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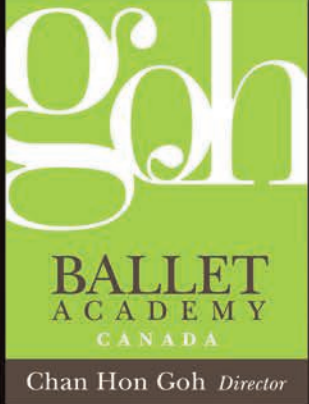
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Subscription & Advertising enquiries:
subscriptions@danceinternational.org
advertising@danceinternational.org

DANCE INTERNATIONAL
Scotiabank Dance Centre
677 Davie Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6B 2G6
Tel: (604) 681-1525 • Fax: (604) 681-7732
info@danceinternational.org
www.danceinternational.org

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Choosing photographs for *Dance International* is one of the pleasures of my job. The magazine's designer, Brenda Finamore, and I spend hours getting the best image we can for each piece, each page.

The selection received from Helsinki Dance Company for Raisa Rauhamaa's feature on Jyrki Karttunen left us with big smiles. Not just for their colour and energy, but also because of their good-natured whimsy. There is even what appears

to be genuine glee on the dancers' faces in several of the photos! See what you think of our choices, starting on page 18.

In his quarterly Notebook, Michael Crabb tackles the situation of arts writers who increasingly find themselves sidelined in daily journalism and whose expertise can be under-appreciated in our egalitarian age. This makes specialist magazines like *Dance International* all the more important as a dedicated space for serious dance writers. **Creating opportunities for the range of our contributors — from the emergent to the masters — is another of the pleasures of my job.** Michael, who has been writing about dance since 1972, and in *Dance International* since 1984, is, of course, one of the latter.

Victor Swoboda, another accomplished professional, files his inaugural Montreal report. Many of you will be familiar with his byline: Victor has written for *Dance International* on an occasional basis since 1993 and for the *Montreal Gazette* since 2001. One of his earliest stories for us was on tango, a form he knows firsthand. Two of Victor's favourite tango experiences? Dancing outdoors at a park in Verdun, Quebec, overlooking the St. Lawrence River, and in Paris on the banks of the Seine. In this issue, Victor also files from Montpellier, France, where he attended the annual summer contemporary dance festival.

And I file from Texas: Houston Ballet's new *Giselle* made for an irresistible journey to see and share with you another adventure in classical repertoire, one we are happy to make space for here, in *Dance International*.

Kaija

Kaija Pepper
editor@danceinternational.org

Alberta Ballet's Anthony Pina in Jean Grand-Maitre's *The Fiddle and the Drum* (2007), set to the music of Joni Mitchell
Photo: Charles Hope



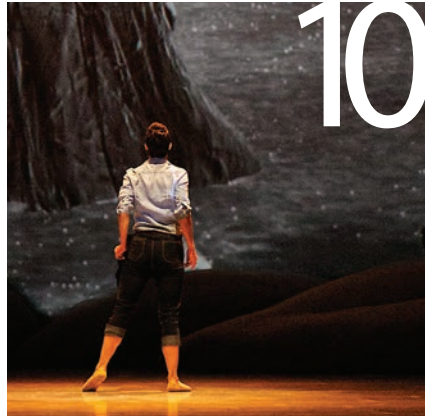
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Dance International



DIMagazine



FEATURES

- 6 A Sense of Place and Mocean** by **Don Rieder**
Susanne Chui and Sara Coffin in Nova Scotia

COVER STORY

- 10 Resilience on the Prairies** by **Kate Stashko**
Alberta Ballet finds new relevance at 50
- 14 Good Sense, Great Dancing** by **Jennifer Fournier**
Alberta Ballet's Kelley McKinlay knows when to swagger, when to stand still

- 18 Dancing into a World of Magic** by **Raisa Rauhamaa**
Jyrki Karttunen's bright vision in Helsinki

- 28 Making the Move** by **Gigi Berardi**
Why Europe beckons North American dancers

- 32 Boys and Men Who Dance** by **Andrew Westle**
Beyond bullying, toward gender equity

22 DANCE NOTES

- 23 Canada Dance Festival at Diefenbunker**
by **Lys Stevens**

- 25 Dance Daughters of Dubai**
by **Tej Rae**

QUOTABLES

- 25 Photo from *Lois Greenfield: Moving Still***
by **William A. Ewing**

- 35 Excerpt from *Dance to the Piper***
by **Agnes de Mille**

- Michael Crabb's**
26 NOTEBOOK

27 OBITUARY

Geneviève Salbaing
by **Linde Howe-Beck**

34 MEDIAWATCH

Jirí Kylián's *Oskar* and *Free Fall*
by **Silvia Poletti**

36 DIRECTORY

38 INSIDE ED

Dance Literacy
by **Carol Anderson**

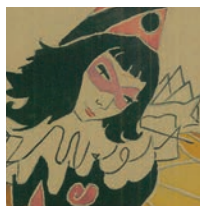
GLOBAL REPORTS

- 39 Vancouver**
by Kaija Pepper
- 40 Toronto**
by Michael Crabb
- 42 Winnipeg**
by Holly Harris
- 43 Montreal**
by Victor Swoboda
- 44 San Francisco**
by Allan Ulrich
- 45 New York**
by Robert Greskovic
- 47 London**
by Sanjoy Roy
- 48 Madrid**
by Justine Bayod Espoz
- 49 Copenhagen**
by Anne-Marie Elmby
- 51 Oslo**
by Fredrik Rütter
- 52 Singapore**
by Malcolm Tay
- 53 Sydney**
by Deborah Jones
- 54 St. Petersburg**
by Laura Cappelle

REVIEWS

- 56 Montpellier Dance Festival**
by Victor Swoboda
- 57 Hong Kong Ballet**
Balanchine, Liang, Fei / Mixed Bill
by Kevin Ng
- 58 Stuttgart Ballet**
Demis Volpi / *Salome*
by Gary Smith
- 59 Houston Ballet**
Stanton Welch / *Giselle*
by Kaija Pepper
- 60 Royal Ballet Flanders**
Cherkaoui, Verbruggen, Béjart / Mixed Bill
by Judith Delmé
- 61 Oregon Ballet Theatre**
Nicolo Fonte / *Beautiful Decay*
by Martha Ullman West

62 GALLERYSPACE



Madame Chiriaeff in the Archives

SEASON : 2016/2017

PREMIERES

MONADE : WORLD PREMIERE
Choreographies by Mauro Bigonzetti and Goyo Montero
10 DECEMBER 2016, OPERA

DON QUIJOTE : WORLD PREMIERE
Dance piece by Goyo Montero
Music: new composition by Owen Belton
22 APRIL 2017, OPERA

MADE FOR US II : WORLD PREMIERE
Choreographies by Jiří Bubeníček and Jeroen Verbruggen
23 JUNE 2017, THEATRE

INTERNATIONAL BALLET GALA
MARCH 10 AND 11, 2017

REVIVALS

KAMMERTANZ
Choreographies by William Forsythe, Christian Spuck and Goyo Montero
08 OCTOBER 2016, OPERA

CYRANO
Dance piece by Goyo Montero
04 FEBRUARY 2017, OPERA

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A Sense of Place and Mocean



Susanne Chui and Sara Coffin in Nova Scotia

by Don Rieder



In Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the harsh and beautiful north Atlantic coast, Mocean Dance — whose name speaks to the dominant element in their environment, the Atlantic Ocean — has built a striking repertoire of commissioned and original work. This hardy dance company, now in its 15th year, has nourished a diverse, lively and intimately connected arts community held together by a strong sense of place.

Nova Scotia is the easternmost province of maritime Canada. It is tenuously linked to the mainland by a narrow stretch of red clay and marshland. This just above sea-level bridge looks as if a strong storm and tidal surge will wash it away. For Susanne Chui and Sara Coffin, co-artistic directors of Mocean Dance since 2012, a sense of place and a sense of self are inseparable.

Chui is one of the central figures in Halifax's contemporary dance community. She trained and danced in Toronto for several years, touring in works by many of Canada's independent choreographers. Returning to Halifax in 2007, she focused her considerable energy on collaborative creation with local dancers and musicians.

Coffin spent 11 years in Vancouver, where she completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in dance at Simon Fraser University, and received the Iris Garland Emerging Choreographer Award from Vancouver's Dance Centre. She recently completed her Master of Fine Arts in choreography and performance at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

I asked Chui and Coffin, both born in Halifax and friends from childhood, about the rewards and challenges of making art in a small place. "Why move away? Why do we have to leave home to be artists?" was their response.

For both, what really matters is family, friends, community and dance. They speak of dance as the form into which they pour their lives, how artistic and domestic choices are inseparable, and how those choices inspire each other in deeply significant ways. Yet both readily acknowledge that in a small community one has to honour what is shared and known, and also acknowledge what is missing.



For Mocean's co-artistic directors, dance is a way of knowing, a way of finding answers to questions of belonging, of the essence of place and of the value of the people in that place. Mocean's 2013 production of *Burnwater* was a memorable example of this vision brought to life.

Conceived and directed by sound artist Erin Donovan, the multidisciplinary site-specific performance was choreographed by Chui in collaboration with company dancers Jacinte Armstrong and Rhonda Baker, and held at blacksmith and sculptor John Little's working forge and seaside property in East Dover, Nova Scotia. Dance, drama, music and audience interaction with large, complex sound sculptures created by Little were used to tell the story of his creative and community life.

The sculptures were placed along a path that wound through deep woods and opened out on the shoreline or in small clearings, with huge rocks serving as focal points. At one point along the path, a dancer performed on an erratic (a large boulder left after the retreat of a glacier) that was still attached to the shore like a small island. The dancer, with bending, arching and rolling undulations of her spine and limbs, echoed the movement of water and wind, of tall grasses, of the shifting branches of spruce trees and of the fluttering leaves on the branches of the hardwoods.

Later, in a grassy clearing, we came across a large totemic sculpture of wire and hammered iron on top of a huge granite boulder. As we watched from below, two dancers appeared above us. Backlit by the setting sun, they moved up the slope of the boulder to its summit. Dressed in ragged black fabric caught by the wind, they moved like ancient ritual figures of ravens and seemed larger than normal human beings, like petroglyphs come to life. The sculpture

then became a stringed and percussive instrument played by the dark and angular dancing figures.

Two other recent works, *Canvas 5x5* and *Sable Island*, highlight Mocean Dance's gift for collaborative work that celebrates the power of place and elevates a landscape and its people to almost mythic status.

Canvas 5x5 is an act of love and renewal from Ottawa-based choreographer Tedd Robinson, four of Mocean's dancers (including Chui) and one bagpiper, who together created a lively post-modern interrogation of Celtic music and dance, which has historically been a strong influence on Nova Scotian culture.

The piece gets its title from the five large squares of white canvas and five white squares that resemble pizza boxes used as costumes and sculptural elements. The use of the canvas as kimonos first catches the eye, and a floating walk and gestural patterns that reminded me of buyo, a Japanese court dance. Timeless archetypal beings and relationships are suggested as the dancers take the risk of still sculptural moments with grace, strength and presence.



In contrast to the stillness, there is driving music and leaping and stomping as the dancers pull energy up from the earth. Celtic music has a quick tempo and an irregular beat, and in one section the dancers play a challenging game of "can you keep up with the music?" In this high-stakes game, one dancer comes downstage, and the others count out the beat. If the dancer succeeds, she is applauded. If she fails, she returns upstage and becomes a counter, and another dancer takes her place. The audience is on the edge of their seats, and it's also a window into what it takes to be a dancer — that ever-alert sensitivity to changes in the rhythm and the beat.

Sable Island by Vancouver-based, French-born Serge Bennathan premiered in Halifax in 2015, set to music by Quebec composer Bertrand Chénier. With a population of five, plus 500 feral horses and 50,000 seals, Sable Island is a 40-kilometre ribbon of sand off the coast of Nova Scotia that's only 1.5 kilometres wide and 28 metres high at its highest point. The island is fragile and held together by marram grass and low growing shrubs. Buffeted by ferocious winds and waves, it never stops changing shape.

