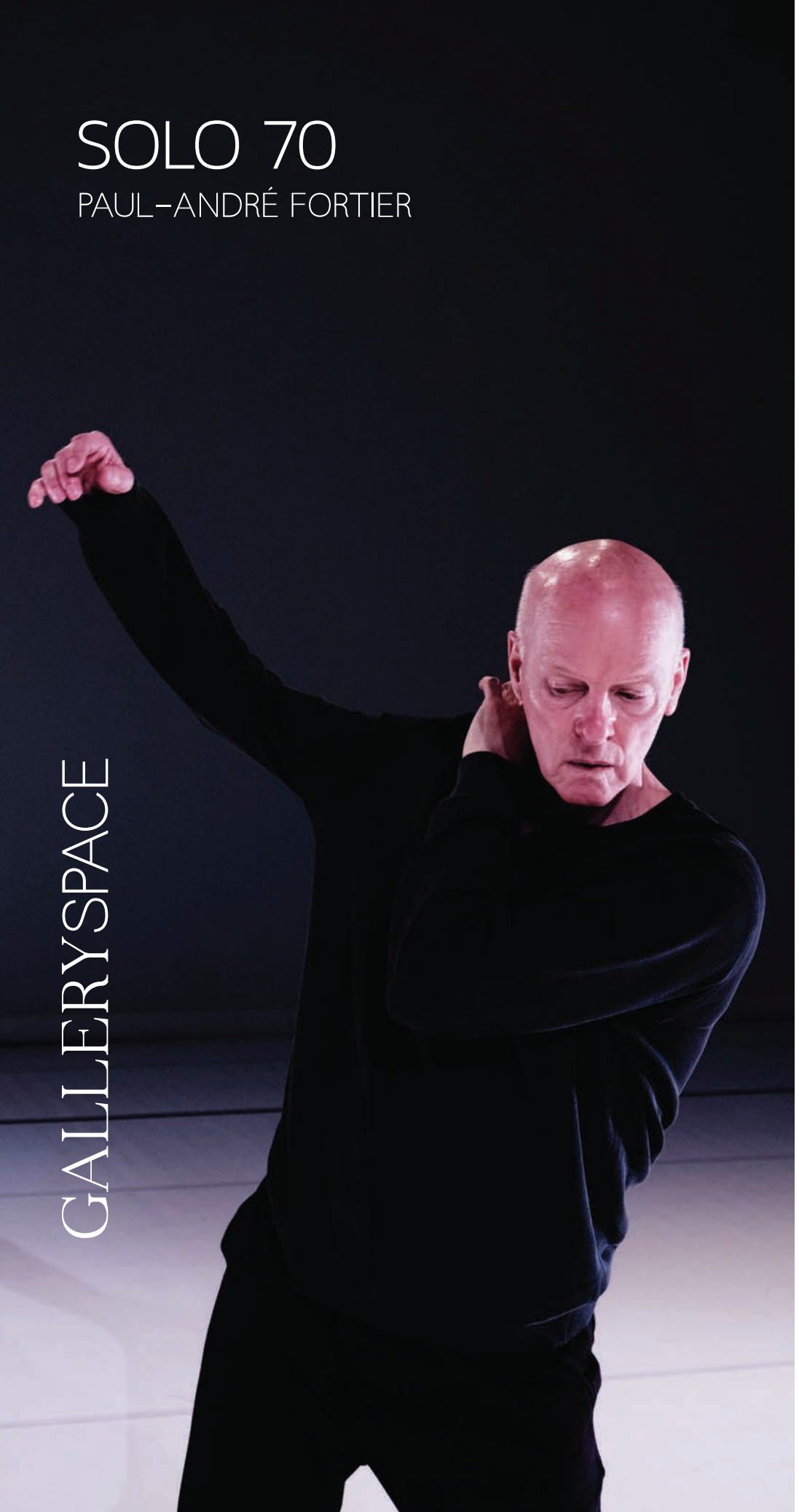
Tjimur Dance Theatre's *Varhung – Heart to Heart* will be presented at the Vancouver International Dance Festival in March. Learn more at vidf.ca.

Tjimur Dance Theatre in Baru Madiljin's *Varhung – Heart to Heart*
Photo: Jhao-Lun Huang

SOLO 70

PAUL-ANDRÉ FORTIER

GALLERYSPACE



SOLO 70 is my final choreography for my company, Fortier Danse-Création, which was founded in Montreal in 1981. It ceased operations on December 31, 2018. *SOLO 70* celebrates both my 70 years of life and my company's incredible journey.

When it comes to choreographic creation, I am an adventurer, and dancing at the age of 70 is my final challenge. I firmly believe in the poetry of the aging body and sincerely hope that my extraordinary adventure will inspire other choreographers and dancers to take risks of their own.

I would like to thank all my collaborators for their support over the years. It is largely thanks to them that I have been able to build such a substantial body of work, which comprises some 60 choreographies.