Left: Rhonda Baker with the sculpture *Mobile* by John Little in Mocean Dance's *Burnwater*
Photo: Holly Crooks

Right: D'arcy Gray and Jacinte Armstrong in Mocean Dance's *Burnwater*
Photo: Holly Crooks

In this work, five dancers embody the fabled island's mystery and isolation, creating wind, stormy waves, shifting dunes and the wild grace of Sable Island's horses. One section of the work brings Haitian rhythms and imagery as an imagined current that moves north from the Caribbean and washes over the island like a shape-shifting fog. There is a subtle acknowledgement of Nova Scotia's old commercial ties to Caribbean sugar plantations: merchants and bankers grown wealthy selling salt cod to feed slaves, and bringing salt and rum north to Canada and New England.

The intensive creation period with Bennathan was transformative for both Coffin and Chui. Coffin explains that, "After a challenging two years of work on my master's degree, *Sable Island* required me to use myself in ways that were more primal, more intuitive and more fully embodied." On a personal level, Coffin adds, "In the studio, my role as co-artistic director was less important than my role as a dancer in a tight ensemble. Serge's metaphor of surviving a shipwreck brought us closer together as artists and as women deeply connected to our sense of place. During the creation process, I came back to Mocean Dance as a dancer."

For Chui, "In *Sable Island*, Serge gave us so many layers of imagery to work with and we always went as far and as deep with the movement as we could. At one point, I asked him if we had gone too far and he said there is no such thing. Over the course of the performance, I felt transformed from domesticated to wild, just like the horses of Sable Island!"



Left: Sara Coffin
Photo: Joshua Sugiyama

Below: Suzanne Chui
Photo: Michelle Doucette



We are always in motion; our blood flows, our lungs expand and contract, and our hearts beat like a drum keeping time. All around us the world is in motion; leaves flutter, waves roll and crash, cars zip by. Inside of this wonderful life-song, our minds and spirits swirl, connecting us to our inner and outer worlds and to each other. Dance is inside and all around us; all we have to do is open to it.

— Suzanne Chui

Excerpt from Chui's International Dance Day Message 2016, commissioned by the Canadian Dance Assembly

Finally, *Body Abandoned*, choreographed by Coffin and developed at Smith College's department of dance as part of her thesis requirements, illustrates Mocean Dance's ability to tackle large social issues. A striking multimedia performance for three dancers, *Body Abandoned* examines the painful disconnect between body and mind in the digital era. Coffin brought her company dancers to Northampton as artists-in-residence to create and perform the piece; this partnership between a professional touring company and Smith College was a first for both, a collaboration across disciplines and across theatrical and academic boundaries.

While performing locally and touring nationally (*Sable Island* was in Ottawa at the Canada Dance Festival in June) are two main concerns of any professional dance company, Mocean Dance also has a strong mandate to serve the needs of regional artists, a commitment expressed in a series of creation labs and teaching initiatives. The first is the CLEaR Forum (Choreographic Lab, Exploration and Research Forum), a weeklong intensive residency for mid-career choreographers developed by Coffin in partnership with the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts in Canning, Nova Scotia.

CLEaR matches choreographers with dancers and mentors in an open environment without the pressure of presentation. Mocean also created a mentoring program for emerging artists, EMERGE, which offers paid apprenticeship and understudy roles.

The energy and vision of its co-artistic directors keep Mocean Dance rooted in the essence of place as well as decisively moving it off this dance island and out into deep water. Thinking about the number and diversity of the company's projects and the dancers' admirable commitment to art-centered experience, the extended metaphor of marram grass comes to mind.

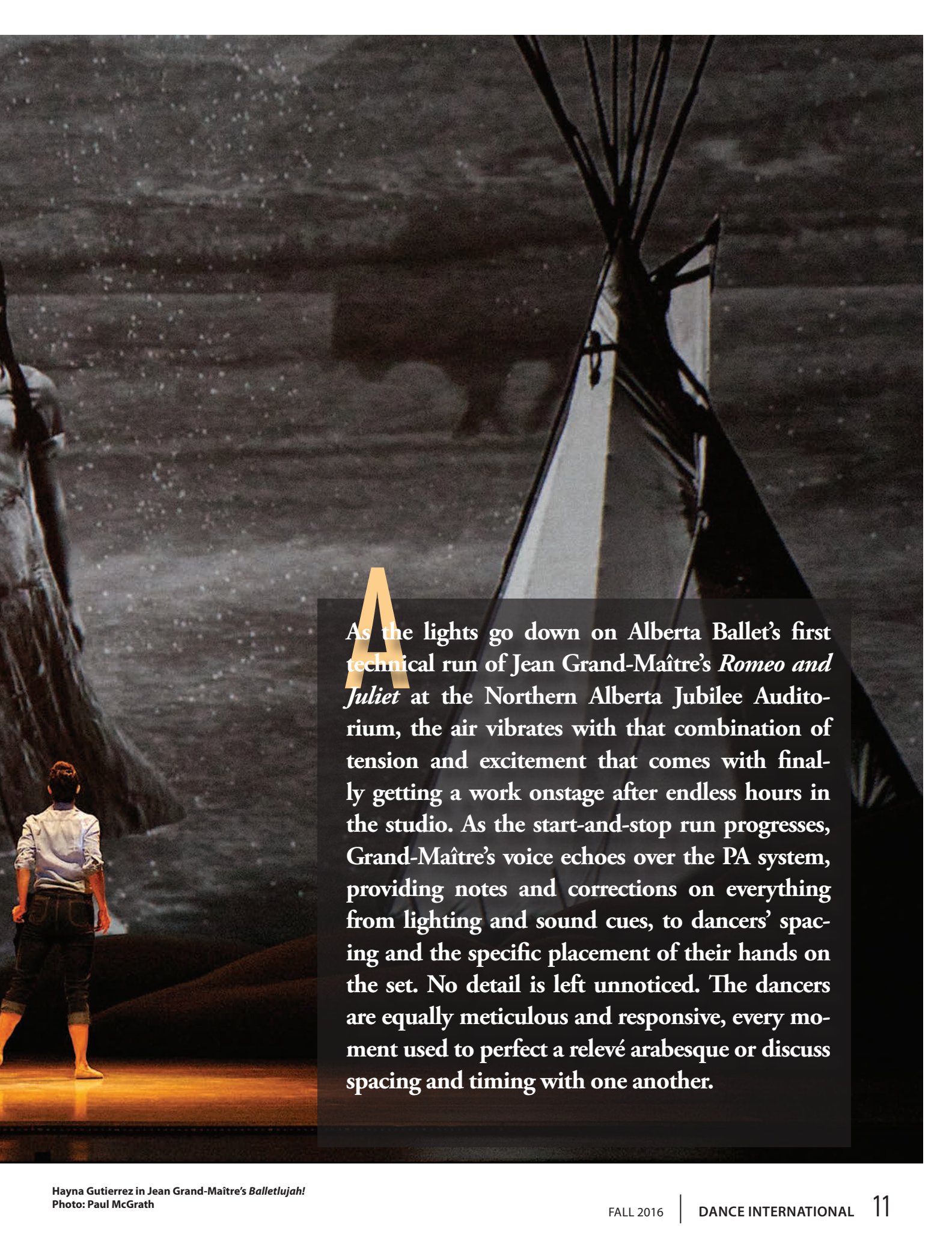
Marram grass is that spiky grass that catches at your legs as you walk over the dunes and down to the beach. In a strong wind, the grasses trace wild arcs and giddy abstract forms in the loose sand. As tough and resilient as marram grass, Mocean Dance has deep roots that have woven a thick web that connects across disciplines with other local artists. At the head of its current incarnation, Chui and Coffin continue to build and support a tenacious arts community in Halifax. ^{or}



Resilience on the Prairies

Alberta Ballet
finds new relevance
at 50

by Kate Stashko



As the lights go down on Alberta Ballet's first technical run of Jean Grand-Maitre's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium, the air vibrates with that combination of tension and excitement that comes with finally getting a work onstage after endless hours in the studio. As the start-and-stop run progresses, Grand-Maitre's voice echoes over the PA system, providing notes and corrections on everything from lighting and sound cues, to dancers' spacing and the specific placement of their hands on the set. No detail is left unnoticed. The dancers are equally meticulous and responsive, every moment used to perfect a relevé arabesque or discuss spacing and timing with one another.

Grand-Maitre, who is also the company's artistic director, is demanding; there is no doubt about that. But his tone is warm and understanding. He's been a performer, too, and knows how difficult it is, so he continually watches out for safety and comfort onstage. The sense of teamwork is palpable, which provides the first clue as to how the company has arrived at its 50th anniversary season.

As I watch the dancers move through the complicated choreography and deal with the changes and challenges that arise in a technical rehearsal, it is clear that this is not the Alberta Ballet of the 1960s. The company's technical skill has skyrocketed since its early days, now boasting classically trained dancers from around the globe. And yet its pioneering spirit has remained intact. Its artists are some of the hardest working and most ambitious you will ever see on a Canadian ballet stage, possessing the same work ethic for which Albertans are widely known.

Alberta Ballet has its roots in Ruth Carse's performing group, Dance Interlude, which toured Alberta and was later renamed Edmonton Ballet, and then, in 1966, Alberta Ballet. When, in 1975, Carse transitioned to working exclusively for the School of Alberta Ballet, the company moved through several artistic directors and eventually merged with Calgary City Ballet in 1990.

Tamara Bliss, director of the University of Alberta's Orchesis Dance Group, remembers Alberta Ballet in 1993, when she arrived in Edmonton from New York. The company was under the artistic direction of Ali Pourfarrok. "I thought Alberta Ballet was a talented company and I enjoyed their energy and diversity in choreography," Bliss says. "Although Ali was probably not the most accomplished choreographer, he brought in others who were exciting and contemporary." It was a big deal for the small company to bring in Peter Pucci, former Pilobolus dancer and a musical theatre choreographer from New York, in 1994, Bliss remembers.

When Mikko Nissinen took over in 1998, he brought Balanchine works into the repertoire, which marked a major milestone for Alberta Ballet. But many saw the Finnish director's choices as a move backward, limiting the company's repertoire. However, Nissinen began a major shift toward a more technically skilled group of dancers, and this contribution paved the way for his successor and current artistic director Jean Grand-Maitre.

Grand-Maitre took the reins in 2002, making the 2016-2017 season his 15th with the company. Grand-Maitre, from Quebec, had a brief performing career with Ballet British Columbia and Theatre Ballet of Canada, before working as a freelance choreographer, making works for companies such as Paris Opera Ballet and Stuttgart Ballet, as well as several major Canadian companies. He remembers that, when he arrived at Alberta Ballet with its dual bases of Calgary and Edmonton, "There were a lot of people in the community who cared about the company. As long as we worked hard and produced something that was committed, I knew the local audiences would respond well. Albertans are very ambitious, and, in those days, anything seemed possible."

Grand-Maitre was also acutely aware of the solid foundation Nissinen had laid, providing him with strong, versatile, classically trained dancers who were as ambitious as he was. He felt Nissinen's programming had been solid, and that the dancers knew what was expected of them. But, he adds, "Mikko's was almost an American way of approaching a ballet company, and I wanted more of a Canadian soul. I wanted to introduce more Canadian choreographers; I wanted to infuse the work with something that gave us a unique identity. I just thought there was a better way to connect with our community. So that was one of my challenges."

The other obvious challenge of directing a ballet company in Alberta is, of course, the volatile nature of its energy-based economy. All art forms demand that artists consider their context, and



Jean Grand-Maitre, Colby Parsons and Alberta Ballet company artists in rehearsal for *Class Acts*
Photo: Maximilian Tortoriello



Alberta Ballet in Aszure Barton's *Happy Little Things*
(*Waiting on a Gruff Cloud of Wanting*)
Photo: Paul McGrath

In October 2015, when I attended a remount of *Balletlujah!* (Grand-Maitre's k.d. lang pop ballet), I walked into a packed house, and the performance ended with a standing ovation. Ballet is alive and well in the Prairies, and this is in no small part due to the innovation and resilience of Alberta Ballet.

Resilience is the ability of an object to return to its original form after being stretched — an elasticity of sorts. Perhaps resilience in today's challenging artistic climate is returning to the form in a slightly different way, adapting and mutating as the context demands.

The company's foray into pop ballets has certainly placed it in a more financially comfortable position that has allowed for expansion in several other directions, both artistically and operationally. In 2009, Grand-Maitre created his version of *Romeo and Juliet*, and, in 2012, the company mounted *Swan Lake* for the first time, choreographed and staged by former American Ballet Theatre dancer Kirk Peterson after Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. Grand-Maitre notes that mounting the classics is no small feat, due to the astronomical costs of costumes and set, and the huge amount of rehearsal time necessary to prepare these works. He considers the company's *Swan Lake* one of the major milestones of his time as artistic director, and is proud to have joined the ranks of other Canadian groups producing on this scale.

Alberta Ballet has also been able to continue *Up Close*, a program that nurtures its own emerging choreographers. Nearly every season, a dancer from within the company has a platform upon which they can create with the company dancers and have their work presented within Alberta Ballet's regular season; past artists have included Sabrina Matthews and Yukichi Hattori. *Up Close* sells out nearly every year, indicating that Albertan audiences are hungry to see new work in an intimate setting.

In 2014, Alberta Ballet launched its youth bridging company, AB Ballet II, which doubled in size in its second season. Participants receive an opportunity to work at a professional level, to train and perform with company dancers, and be paid an honorarium, while the company benefits from occasionally having a larger cast that facilitates mounting large-scale classical works. AB Ballet II also fulfills an important role in the company's outreach efforts, travelling to smaller centres around Alberta and performing throughout the public school system, helping to nurture a future generation of balletgoers.

When I sat down with dancers Laura Vande Zande and Kelley McKinlay, I was again reminded of the ambition and work ethic that are necessary for a dancer to thrive, especially in the Albertan context. They must derive satisfaction from knowing they are playing a significant role in bringing ballet to audiences that may otherwise be isolated from this art form.

Grand-Maitre quickly learned that he and his company needed to be ready and able to adapt to the fluctuations in finances and audience sizes. "I knew we needed the classical ballets to survive, but I came to the rapid conclusion that we had to, as they say on Wall Street, diversify our portfolio," he says.

This led to the presentation of family-oriented productions (Grand-Maitre's *Cinderella*), dramatic works for an adult audience (Grand-Maitre's *Romeo and Juliet* and, in a company premiere, Stanton Welch's *Madame Butterfly*) and, in 2007, the first in a series of pop ballets by Grand-Maitre. *The Fiddle and the Drum*, for example, was set entirely to a score of Joni Mitchell's music. Mitchell, a fellow Albertan and somewhat of a recluse, came out of hiding to help create this new work, which eventually successfully toured North America. Pop ballets became not only a way for Alberta Ballet to draw a new, younger audience, but a means of collaborating with fellow Canadian artists, including Sarah McLachlan and (another Albertan) k.d. lang, in addition to international pop legend Elton John.

Some criticized Alberta Ballet for this move, accusing the company of "selling out" their art form in order to fill seats. But in an artistic climate that sees ballet struggling to maintain its audiences, like every other performing art form, can we criticize a company that is keeping the form relevant and current, and expanding its audience to record numbers?

“Working in Alberta can have kind of a bubble effect,” says Vande Zande, a Calgarian who is entering her fifth season with the company. “We don’t see as much here as people living in other cities can. But, because of those limited opportunities, people come to see our shows.”

When asked why she chose Alberta Ballet, Vande Zande notes that she saw it as one of the most accessible dance companies in Canada, with a good mix of classical and contemporary work. “After seeing them perform, this was the company in which I could visualize myself working. It’s a very good fit for me.”

McKinlay says, “I love living in a city where art is *not* the main focus because it’s a real challenge and you have to put in that much more effort to get the work out to the public. Of course, there are times I wish this was a place where people go [to the ballet] because that’s the social norm, but I’m also very happy that it’s not. I love the challenge.”

In his time at Alberta Ballet, McKinlay specifically notes that the addition of pop ballets to the repertoire “sparked an era of dance that attracted new audiences and was a huge turning point for Alberta Ballet.”

He adds, “The company had to look at the city we live in, the country we live in, and the time we live in, and really be relevant.”

That resilience is something Grand-Maitre sees as one of the company’s major strengths, along with the work ethic and ambition of the dancers and artistic staff. It is with this winning combination that Alberta Ballet enters its 50th anniversary season, which includes the company premiere of Ben Stevenson’s *Dracula*, a presentation of New York’s *Pilobolus*, and a new work by Grand-Maitre to the music of Gordon Lightfoot. These are the season anchors for which the company has become known: dramatic contemporary ballets, a notable international group and its own well-loved pop ballets. The company has discovered a formula that challenges its dancers and engages its audience, and this willingness to adapt to their context is one of the reasons Alberta Ballet is still dancing. ▫

Good Sense, Great Dancing

by Jennifer Fournier

T

To most dancers, an opportunity to perform in Russia at the Bolshoi Theatre would be an honour, offering high-profile confirmation, or maybe reassurance, that they are indeed world class. But for Alberta Ballet’s Kelley McKinlay, a plain-spoken Prairie boy, dancing Iago in Kirk Peterson’s *Othello* at the 2008 gala for Benois de la Danse was simply “a really great experience for me personally.”

Last February, I saw McKinlay onstage in Wen Wei Wang’s *Futureland*, dancing with his wife, Reilley McKinlay, in a sinewy neoclassical pas de deux. His intensity and masterful partnering invited the audience directly into the duo’s riveting interplay and their exploration of the extremes of balance and extension. In another contemporary work, Aszure Barton’s *Happy Little Things (Waiting on a Gruff Cloud of Wanting)*, my eye was drawn to him again — whether he was dancing with just the right amount of swagger or standing still. Then, a few weeks later, I saw him completely transform into a dreamy Romeo, displaying exemplary classical technique, in Jean Grand-Maitre’s *Romeo and Juliet*.



Alberta Ballet's Kelley McKinlay knows when to swagger, when to stand still

As a dancer, McKinlay reminds me that dance, much like life, happens entirely in the present. There is no hint of anxiety when he dances because he isn't worrying about what might go wrong in the future. Nor is he trying to recreate the past performances of himself or others; McKinlay says he decided long ago that he would rather be unique and draw on his own lived experiences, instead of trying to recreate someone else's. When we spoke recently, I discovered he approaches life in an equally sincere manner, eschewing grandiosity and displaying refreshing humility, as in his insistent characterization of his many accomplishments as "opportunities I am grateful for."

McKinlay grew up in a family of five children, two girls and three boys, on an acreage north of Edmonton, near Fort Saskatchewan. After school, the family would drive 45 minutes to Edmonton so his sisters could take ballet classes. McKinlay started taking dance lessons when he was three after his mother noticed that the boys enjoyed imitating ballet steps while waiting outside the studio for their sisters to finish.

Between classes at the School of Alberta Ballet, he pursued curling, joining a competitive league around age 10, and soccer: "Curling helped me with accuracy and balance, and soccer gave me quick feet." He also found time to dabble in theatre and music.

When he was 12, McKinlay started to find the repetition of his Royal Academy of Dance syllabus classes boring. He considered switching to jazz or some other kind of dance, but then the school created Dance Alberta, a small student company, and he "fell in love with performing."

Like many dancers in Canada, the Banff Centre figured prominently in his early development. At age 14, McKinlay auditioned in Banff, then spent two summers in its

distinguished training program and joined Festival Dance, Banff's professional summer company, where he danced for one year. He credits the program, which no longer exists in the same format, with teaching him about the practical side of professionalism, things like eating well and showing up to rehearsals. When he was 17, Judith Marcuse came to Banff and cast McKinlay in a touring production that she was choreographing in Vancouver about teen suicide, *ICE: Beyond Cool*. McKinlay missed the first semester of Grade 11 to perform the piece all over the country.

The next year, McKinlay decided it was time to get a job. He set up auditions in Toronto and Vancouver, and was offered a contract as an apprentice with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal. But, before making that commitment, it occurred to him — why not Alberta? He auditioned for Jean Grand-Maitre, who had just been named artistic director of Alberta Ballet, and was hired.

McKinlay was soon dancing principal roles. "Right away I danced the Champion Roper in *Rodeo* because I knew how to tap, and I guess I rose to the challenge," he says with typical humility.

Over the course of his 14-year career with the company, McKinlay has danced leading roles in many classics — *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle* and *Don Quixote* among others — but he becomes most animated discussing his experiences in the studio with choreographers. He enjoys working with artists like Grand-Maitre and David Nixon, who are not dogmatic about steps and care deeply about characterization and theatricality.

About Grand-Maitre, with whom McKinlay has collaborated on many works, he says, "Sometimes I know the steps Jean is going to choreograph before he does. I know where he's going ... but he still throws in challenges."

McKinlay was flattered when Nixon adapted some choreography in his *The Three Musketeers* specifically for him and Hayna Gutierrez in 2014. It was also exciting to be invited shortly after to guest in England with Northern Ballet, where Nixon is the artistic director, dancing Pinkerton in Nixon's *Madame Butterfly*. But, afterward, he was happy to return home.

"I like Alberta," says McKinlay, even though he has witnessed the profound effect economic downturns in an oil-based economy can have on support for the arts. "Any company has dark times, dancer turnover, financial difficulties."

Yet, he remains upbeat. "I have thought about what's out there, but never pursued anything. Now I'm thankful to be dancing in the company I grew up watching. The arts aren't as prominent here as they are in New York or Toronto, and it's something of a fight to get people to see what you do, what ballet has evolved into. But I love the feeling of pushing people's boundaries and expanding their view on art."



Kelley McKinlay, Hayna Gutierrez, Alex Gibson and artists of the company in Alberta Ballet's *Giselle*
Photo: Paul McGrath



Kelley McKinlay in David Nixon's *The Three Musketeers*
Photo: Paul McGrath

When we spoke, the company was in the midst of rehearsing Grand-Maitre's *Love Lies Bleeding*, a ballet set to the music of Elton John that depicts the musician's life and struggles, in which McKinlay, as Elton Fan, dances a climactic and passionate pas de deux with Yukichi Hattori, who portrays Elton John. While sex is usually present in some form in most dance works, the long kiss between the two men in their pas de deux is startlingly explicit. McKinlay brushed aside my question about whether, as a straight man, kissing Hattori was difficult to pull off convincingly. "It's not hard — Yuk and I are friends," he answers. McKinlay was more amazed that the two men had, despite differences in their size and physicality, learned to dance together, through their shared focus, almost as one. "People are in awe of how similarly we move."

McKinlay becomes wistful when he mentions Hattori's retirement from the company at the end of last season to pursue his choreography and open a dance studio in Calgary. "It's a huge loss for me personally. You see someone 24/7 and then they are gone." At age 33, McKinlay is still in his prime, although he is a senior artist now, a level of dancer he recalls looking up to when he joined the company.

Though he wants to dance as long as he can, McKinlay admits to sometimes looking back at his performances on video and thinking incredulously: "I used to be able to do that?" As for his long-term future, Grand-Maitre and Peterson have pushed him to "sit at the front of the room" on occasion; he enjoys coaching and helping with partnering, and while he has not considered ballet master as a future career, he remains open to whatever life brings.

I ask McKinlay if he has had any struggles during his career. He pauses for a moment and confesses he is "not the most flexible," but that nothing has challenged him in a "bad way." In fact, McKinlay's easygoing approach extends to pretty much everything in his life. He is happily married, and he and his wife, Reilley, who has been with the company for eight years, "work great together." For a while he assumed a lot of responsibilities as a dancer representative for Canadian Actors' Equity Association and the dancers' contract negotiations committee, but while away guesting with Northern Ballet he realized how liberating it was not to "start your day under a cloud of everyone's problems," and resigned those positions.

McKinlay is also a private person who doesn't spend much time on social media. "I don't know if it's a small town mentality, but I find self-promotion weird. I don't need to have people on Facebook saying, 'Oh you're so wonderful, oh that's so beautiful.' I post a photo of my dog once a month and I'm like 'do I have to post another one?'"

Perhaps McKinlay's approach stems from an innate part of his character. Hattori explains: "You see a nice guy like him and you think, what's behind the mask? In Kelley's case, it's just him. He's really nice."

Or maybe Kelley McKinlay's code, the set of ethics that make him the unassuming but compelling artist he is, derives from his fundamental belief that artists are just like other workers. As he says: "It's a job. A special job. I love it. You have to because in our day-to-day work we only hear what we are doing wrong; it's only when you get onstage and hear the response that you know when it's good." ^{or}

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The Bolshoi Ballet's Principal Dancer OLGA SMIRNOVA seen here as Nikiya in *La Bayadère*.
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Dancing into a World of Magic



by Raisa Rauhamaa



Jyrki Karttunen's bright vision in Helsinki

As a choreographer, Jyrki Karttunen's style is audaciously childish and comical, characterized by a combination of play and gentle sadness. "I like to put characters into unlikely situations and see what happens," says Karttunen, artistic director of Helsinki Dance Company since 2013.