Gilles Savary, who has been at the company's administrative helm for 27 years, and I are also very grateful to Canadian promoters and to the entire Canadian dance world. We thank you all from the bottom of our hearts; it has been a true pleasure to work with you.
— PAUL-ANDRÉ FORTIER

Paul-André Fortier began his career as a dancer in 1972 with Le Groupe Nouvelle Aire, and made his first choreography six years later. From March 2006 to October 2012, he performed his Solo 30X30 *450 times around the world.*

Photo: Sandrick Mathurin

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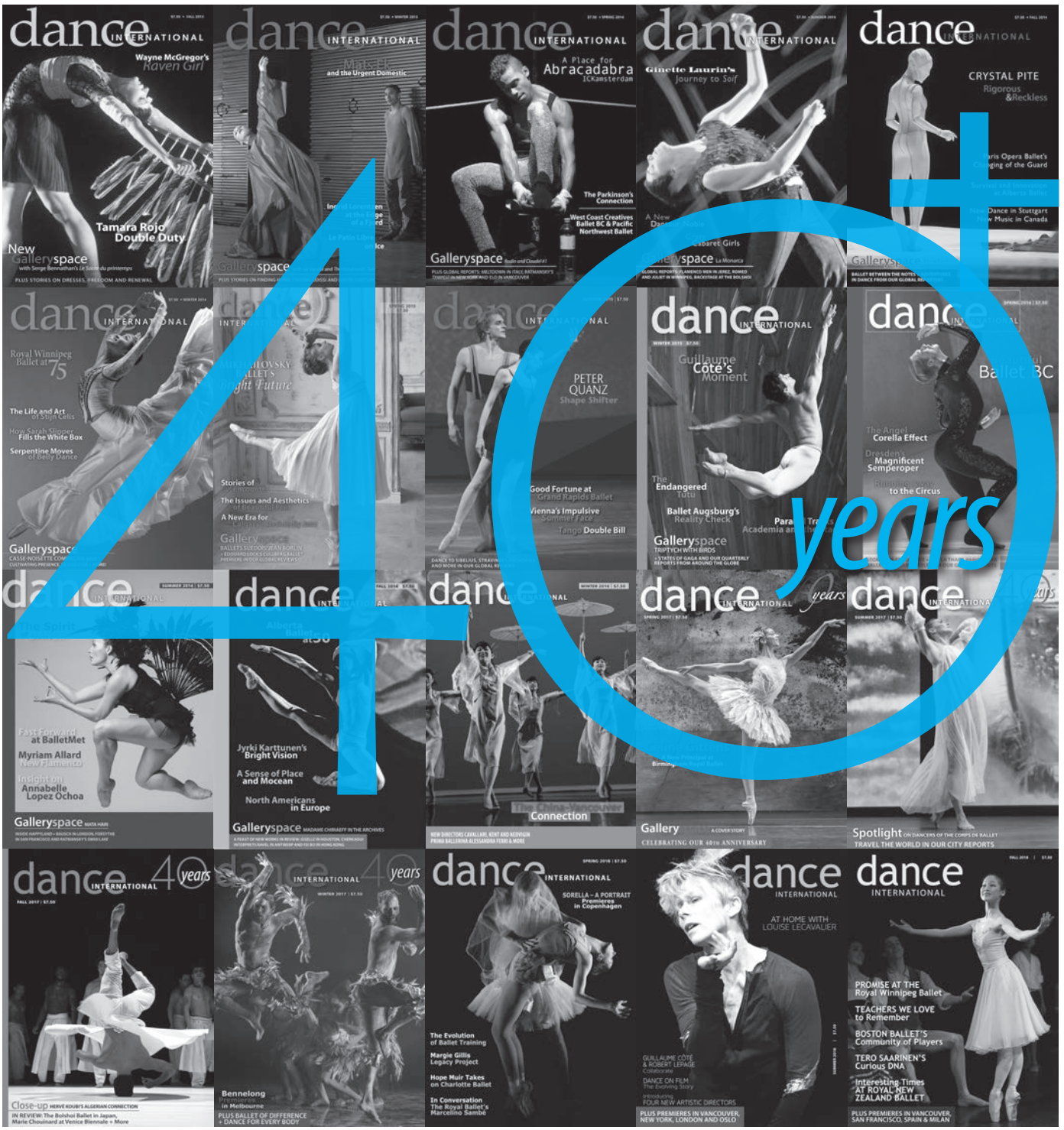

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Interested in joining the Academy for our year-round training programs? Contact the office for audition and registration information.

2009/2010/2013/2016 Pacific West Award for Dance Studio with Most Positive Attitude, Peer Encouragement & Intercultural Respect
2009/2012/2015 Richmond Arts Award for Arts Education Finalist
2013 Richmond Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Award Finalist
2013 Ethel Tibbits Women of Distinction in the Arts Award

award-winning




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