Before that, from 2007, Karttunen ran his own group, Karttunen Kollektiv, establishing himself with a series of memorable works. "In *My Imaginary Friend is with Me* (2007), an artist in a crisis reflects upon his own existence surrounded by Moomins [famous fairy tale characters created by Finnish author Tove Jansson]. It was some kind of self-portrait of my career in which I asked myself: is there any reason to go on with my artistic strivings?" he says.

"In *Digital Duende* (1998), clumsy Finnish men try to survive in the role of Spanish flamenco dancers, and *Human Imitations* (2005) features men who do not know much of anything — how to perform, how to talk, and yet they are expected to make a finished choreography."

Jemina – Act as you'd know her (2012), which won the Finnish Theatre Work of the Year award, was the last piece he made for his own group. In *Jemina*, found today in the repertoire of his new company, the stage becomes the platform for the performer/dancer, who is Karttunen himself (he began his career as a dancer in 1989 with Helsinki Dance Company). In this full-length solo, he transforms his body and soul to present different tragic-comic women entertainers. Diva and drag queen Jyrki/Jemina invites guests into her salon, where she entertains the audience with singing, dancing and stand-up comedy.

"I am interested in creating accurate close-ups of human behaviour and to show how contradictory the way we act might be. The human body and its ability for delicate movement reveals this dilemma better than any words."

In his work, Karttunen catches something of the Finnish people's temperament. "We are considered very quiet and a little weird. But under this inhibited surface we have a strong inner life combined with a thick quality of fantasy," he says.

Fantasy is one of the keys into Karttunen's choreography. *Minor Leading Roles*, which premiered at Helsinki City Theatre in 2016, is set in the future, in the 2060s, with a group of performers living at the edge of the world striving to realize their dream to revive *The Sound of Music*. Costumed in silver, the dancers look like extraterrestrials for whom the task is quite impossible. They manage to learn just a few steps from the iconic musical production, mostly trying anything they can think of to find its spirit.

The two works made directly before *Minor Leading Roles* were family oriented: *Fairy Councillor Koo* (2014), in which Karttunen danced the title role, and *Pippi Longstocking* (2015), which featured buoyant choreography for the ensemble.

"Just before beginning rehearsals for *Pippi Longstocking*, I became a father," he says.

No wonder children's performances had begun to interest him, although he refuses to be branded specifically as a representative of



of childhood dreams. Maintaining a fantasy world helps you to trust in your imagination when you have to solve problems. For example, in the choreography for *Pippi Longstocking*, I had to come up with an idea for how to lift up a horse in the air. I wanted to get the children to leave the performance jumping and bounding like Pippi herself.”

By contrast, the starting point of *Fairy Councillor Koo* was quite profound. “My first thought was, can you make a philosophical piece for children about time? The idea was crazy enough, so it began producing lots of material.” He gave the piece a subtitle, *Learned reflections for understanding fairies (and other spirits)*.

The work is a fairy tale, told with text and movement, about the seven

children’s culture. Yet, Karttunen says, “Children are a great audience. It would be a pity to forego the joy of performing for them. Children’s productions are often underrated, but I don’t think you should waste your time making similarly distinctive contemporary dance pieces exclusively for colleagues and cognoscenti.”

Karttunen recalls the reception of the popular *Fairy* (2002), which tells the story of a fairy who is totally alone. “I found out then what it feels like when you’re a rock star and the audience howls along with you. *Fairy* was originally a fairy tale for adults, but it was hijacked by children. In Lyon, when the Fairy who has lost its wings tried leaping into the air, 600 children shouted encouragement every single time!”

Leaping into the world of fairy tales raised eyebrows in art circles, and for some *Fairy* was too entertaining. Karttunen rejects that notion. “My bright attitude is also a message, it is my way of making politics.” Different types of works, he explains, can be deliberate alternatives to trends and to the obsessive notion of continuous renewal in art. “What’s there to renew in art?” Karttunen asks. “My main purpose is not to reinterpret forms. Renewal in contemporary dance happens by accident, you can’t just decide to do it. You can only work with the skill you have developed over the years.”

He adds: “Already when I was a child, I loved pretending to be someone else. I often went to school dressed in a Superman costume made from my mother’s tablecloth. I dreamed of being able to fly or being invisible and able to walk through walls.”

As a boy he had poor eyesight, but a lively imagination. “When I went to school, I got a pair of glasses. It was boring, because now I could see too clearly, and was no longer able to imagine endings,” says Karttunen. “My works are a kind of continuation



days of the week who have their order mixed up by an absent-minded scientist. The weekdays are each represented by spirits of different types. The old-fashioned and fantastically exuberant visualization creates just the right context for fairies and spirits. The work looks like an illustration in a traditional fairy tale book, sparing no false noses, wigs, horns or wings, and is based on Karttunen’s childhood experiences of theatre.

“People come to the theatre to believe in miracles,” says Karttunen. He remembers the huge impression made on him by a production of *Lintu Sininen (The Blue Bird)*, an old fairy tale play by Finnish author Zacharias Topelius, which he saw as a child in his hometown of Joensuu. Although the bird was only a ball of feathers suspended from a string, it was a real blue bird to him. *Fairy Councillor Koo* has all sorts of creatures flying on top of sticks, and Karttunen felt no need to hide the supports.

Above left: Sofia Hilli, Heidi Naakka, Jenni-Elina von Bagh and Sofia Ylinen in Jyrki Karttunen’s *Fairy Councillor Koo*
Photo: Marko Mäkinen

Above right: Jyrki Kasper, Aksinja Lommi and Kaisa Niemi in Jyrki Karttunen’s *Minor Leading Roles*
Photo: Marko Mäkinen

While Karttunen takes care of his own inner child, he also gives others an opportunity to step into the world of make-believe. “At first I was a bit wary about how the ensemble would take to the idea of making a performance for children. But the *Koo* process was awesome. It gave dancers an opportunity to let go of the strict dancer’s role. Performing for a full house time after time was absolutely fantastic. When children cried out as they lived with the events onstage, we felt we were real stars.”

Now Karttunen’s daughter is 18 months old, and they have already seen many performances made for babies together. When Opri was just six months old, Karttunen remembers taking her to a performance of *Carnival for Diaper People* by Dance Theatre Hurjaruuth, and how the eyes of his little daughter lit up when a red ball appeared onstage. “I would never have believed what excitement that dramatic moment caused in me as well,” Karttunen says, with a laugh. “Perhaps I should make my next performance for babies.” ⁰¹

An earlier version of this piece appeared in Finnish Dance in Focus, 2015-2016, Volume 16. It has been revised by the author for Dance International.

Helsinki Dance Company Overview

Sixty-five percent of Finnish dance artists live in and around Helsinki, and it seems every major Finnish choreographer has worked with the 12-member Helsinki Dance Company, the country’s largest contemporary group. While Helsinki City Theatre, where the group is based, undergoes renovations due to be completed in 2017, its home is at Stoa, a venue operated by the City of Helsinki Cultural Office. Stoa presents a wide range of contemporary dance, including *Liikkeellä marraskuussa – Moving in November*, an international festival co-curated by Ari Tenhula, one of many past artistic directors of Helsinki Dance Company (2000-2002).

The company’s formation was fostered by Helsinki City Theatre, which started a training program the same year it was founded, 1965, for 25 dancers. Out of this group, Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company was founded in 1973 when Seija Simonen, a Finnish National Ballet dancer, was appointed to direct six dancers; in 2003, the group simplified its name to its current one. Over the years, the company has shared many artists with the Finnish National Ballet due to the country’s small, interconnected dance community, whose members often move fluidly between ballet and contemporary genres.

Helsinki Dance Company became an independent unit in 1987, led by Jorma Uotinen (another former Finnish National Ballet dancer). Under Uotinen (1982-1991), they toured internationally and gained recognition dancing his theatrical works that create mythical worlds, including *Kalevala*, *B12* and *Ballet Pathétique*. Uotinen left to direct Finnish National Ballet.

International touring increased under Carolyn Carlson (1991-1992), an American of Finnish descent who refers to her fluid, lyrical choreography as “visual poetry.” She made two works for the company, *Who took August?* (*Kuka vei elokuun?*) and *September* (*Syyskuu*), and, in 1992, the group received the Finnish State Award of Dance in recognition of its artistic excellence and longtime contribution to Finnish dance.

Artistic director Marjo Kuusela (1992-1996), who had previously choreographed for the Finnish National Ballet and Finnish National Opera, infused her works with realism, leftist social themes and literature. Kenneth Kvarnström, who had been invited as a guest choreographer by Kuusela, became artistic director in 1996, leaving the following year, in that short period creating several works, including *no-no* and *108 dB*.

British Nigel Charnock, a founding member of DV8 Physical Theatre, was artistic director from 2003-2005, his work characterized by physical theatre and black humour. Ville Sormunen, choreographer and former company dancer, took over in 2006, encouraging guest choreographers to broaden the company’s stylistic range until his departure in 2010.

Kvarnström returned in 2008 to restage *no-no* and, in 2010, while the company was between directors, he was resident choreographer, staging six original works, some co-productions with his own K. Kvarnström & Co. Jyrki Karttunen took the helm in 2013.

— TESSA PERKINS

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Lawren S. Harris
Isolation Peak, Rocky Mountains
1930
oil on canvas, 106.7 x 127 cm
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with income from the Harold and Murray Wrong Memorial Fund, 1946
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IDEAS OF NORTH

The National Ballet of Canada partnered with the Art Gallery of Ontario to present *The Dreamers Ever Leave You*, an immersive gallery experience created by choreographic associate Robert Binet, in Toronto, August 31 to September 10, 2016. The performance was inspired by the work of Lawren Harris (1885-1970), a founding member of the Group of Seven, whose iconic landscapes are the focus of the gallery's exhibition, *The Idea of North: The Paintings of Lawren Harris* (until September 18). In *The Dreamers Ever Leave You*, artists of the National Ballet performed in a dedicated gallery space, accompanied by live music composed by Ukrainian Lubomyr Melnyk.

Supporting Pride

More than 30 dancers from Canada's Ballet Jörge n donned rainbow tutus and Pride T-shirts to show off their dance moves during Toronto's Pride Parade in July, celebrating diversity and inclusivity.

Ballet Jörge n's Junior Gaspar Caballero
Photo: Kamal Daid



Canada Dance Festival at Diefenbunker



course, is below ground. An echoing corrugated metal tunnel protects the actual entrance situated mid-way, through two-foot-thick steel doors. For the performance, the audience was led down several flights of stairs to “the vault,” where it got even colder. In this entirely concrete room, sound ricochets, the odour is cold stone.

Robinson and Quevillon exploit the austerity of the space, evoking catacombs and liturgical rites, using a funeral mass as structure and inspiration. A slip of paper with the words “Requiem for Wood and Stone” was placed at each of the 48 seats on top of a blanket (to help the audience keep warm). There was also a quote by ninth-century Chan Buddhist monk Dongshan Liangjie: “When the wooden man starts to sing / The stone woman gets up to dance.”

In *TRUST*, Robinson and Quevillon both sing and dance. They began the piece hooded and droning a low chant. Later, Quevillon covered his prone and naked body in bits of shale rock before drumming on them. Two delicate and elaborate model houses were used as masks for a dancing Robinson. Stone, wood, voice, antelope horn, metronome and bell were used in the sound and movement score.

Quevillon is an environmental electroacoustic composer, exploring elemental sound and the possibilities of natural instruments. Robinson’s work is influenced by his six years of study as a Zen monk, and he is renowned for his large group pieces and idiosyncratic solo dance works, comfortable creating for proscenium theatres and found spaces as well. This space was an especially good find.

— LYS STEVENS

TATE DANCES



Argentine-born artist Pablo Bronstein’s *Historical Dances in an Antique Setting* is the 2016 Tate Britain Commission, an annual event that invites artists to create a large-scale work in response to the neoclassical Duveen Galleries at the heart of Tate Britain. The work includes three classically trained dancers who weave up and down the gallery, blending gestures and movements of Baroque choreography with minimalist contemporary dance. *Historical Dances in an Antique Setting*, in London until October 9, is inspired by Bronstein’s interest in history and the potential inaccuracies that occur when the past is recreated.

Pablo Bronstein (b. 1977)
Historical Dances in an Antique Setting, 2016
 Photo: BrothertonLock
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Dance Daughters of Dubai

In Dubai, the land of towering skyscrapers and mega-malls, there isn't a dance scene per se as much as there are a handful of studios that put on shows at malls or brand-driven events. The watermark of this global port city in the United Arab Emirates, a short skip from the Asian subcontinent, Northern Africa and Southern Europe, is transience. Most dance teachers come and go in a handful of years — and then there is Sharmila Kamte, who started teaching here in the late 1990s. Trained in New Delhi and the United Kingdom, Kamte performed all over the world before she turned to teaching, and has built a mini-empire a few metres from Dubai's famed indoor ski slope.

Kamte offers Live Dance classes, a mixture of hip-hop, contemporary and jazz, as well as ballet, for students aged seven through 50-plus. Mothers and daughters who take the popular, high-energy Live Dance class might find themselves together



Live Dance class
Photo: Sharmila Kamte

in the studio at the same time — daughters in the front lines, mothers in the back. Often the child encourages her mother to try dance, not the other way around.

Sofia Ladak, 13, dances with Kamte's performing group, Sharmila Dance, five days a week, after school and on Saturdays. Last year, when her Spanish mother Mayalen took a year off from teaching math, Sofia coaxed her into the studio, cajoling her mother not to give up right away. Mother and daughter glimpsed something familiar and reassuring in the other as they pursued the same goal. "Dance is an extra connecting point. It's almost like therapy

for me," says Mayalen, remembering how she longed to take dance classes as a child.

Sencha Chung from South Korea started Kamte's classes following her two pre-teen daughters' lead. At home, when she showed them the combination from class, they praised her. For Italian-born Mena MacLean, the shared experience is a catalyst for conversation at dinner with teenage daughters Emma and Neela. She knows not only all the moves, but also all of their classmates. "It keeps us connected," Mena says. The music from the class, which mother and daughters like to download at home, becomes another point of bonding.

What makes the delicate balance of the mother-daughter dancing relationship work is Kamte, who is the extra member of the village needed to help raise teenage daughters. The fierce discipline with which Kamte approaches her classes is contagious, and her students find the self-respect and persistence they develop in class spills over into other areas of their lives.

"The way you're treated here is unlike anywhere else," reflects Rana Roy, who, at 29, still takes class with her mother. Roy studied with Kamte for more than a decade and now works as an actor in New York, but comes to class on visits to Dubai.

— TEJ RAE

Quotable



©Lois Greenfield

ANDREW PACHO, 1999

As featured in
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Michael Crabb's Notebook

A recent but not unprecedented event has again thrown into question the survival of informed critical writing in mainstream media, struggling as they are to adapt traditional business models to the realities of a wired world. In May, Canadian daily the *National Post* pulled a review of a Canadian Opera Company production by respected critic Arthur Kaptainis after a company publicist emailed the paper's arts and culture chief, ostensibly to correct two alleged errors.

Musical Toronto, by niche media standards a popular webzine, responded by republishing Kaptainis' review. In a laudable act of transparency, the Canadian Opera

Company then released its email exchanges with the newspaper in which the *National Post's* arts boss was revealed to have shared the following: "I really hate running reviews for performing arts. They simply get no attention online, and almost always end up as our poorest performing pieces of digital content."

Kaptainis, like almost all critics of the non-profit arts in North American mainstream media, is a freelancer. Because it's piecework, the number of stories a freelancer gets published is entirely at the discretion of editorial staff. When budgets have to be trimmed, which nowadays seems to be a continual process, freelancers are easy targets. Or, as happened when John Coulbourn, who for many years reviewed theatre, opera and ballet for the *Toronto Sun*, retired, the paper simply dropped dance coverage.

When I started reviewing dance for the *National Post* when the paper launched in 1998, on average I was placing more than four stories a month. Go online and check how many dance items the paper runs nowadays.

Since switching to the *Toronto Star* in September 2009, I've been surprised how much dance content, including contemporary dance, I continue to get into the paper despite diminishing space, but not without a lot of hustling. And, in reality, that situation could turn on a dime. Even if Canada's biggest newspaper tries to reflect the gamut of activity in its community, that does not necessarily mean running reviews. This partly reflects scheduling changes that make overnight reviews into print almost impossible to effect and a preference for upbeat set-up stories. With increasing dependence on online readership and the evidence of how little traffic actual arts criticism generates, reviews may soon be sacrificed.

From a marketing standpoint, this is not necessarily bad news for arts organizations. Given the alternatives of an advance feature or a review, most publicists would quite reasonably opt for the former. Advance stories are by nature inclined to be positive. Reviews are unpredictable.

Arts marketers increasingly are focusing their attention on social media, where positive comments and links to videos and photo imagery, shared exponentially, can create the desired buzz.

Also, especially among younger audiences, it would appear there's a disinterest in or outright aversion to informed expert

critical commentary. Who needs critics when everybody's opinion is apparently of equal weight?

Yet a lack of curiosity in informed opinion and a willingness to respond supinely to expert marketing hype can have an intellectually deadening effect. If you're told often enough that something is going to be just great, a lot of people will begin to believe it and, having swallowed the bait and bought a ticket, there's a temptation to convince yourself you're having a great time regardless. In the ballet world, this risks pushing hard-to-sell but artistically valuable work to the margin in favour of popular bums-on-seats spectacles that are virtually review-proof by virtue of the market they're aimed at.

The truth is that where once reviews by reputable critics in reputable publications actually carried some weight, they no longer do in any significant measure. Arts criticism in mainstream media might thus seem of little consequence and readily disposable; but is it really? Tim Mangan, laid off in early June as a longtime staff music critic at California's *Orange County Register* because of "restructuring," pinpoints, in his blog, what's changed. His comment applies across arts disciplines.

"Previously," writes Mangan, "music criticism survived as part of a printed newspaper, which was predicated on the 'bundle' model, just like 500-channel cable. All the topics in the paper supported the others ... and all boats floated higher for it. No topic had to survive on its own. The paper was a community, even a team of rivals. But as newspapers have moved online, a different model has been adopted. Now, every topic has to survive on its own, because online readers don't generally read the paper as a bundle. They pick and choose topics, from different publications, all over the internet. Each topic is an island. Think of it as a 'streaming' model."

This does not mean that thoughtful arts criticism is doomed. On the contrary, the internet has opened up a useful global forum for discourse among dedicated dancers and commentators. There are still specialized print publications — *Dance International* included — that cater to this appetite, for a relatively small but vibrant and dedicated community. Serious arts coverage in the mainstream media has the potential to expand and regenerate that community, and gives the arts a broad public profile and legitimacy. It is this that risks being lost. *or*

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Geneviève Salbaing 1922-2016

Photo: Courtesy of BJM Danse



Geneviève Salbaing could have lived a glamorous, easy-going life, but instead chose the emotionally and financially stressful path of shepherding what became one of Canada's best-loved dance companies through its formative years. Co-founder of Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal (now known as BJM Danse), Salbaing died at home in Outremont, Quebec, on May 8, at the age of 94.

Watching the legendary Serge Lifar perform in Paris was the beginning of Salbaing's love affair with ballet, but the New York musical triggered an enduring passion for jazz music and a determination to use it to inspire dance. So it was a perfect match when Eva von Gency and Eddy Toussaint, who were looking for a third partner to co-found Les Ballets Jazz in 1972, chose the elegant, well-educated and well-connected Salbaing.

Direction by committee was not without conflict: first Toussaint and then von Gency left. Taking full control over all aspects — auditioning dancers, choosing choreographers and organizing tours (BJM became beloved on all continents) — the fiercely devoted Salbaing suffered some monumental battles to keep her company alive. In those days, BJM's mandate to dance to jazz music was not recognized by funding agencies and there were times so dark she was reduced to tears. The company became Salbaing's life's work, and she was its drive and soul for 20 years.

Salbaing (née Nehlil) was born in 1922 into a comfortable life in Paris. In 1935, she studied ballet at Morocco's Casablanca

Conservatory of Music and Dance, which awarded her first prize for excellence in 1940. She then studied with notable teachers in Paris: Lubov Egorova, Madame Roussanne and Victor Gsovsky. She also received a bachelor in philosophy degree from the University of Nantes.

Salbaing's career began in 1939 as principal dancer with the Municipal Theatre of Casablanca. She remained four years, then moved to Washington, D.C., dancing with Washington Concert Ballet for three seasons. After moving to Montreal, she performed for a season with Les Ballets Chiriaeff (forerunner of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens), in the mid-1950s. Married to a French business executive, she juggled the roles of wife, hostess and mother of four sons, while pursuing a freelance career as a dancer and choreographer.

Public honours include becoming a member of the Order of Canada (1987) and an officer of the Order of Quebec (2012). She served as a board member for

institutions like McGill University, the National Theatre School of Canada, the Concours Musical International de Montréal and, after retiring as its artistic director in 1993 at 70, for BJM. Her fascination with dance continued, too: she served as a jury member at the Paris International Dance Competition, attended scores of performances, and rekindled relationships with von Gency and Toussaint. She was also an avid scuba diver, golfer and skier, continuing to age 86.

Salbaing attended all BJM performances in Montreal, including its latest in December 2015. She didn't always agree with her successors, but she always maintained her equanimity. When Louis Robitaille, BJM's artistic director since 1998, rebranded the company as a contemporary dance group, she may have had nightmares, but never lost her poise. Her tenacious views about dancing to jazz became a running joke between them at their frequent meetings.

"We had a good relationship," Robitaille said. "Geneviève supported me in my decisions even when I expected sometimes that she would oppose them. She could surprise me."

— LINDE HOWE-BECK

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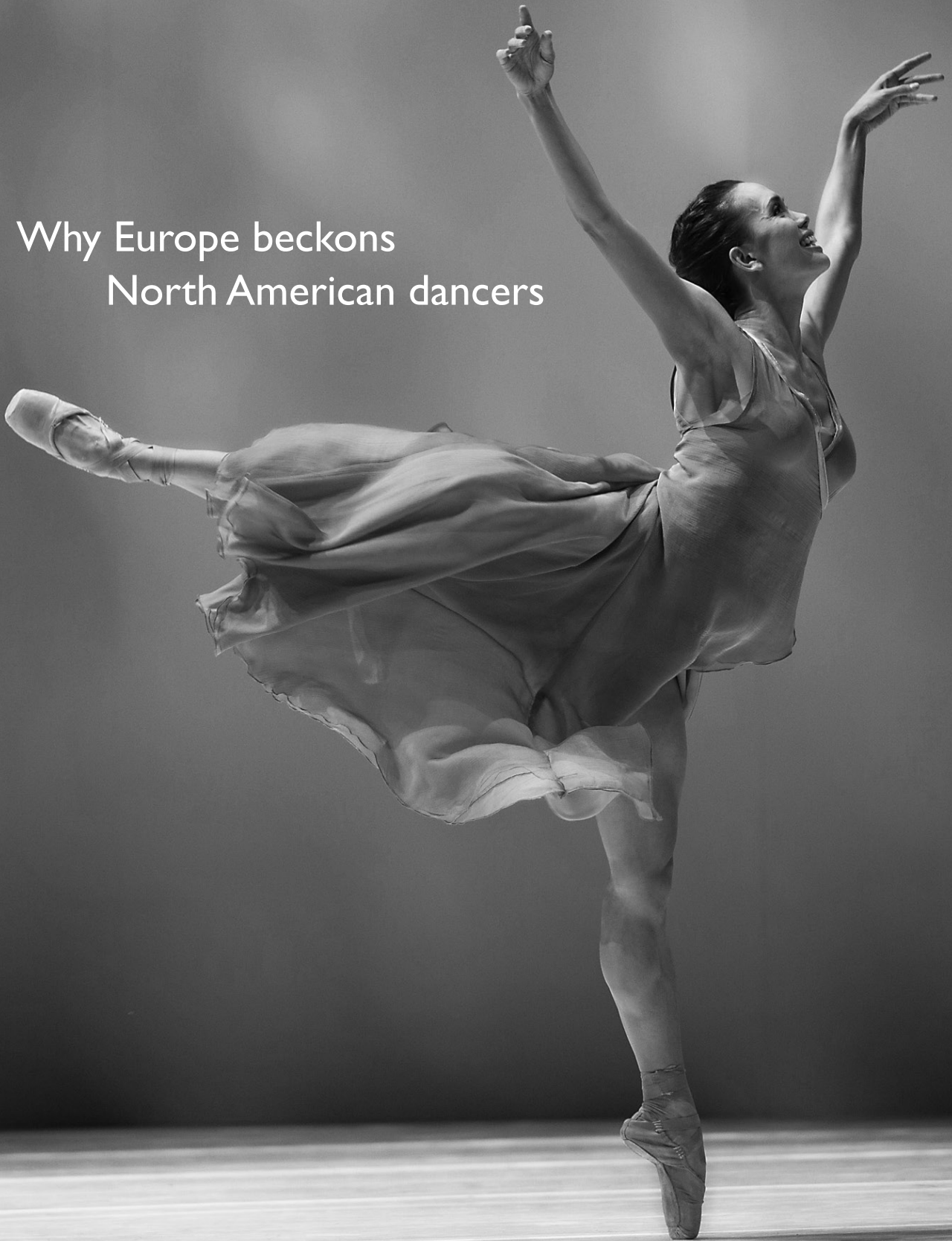
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DANCE

MAKING THE MOVE

Why Europe beckons
North American dancers





S Small cafés, narrow streets, bicycles, baguettes, state support for education, music and dance — Europe seems to have it all, and North American dancers are moving there to join small ensembles, state-supported companies, circuses and cabarets.

Just what are the advantages and the challenges of making the move? As Danielle Gould, currently with Hungarian National Ballet, admits, “Working abroad is all about learning curves, both positive and negative. Really, it’s about new cultures and languages to learn.”

Gould, 23, was on the fast track to push through, work hard and join a top Canadian ballet company, with her sights set on the National Ballet of Canada. She started attending its Toronto school at age 10, and also trained at home in Vancouver with Goh Ballet Academy. Gould completed her Royal Academy of Dance syllabus training and achieved her Solo Seal Award, leading her to compete at the Genée International Ballet Competition in 2010.

A scholarship in 2011 from the Youth America Grand Prix ballet competition gave Gould the opportunity to train in Europe at the John Cranko School of Stuttgart Ballet, which, she says, “was a wonderful introduction to the dance scene of Europe. Working in Stuttgart made it possible to travel and explore European culture and lifestyle. It has certainly proved to be a happy decision.” For Gould, the main attraction was, first, the repertory, and then the beautiful opera houses. After her training in Stuttgart, Gould was invited to join the Hungarian National Ballet as a company member.

Hawaiian-born Gregory Lau, 22, trained in New York at LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, and later attended the Juilliard School. During his first year there, he travelled to Europe to audition for Nederlands Dans Theater 2, the junior division of the main company, and accepted a contract. “The Netherlands was always a place I was interested in and knew would provide motivation for my artistic growth,” he recalls. Many of Lau’s friends at Juilliard also went on to dance in Europe. “It is interesting

Left: Noelani Pantastico in Pacific Northwest Ballet’s production of Jean-Christophe Maillot’s *Roméo et Juliette*
Photo: Angela Sterling

Above: Danielle Gould and Roland Liebich (centre) in Hungarian National Ballet’s *Coppélia*
Photo: Attila Nagy / Hungarian State Opera



Left: Nederlands Dans Theater's Gregory Lau in León & Lightfoot's *Sad Case*

Above right: Nederland Dans Theater 2's Paxton Ricketts and Madoka Kariya in León & Lightfoot's *Sleight of Hand*

Photos: © Rahi Rezvani



to discuss our actual experiences abroad compared to our idealized dreams of what the 'European dance scene' is. We imagine endless opportunities to work with famous choreographers, constant one-on-one attention. Opportunities and attention are certainly there, but not necessarily consistently," says Lau.

Canadian Paxton Ricketts, who trained in the dance program at Vancouver's Arts Umbrella, also went to The Hague, in the Netherlands, to audition for NDT 2. Ricketts, 22, says of the company: "They do work by some of the best choreographers in the world. It's exhilarating to be immersed in such a place."

At first, Ricketts was concerned about a language barrier. "But, it turns out, since the company is so international, all the classes and rehearsals are in English. The Hague is the same, actually. It is such an international city and everyone seems to speak English."

Noelani Pantastico, 36, another Hawaiian-born dancer, is a product of training at the Pacific Northwest Ballet School and years of dancing with the company. In 2008, after being with the Seattle-based Pacific Northwest Ballet for 11 years, Pantastico was looking for a change. Guest choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot had cast her as one of two dancers taking on the female lead in his version of *Roméo et Juliette*, and she ended up dancing in all nine performances due to an injury of the other Juliet. She caught the eye of Maillot and of the coaching team from his company, Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, and decided she wanted to explore more of Maillot's choreography in Monaco.

"I didn't expect anything going into Monte Carlo; honestly, I didn't know what to expect," says Pantastico. "I had a rather complacent attitude and, at 28, thought, 'If I don't leave now I will never be able to see other dancers, coaches,

companies.'" She also wanted to focus on types of work other than the familiar Balanchine-based and mixed-contemporary repertory at Pacific Northwest Ballet.

For all four dancers, the artistic appeal of dancing in Europe is huge. Sometimes dancers want to work with specific choreographers or even sets of coaches, as did Pantastico at Monte Carlo. The process of coaching and artistic development can be more individualistic in Europe, and can add an additional dimension to dancers' work, either on an emotional or physical level. For Pantastico, the Monte Carlo coaching directed at her emotional vulnerability allowed her to work on connecting intention to individual movement. "It has made dancing more interesting for me, and hopefully it transfers through to the audience."

Lau was drawn, in particular, to the diversity of the Netherlands repertory. "At a certain point, Hofesh Shechter, Crystal Pite and Sharon Eyal were all in the same building working on their own creations," he says. "That just never happens! It has been such a blessing to be able to watch their processes with NDT dancers and then see the final results."

Travel and touring, too, is a big draw — and it's something European-based companies do particularly well. "Since Europe is so condensed," says Ricketts,

“we are able to tour a lot to many different countries.” The touring, however, adds wear and tear on the body, with uneven and uncertain stage floors, gruelling schedules with little time for recovery, jet lag, and constant changes in drinking water and hotels, all of which can add up to a lot of injuries. But for many, it is worth it.

Les Ballets de Monte Carlo is mostly a touring company, with only two or three programs a year at home in Monaco. Tours to Israel, Syria, Japan and Cuba have given Pantastico opportunities to travel she says she would not have had otherwise.

Dancers may be drawn to the historical and cultural richness of a particular region. This appealed to Ricketts, but it wasn't the major driver for his move. Europe is a beautiful and historically rich place, he says, “but when you're pursuing a dance career you focus more on the companies you want to work for rather than the cities you want to live in. Location may affect your decision, but there are other things that play a bigger role.”

For Lau, “the main attraction to dance in Europe is the history and support the art has here.” Government financial support to freelance artists or established companies creates a strong foundation for creativity to flourish.

North Americans may also make the move to Europe simply because there are more options. “To a degree,” says Ricketts, “commercial dance has a larger audience in North America, and concert dance has a larger audience in Europe. Neither is better than the other; they are two very different worlds. So the European scene has an appeal to some dancers who prefer the concert style.”

Europe's preference for concert dance tends to produce full houses with loyal audiences, many performances, and the opportunity to dance a lot and to dance a varied repertoire. Even small cities can feature opera houses and theatres with resident ballet and opera companies, as well as orchestras. Jobs may still be difficult to get, but there is a perception of more opportunities and, according to Gould, it is not uncommon for North American dancers to do a large audition tour of Europe since there are so many theatres to audition for. For Gould, because Hungarian National Ballet is a state-run ballet company and opera house, with two theatres to perform in — the Hungarian

State Opera House and the more modern Erkel Theatre — the repertoire and number of large ballet productions in a season is exceptional. This has allowed Gould to dance both corps de ballet and soloist roles, and to learn a large and varied repertoire in just three years.

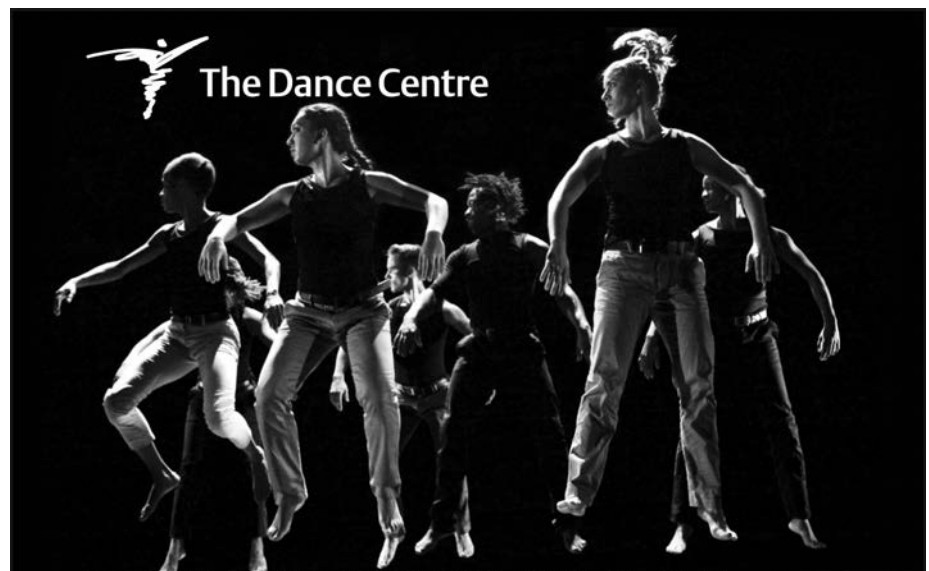
Dancers also notice big differences in the audiences in different countries. “How the audience reacts and interacts with your performance deeply affects what you do,” explains Ricketts. “There is very much a relationship built between the two. It's amazing how different the same performance feels with audiences from Hungary or France or Sweden.”

Change is inevitable; it's what attracted this quartet of dancers to Europe. It's also what brought Pantastico home: she re-joined Pacific Northwest Ballet in the fall of 2015. She felt that she had attained what she could working with a single choreographer, adding, “I have changed as an artist and feel it is all for the better. My performances show a different maturity, and the Seattle audiences are very appreciative.”

Gould's plans for the future include expanding her repertoire and “developing even more as an artist, both technically and artistically.” She has her sights set on a promotion and hopes to see doors opening in new directions, including developing her passion for choreographing. As Gould says, “This, for me, is an enriching experience that later on in life I will look back on and think, these are the experiences that made me an artist.”

Lau has just been promoted to Netherlands Dans Theater, the main company. His commitment is clear: “The dancers here are truly inspirational. I think great things can stem from being surrounded by such knowledgeable artists, so I am looking forward to learning from all of them.” NDT2 is designed to keep its young dancers for three years, and Ricketts, after two years with the group, is looking forward to what the next season brings.

All four dancers want to put themselves in settings where they are constantly being challenged. This holds for the studio and for day-to-day living — Europe seems to provide an enticing place to do just that. ▫



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Boys and Men Who Dance

Beyond bullying, toward gender equity

by Andrew Westle

In the struggle to attract more boys to dance, many in the field are emphasizing the athleticism of the art form, drawing on comparisons between dance and sport, while also downplaying the participation of gay men. They are trying to counteract the cultural stigma circulating about boys who dance and reduce the incidence of bullying. But perhaps, for boys and men who dance, things have started to shift?

The stereotypical association of dancing with femininity has been challenged in the last decade or so, partly through films such as *Billy Elliot* and television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*, which have helped the general public get used to a diverse range of people dancing, as well as providing role models for boys. At the Australian Ballet School, there have recently been several years with more male enrolments than female.

Yet bullying remains a dominant perception about men's experience in dance. The trouble is that with the narrative of bullying constantly recreating and reinforcing itself, there is the emergence of a self-fulfilling prophesy. What if we saw the "problem" of male dancers with fresh eyes? If we focused on the positive aspects of their experience?

I set out to do just this by interviewing 16 male dancers and a selection of female dancers, as well as publicists, artistic directors, managers and choreographers, from three major Australian contemporary dance companies. Their experiences suggest the focus on bullying and the stigma on boys who dance is, in fact, out of date.

Spencer (names have been changed for privacy), who started dance at age nine, told me he was never bullied and that his friends accepted his dancing, nicknaming him "Tappy," a friendly reference to tap dancing. Another dancer, Zed, could not understand why a child would get bullied for dancing. "I've never had a single experience like that," he said. Zed attributed the support and acceptance he received to open-minded people and a loving family.

Brodie, who identifies as gay, had unintentionally proved himself through dancing. He has travelled the world, been profiled in major newspapers and magazines, and, at age 24, is making a living in a career that brings him immense joy and pleasure.

Tyler was one of the only dancers I interviewed who experienced any bullying due to dancing, having been teased in early high school. As a result, Tyler kept quiet about his pursuit and many people did

The focus on bullying as the lens through which to view male dancers limits the achievement and pleasure associated with dance. It also conceals the dominant position men hold in the industry, often at the expense of women.

Brodie grew up in a country town that is quintessentially Australian, two hours from the closest capital city, with a population of 5,000. The community was centred on the local football and netball clubs. Brodie's dad was president of the football club and his brother, who later went on to the national league, was celebrated for his sporting prowess. At age 12, Brodie left football and started dance, one of the only boys who danced in the small town. Yet Brodie's experiences were nothing but positive.

"People started having some respect because I was doing really cool things, and getting awards for it," he said. "All of a sudden, the cool kids I didn't associate with were saying hello."

not know he danced. Then, at age 14, "I got to a point," he said, "where I was like, ah, who cares. I'm not going to try and deny it anymore." Tyler believes he was teased because others did not understand dancing; they didn't realize, "you can still be a guy and dance." Being open allowed people to appreciate what it was he actually did. Tyler's friends started attending his concerts and were incredibly supportive.

"The fact I made it really open and stopped trying to hide it — I think that helped," he said. Dance teachers would often encourage Tyler to emphasize the athleticism of dance, to help him deal with being teased. But Tyler said this was unhelpful. He hated sport and instead gained his confidence by proudly identifying as a dancer.

Despite the relative absence of bullying, many of the dancers interviewed spoke about how common it was for their parents and teachers to focus on the athleticism of dance, as if this were the only reason men could enjoy it. They would have preferred for their parents and teachers to celebrate dance on its own terms. Trevor told me, “I was never bullied for dancing, so I couldn’t understand why everyone talked about it.”

Similar accounts have been reported in North America. In the 2009 book *When Men Dance*, Christian Burns writes: “Rather than being faced with stereotypes, being a dancer in such a small minority gave me some kind of cool cachet.” In the same book, Seth Williams writes that bullying “has not been my experience. If you ask me, it’s a fairly cushy job.”

While bullying remains part of the narrative about male dancers, the dance world itself can become an encouraging and positive environment. Felix, for instance, was bullied extensively as a child and teenager, although in his case, this began before he even started dance, when he played tennis and basketball, trained in swimming and even kickboxing. “I was like, here I am, playing this masculine sport, but still being teased.” Felix, who identifies as gay, recalled being held over the edge of a balcony by two boys (who were subsequently expelled from the school).

Sadly, Felix’s experience mirrors that of many same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people who get bullied. In Felix’s case, dance actually provided a safe place where he was both accepted and earned respect. Through participating in dance, Felix regained his confidence, and has been dancing professionally for six years.

The focus on bullying as the lens through which to view male dancers limits the achievement and pleasure associated with dance. It also conceals the dominant position men hold in the industry, often at the expense of women. For instance, women are under-represented as choreographers all over the world. Australia’s five top-funded companies all have male artistic directors. Several dancers indicated that the supports used for boys result in increased confidence. Spencer said, “Teachers all loved me and would always put me in

the middle of the front.” Similarly, Jack said, “I believe the systems are set up at those young ages to make sure that boys have incentive” to continue dancing.

Fiona, a successful choreographer, believes that men were taught to be “more fearless,” whereas women were “taught to fit in.” Fiona said this confidence in male dancers is likely born out of their being treated as “special” and having the opportunity to voice their opinions while training. According to Tracy, men are often “louder” and “bolder” when it comes to having their say.

In attempting to reduce the perceived potential of bullying, teachers, families and companies have unknowingly shaped the role of men and women in dance, leading to men feeling more confident to pursue positions of artistic leadership. The “problem” of men in dance could perhaps be seen as a problem of gender equity. Both male and female interviewees indicated their frustration that women were not being given the same opportunities available

to men. Instead of viewing dance as a problematic activity for male participation, we should ask how dance could be a field where individuals can participate equally from childhood and throughout the profession.

Based on the experiences of the male dancers interviewed, ideas of bullying associated with boys engaging in dance lacks contemporary relevance. As a result, parents, teachers and dancers themselves have good reason to celebrate dance for all it can offer, rather than continuing to seek recognition and respect through a disingenuous comparison with sport or by downplaying the involvement of gay men. The challenge is set for us all to encourage individuals to engage in dance proudly on their own terms, giving equal opportunity to everyone.

As one dancer, Rick, succinctly put it: “All I can do is hope that, you know, all boys and girls, gay, straight, bi, trans, will go and dance.” ^{vi}

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The School of Dance

Jirí Kylián's *Oskar*: A "Pièce d'occasion" and *Free Fall* photo installation



"For me, the most beautiful thing is comparing the technological device and the living person at the same time," says Jirí Kylián. "It is a direct confrontation between life and death, between something that remains fixed and something that is going to change in the same moment you are looking at it."

Kylián continues to explore life, time and space through media, a choice he made some years ago, apparently leaving choreographic creation behind to pursue video. Indeed, his dance-making has been only transformed in this new medium: in close-ups made possible by the camera, the performers' expressions dance on their faces, featuring a range of emotions from flippancy to sorrow. The timing of the shots — sometimes slow, often speedy; sometimes quickly repeated or suddenly stopped — contributes to the overall mood of the film. Melancholy, nostalgia and irony: these are the main feelings Kylián evokes through his art, and video helps to increase their effects, often giving a clear reading to the sometimes elusive dance.

So there was a sense of great expectation when Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, this year celebrating its 30th anniversary, announced at the premiere of their mixed bill, *An Evening with Jirí Kylián*, last April at the Grimaldi Forum in Monaco, that the Czech maestro had prepared a special surprise. A new dance? No,

a new videodance, *Oskar*, where he was able to showcase two 40-plus performers — a category of artist he has long supported, having founded Nederlands Dans Theater 3 in 1991, designed for "older" dancers, headed by his muse Sabine Kupferberg.

NDT3 was the third microcosm in the Netherlands Dans Theater macrocosm, along with the junior company, NDT2. "When we founded it, it was a moment of great freedom and high spirits," Kylián says. "You could understand the dancer experience through the younger, the 'normal' and the older. And consider how great it was that a 17-year-old dancer could see what a 50-year-old performer can do and really understand what dance is about: that is, for me, above all, experience of life and sharing this experience with an audience. The closure of NDT3 in 2006 due to poor structural subsidies (so the board of NDT declared) was criminal and surely made me distance myself from the company as artistic consultant. I was truly disappointed."

Fortunately, over the years, Kylián did not lose his quirky humour and the pleasure of discovery in new creative opportunities. *Oskar*, the Ballets de Monte Carlo surprise, is proof.

For the occasion, Kylián worked with Les Ballets de Monte Carlo's director, Jean-Christophe Maillot, 55, and former ballerina Bernice Coppieters, 45, plus an unexpected

"guest star," who makes a brief appearance and gives the video its title: a little dog called *Oskar*, who belongs to real-life couple Maillot and Coppieters.

The four-minute video, set to the glam and spicy pop rhythm of Prince's *Cream*, develops a humorous relationship between a choreographer, played by Maillot, and his mischievous muse, Coppieters. We see poses, smirks, affectation, grace, all teasing glimpses of a couple in rehearsal. Bits of daily routine are featured, but transformed: at one point, bald Maillot apparently feels like the Sun King, and he appears with a curling shoulder-length wig; Coppieters is lively and even spiteful, at once capable of low blows, then of seductive sentimentality. Kylián plays with dance, video and music to invent a surrealistic divertissement with echoes of Charlie Chaplin's slapstick comedy that he so loves, creating an ironic gem that everybody now can watch on the web at dailymotion and on Youtube.

The Evening with Jirí Kylián was performed by Les Ballets de Monte Carlo with real comprehension of the dynamics and poetry of the choreographer's style in all three pieces: *Bella Figura*, *Gods and Dogs* and *Chapeau*. Just a few days later, two more important events concerning the Czech maestro occurred.

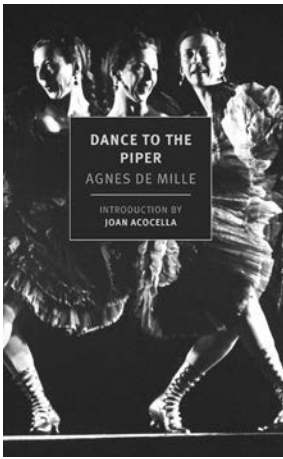
Lyon Opera Ballet director Yorgos Loukos announced that Kylián has been named associate artist of his company. And at the Korzo Theatre in The Hague, over two weeks in May, Kylián presented his first photo installation, *Free Fall*. Once again, the focus is on time, space and emotions, in another investigation of the mystery of living.

In the exhibit, Kupferberg's fleeting expressions are made eternal by shots that catch the moments. In one, a green apple is the touch of colour in the essential frame. In another, a maze on the floor and some little sculptures on tables recall the fragments and bits of which everybody's life is composed. In the air, the notes of Bach that play during gallery hours give a sense of eternity. "A frozen choreography" is how Kylián defines it.

Indeed, it is another step forward to whereabouts unknown for this artist whom, like the Pied Piper, we cannot help but follow in our continued need to understand what it really means to live.

— SILVIA POLETTI

Quotable



Excerpt from
Dance to the Piper by Agnes de Mille
First published 1951; New York Review of Books
edition, with introduction by Joan Acocella, 2015
www.nyrb.com

The Kosloff School

“The plain truth is I was the worst pupil in the class. Having grown into adolescence feeling that I was remarkably gifted and destined to be great (I remember a friend asking Mother, ‘But do you want her to be a professional dancer?’ and Mother’s cool reply, ‘If she can be a Pavlova — not otherwise’), I now found I could not hold my own with any of the girls standing on the floor beside me. So I crept about at the rear of the group, found matters wrong with my shoes, with my knees, with my hair, resorted to any device to get away from the dreadful exposure.

Furthermore, the [Theodore] Kosloff method of teaching rather accentuated my dilemma. The accent was placed on force and duration instead of harmony. He was intent on disciplining the feet and legs, and paid almost no attention to the co-ordination of arms and facial expression. The girls grew as vigorous as Cossacks, leaping prodigiously, whirling without cease, flailing and thrashing as they went and contorting their necks and faces in a hideous effort to show the master how altogether hell-bent for beauty they were. The exercises he devised were little miracles of perverse difficulty, muscle-locking gut-busters, all of them. I have never since seen healthy girls faint in class, but in Kosloff’s class they went down quite regularly and were dragged off with their heels bumping on the floor behind them. Kosloff barely stopped counting. He used to sit in a great armchair facing the room, stamping and roaring, whacking a cane in measure to the music. In the corner sat the man with the balalaika barely audible through the noise. All the girls adored the master and gladly fainted for him. It was Miss Fredova, however, who gave me my private lessons, quietly, patiently, kindly. Kosloff occasionally walked in, looked for a minute, said, ‘No juice, no juice. More *plié*. Do you know? More expression, more soul!’ grinned suddenly with Tartar glee and lost interest. ‘Don’t be discouraged,’ said the angel Fredova, ‘I wish though you could practice more regularly.’ ”

Left: Jiri Kylián rehearsing *Oskar* with
Bernice Coppieters and Jean-Christophe Maillot
Photo: Alice Blangero, courtesy of Les Ballets de Monte Carlo

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INSIDE ED

Dance Literacy

by Carol Anderson

Literacy in all its expressions is essential to deep understanding of dance. This may mean: the embodied experience of “speaking dance” through technical training and performance; understanding how to observe, evaluate and write about dance of various styles and genres; a sense of the roots, history and cultural significance of dance; and confidence, gained through experience, to engage with dance as a practitioner and/or observer.

Depth and breadth of knowledge create context, cultivating awareness of the unique potential and importance of the art of dance. As dance practice expands to include new ideas and forms, literacy is key to comprehensive understanding for future generations of professionals who find themselves entering fresh territory in their careers.

Undergraduate university students often have backgrounds in commercial dance studios, competitive dance and high school arts programs. For many, writing and speaking about dance are skills they must acquire almost from scratch. They need convincing that learning and finding language to describe, analyze and evaluate dance is a process that offers unique perspectives and rewards.

This process is supported and illuminated by systems that address analysis. Laban Movement Analysis, for instance, with its focus on effort and shape within the broad categories of the body, effort, shape and space, characterizes essential qualities of movement.

Somatic practices that offer understanding of body mechanics, subtle energies, energy pathways and efficient motion should also be an intrinsic part of dance literacy education. Somatic work supports healthy dance practice and equips students with practical knowledge about what the body can do, while providing functional,

anatomical language for describing dance movement.

Becoming conversant with specific lenses through which to view dance provides specific ways of looking at the essence of movement. With such tools, students can observe and evaluate movement in informed ways. Alongside such physical learning is the ability to be articulate that acquiring language and fresh ways of seeing can foster.

Developing observational and linguistic skills has a direct impact on students' ability to be critical thinkers, empowered in their own process as dancers and interpreters, and prepared to respond to choreography with objective, descriptive, evaluative skill. “If you don't think, how can you dance?” is equally as valid a question as “If you don't dance, how can you think?”

Another key to dance literacy is exploring dance history. Reflecting on historical issues and questions is not the same for dance as for other scholarly and critical writing. There is no body of work, no text or canvas, sculpture or score, to use as a basis for remount or reinterpretation, or that is, in fact, the work of art itself. The moment passed, dance ceases to exist, other than as a trace written in time and space — a moment that can, I believe, be written in words that haunt and illuminate and carry forward that space. The ephemeral nature of dance finally comes down to a body, writing.

Lucidity, integrity, clarity — these are qualities to be sought in speaking and writing about dancing. Whatever path a student of dance pursues as a professional, literacy serves them, supporting them in articulating artistic and evaluative matters. Students gain understanding through the effort of striving to write clearly, elegantly, evocatively about challenging content and sublime, exquisite art. This is important in the YouTube era, as looking at dance on screen is miniaturizing the art form. Filtered, considered, raw, poetic, clumsy, emergent ... all writing moves the field forward. ▫

Carol Anderson is a dance artist and writer who recently retired from the dance faculty at York University in Toronto.

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**Above right: York Dance Ensemble,
2015-2016, in rehearsal
Photo: Jennifer Collins**

Vancouver by Kaija Pepper

Vancouver is not a favoured touring location for dance companies these days — it's just too hard to fill seats — but plucky Ballet Kelowna, a six-member troupe from British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, dared three nights at the Norman Rothstein Theatre in May. Under artistic director Simone Orlando (an ex-Ballet BC dancer) since 2014, the group has grown in polish and contemporary presence, and its mixed bill included a welcome presentation of James Kudelka's *Byrd Music* (2011).

Kudelka is a major Canadian choreographer, one who is most widely represented by the National Ballet of Canada (where he was once artistic director). Over the years, the National Ballet has brought several Kudelka pieces to Vancouver, including *Swan Lake* (1999) and *The Four Seasons* (1997), two of his best. Now that the National Ballet tours west so seldom, Kudelka mostly comes to my attention through hearing about his commissions for companies in the United States (he remains fairly unknown in Europe).

Bryde Music is set to Rodney Sharman's *Pavane, Galliard and Variations* (2010), which was inspired by British Renaissance composer William Byrd's keyboard works. Performed onstage by the five members of Continuum Contemporary music, the Canadian composers' score has both complexity and warmth, things dance audiences don't often hear in an era of recorded

music favouring soundscapes and electronic noise.

On opening night, dancer Heather Thomson, Mark Dennis, Valentin Chou and Kurt Werner stepped neatly through the precise moves of Kudelka's courtly ballet. Many choreographers overlay pointe shoes (what they offer, and also restrict), but Kudelka clearly did not feel the need to make this technical tool, worn by the single woman, into the central impetus; the quartet performed with a similar energy and approach. There is a hint of relationship between the two couples — one partner is pushed through their moves and in the other duo, on is pulled — just enough to bring something warm and engaging to the choreographic shapes and steps.

Ballet BC's season finale also presented a work new to Vancouver, *Bill*, by the Israeli choreographic duo of Sharon Eyal and Gai Behar. Created in 2010 for Batsheva (with whom Eyal has a long association), *Bill* is informed by the style of that company's director Ohad Naharin, whose Gaga technique is now evident in works all over the world.

Eyal and Behar add their own cool and kooky touch in the form of twitch-rock disco styling, alternately tight and robotic, or super-stretched and bendy. At the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in mid-May, Ballet BC's 17 dancers boogied to Ori Lichtik's dancey music (the longstanding Eyal/Behar collaborator is called a founding father of the Israeli techno scene in his

program biography). The choreographers costumed their dancers in shape-showing unitards, hair slicked back and wearing green contact lenses, adding an eerie effect.

The dancers were also splendid in *I and I am You* by Jorma Elo, a Finn who is resident choreographer at Boston Ballet; they gave what seemed an authoritative interpretation of this engaging work, premiered by Ballet BC in 2013. The physical sweep and musical dynamics of the four sections, each set to a piece by Bach, opened the evening at a peak of theatrical aplomb.

In the middle piece, artistic director Emily Molnar's *16 + a room*, also from 2013, each dancer showed an ability to hold the moment, whether standing hunched and shaking, or just walking across the stage with a sign reading, "This is a beginning." Overall, this mixed bill showed Ballet BC was primed for the tours to Birmingham, New York and Ottawa's Canada Dance Festival that followed.

Elsewhere, two west coast choreographers took different approaches to using words onstage. The first by Body Narratives Collective co-directors Julia Carr and Meghan Goodman telling stories about friendship, motherhood and aerial dancing in an eclectic collection of memories orchestrated by choreographer Sarah Chase. *Here on the Ground* brought real-life stories to the dance stage, with Carr and Goodman miked and as busy talking as they were weaving arms and torso on the small Shadbolt Centre stage.

Just Words by Serge Bennathan focused on poetry, offering reflections on the life of an artist. Bennathan, performing with dancers Karissa Barry and Hilary Maxwell on another small stage, this time at the Firehall Arts Centre, also provided the words, both live and recorded. "I live with ghosts," the 58-year-old says, and the choreography resonated deeply when the ghosts of the ballet past were evoked in the fierce, elegant flow of contemporary movement for which he is known.

Finally, a shout out to the fierceness that was also present in Nicol Leahey's performance of *ReVoLt* (2015) by Belgain Thierry Smits, which ended The Dance Centre's Global Connections series. With her feet mostly on the ground, the Australian dancer keeps tossing her long blonde hair, which flies defiantly and, delving more deeply, works the muscles of her shoulders and back. When Leahey gets under her own skin, her dance is subtle, but no less fierce. *DI*

Toronto | by Michael Crabb



The massive 650,000-cubic metre hulk of the former Hearn Generating Station in Toronto's scrubby-ugly industrial Portlands proved the perfect venue for the revived version of Holy Body Tattoo's 2005 swan song, *monumental*. This time around it featured a reworked Godspeed You! Black Emperor score played live by the Montreal-based eight-piece post-rock band on a raised stage behind the dance floor.

The space, already the chosen location for a number of apocalyptic action movies and newly adopted by Toronto's Luminato Festival as its hub, is awe-inspiring — a ruined secular cathedral of shattered concrete and twisted steel. Fortunately, the roof is mostly rain-proof and the hollowed-out building safe enough to admit construction of an improvised theatre and separate “music stage” where *monumental* played to enthusiastic crowds over two nights.

Apart from a different cast and the addition of live music, Noam Gagnon and Dana Gingras' chilling evocation of urban societal alienation is not much changed from the original, although it does seem longer and was most certainly bone-shakingly louder. Heaven knows where it registered on the decibel

meter, but to their credit the thoughtful folks at Luminato provided free earplugs for everyone.

Monumental is still a strong piece and the bleak Hearn setting suggestively amplified its message. Even so it does go on a bit. It never quite seems to know when enough is enough. Sometimes a little less really is a lot more.

With a massive marketing campaign and tsunami of advance hype, the National Ballet of Canada's latest mega-production, *Le Petit Prince*, unveiled in early June, turned out to be box-office gold. While not quite the blockbuster equivalent of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's* 14-show debut Toronto run in June 2011, *Le Petit Prince's* sold-out run of nine performances was manna from heaven for a company whose March season was hardly a revenue driver.

The two-act, two-hour ballet, based on French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's illustrated 1943 novella, is the first full-length work by National Ballet principal dancer and emerging choreographer Guillaume Côté. Few choreographers of his limited experience are offered such an opportunity, or the \$2 million budget — a private donation — to go with it. That it packed Toronto's 2,100-seat Four Seasons Centre is

certainly a triumph of marketing, but how much good it will do Côté's choreographic reputation is questionable.

The philosophical ruminations intertwined with episodic fables that have made Saint-Exupéry's little book such a beloved classic for adults and children alike are not easily evoked in dance. In falling into the trap of depicting the Little Prince's intergalactic encounters with odd characters representing the gamut of human foibles, Act I of Côté's new ballet has little room for much else. Act II, recounting the Little Prince's stay on planet Earth, is less literal, even surreal, and contains some of the more promising choreography, especially that for the Snake, but the Prince's pas de deux meeting with the Fox is not emotionally distinguishable from that with the Rose in Act I.

With Canadian designer Michael Levine's black-box set of many movable parts and a score by Canadian composer Kevin Lau that channels any number of composers and sounds as if it's in search of the right movie, *Le Petit Prince* ends up being considerably less than the sum of its parts and a disappointing artistic flop.

Among the less mainstream, more arcane offerings of the spring dance

season, Toronto Dance Theatre in mid-April presented a curious but mostly rewarding choreographic invitational called *Singular Bodies*. The twist was that only one of the 11 invitees, Johanna Householder, boasts a dance background and can lay any conventional claim to being a choreographer. No matter. Artistic director Christopher House's intention was to match-make a series of counterintuitive creative marriages between his chosen visual artists and TDT's 10 dancers.

Predictably, some of the results were instantly forgettable, but others, such as Stephen Andrews' *You and I* for the excellent Jarrett Siddall, and Walter Scott's *Take my scepter/take my blade* for the lissom Erin Poole, were not only well-constructed and wonderfully performed, but actually had something to say.

House, at age 61, took to the stage himself just a little more than a month later for TDT's season closer in another intentionally unconventional artistic match with 28-year-old Governor General's Award-winning playwright Jordan Tannahill. It wasn't just the match that

was unconventional. For *Marienbad*, audience and artists switched places, with the former arrayed on risers near the back wall of TDT's Winchester Street home's studio/theatre, and the latter making clever use of the denuded bleachers that normally accommodate the audience.

House and an admirably agile Tannahill in boxers and casual tops negotiate these terraces like strangers in a strange land. They romp and run. They sprawl with erotic suggestiveness. There's a hint of two men cruising, of an odd but inconclusive courtship. There are moments of physical, but distinctly unromantic intimacy.

Marienbad is ultimately enigmatic, its performers at one level portraying loosely defined characters and at another themselves. Their mysterious journey through this evocative emotional no-man's-land holds one's attention because of its underlying tensions and unpredictability.

Generally, it might seem unfair to render critical judgment on dancers-in-training, but when they are as

accomplished as those of the National Ballet School and Canadian Contemporary Dance Theatre, an exception to the rule is surely admissible.

George Balanchine choreographed *Serenade*, his first made-in-America work, in 1934 for students, albeit most of them beyond adolescence, of his School of American Ballet. Too often its essential simplicity, the key to its ultimately melancholy magic, is nowadays lost by a surfeit of self-conscious artistry; not so with the National Ballet School's Spring Showcase performance. It had a luminous glow and unaffected innocence that made its internal emotional drama all the more potent.

Similarly, the teenaged dancers of CCDT in their annual spring performance, *Precipice*, infused well-chosen excerpts from José Limón's 1966 *The Winged* with a fresh urgency that was simply breathtaking; but, then, this was true of the whole program with even its indifferent inclusions danced with such commitment you could excuse any number of choreographic clichés. *DI*

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Peter Quanz's "experimental dance laboratory," Q Dance, co-presented with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet its eighth annual production on April 1-3, at Winnipeg's 110-year-old Burton Cummings Theatre for the Performing Arts, a former vaudeville house that once hosted Charlie Chaplin and Harry Houdini. Quanz's mixed bill program featured one guest choreographer, Vancouver-based Heather Myers, and a multi-generational roster of dancers, who ranged in age from 18 to 54.

The premiere of *1490*, its title inspired by its florid Renaissance score from a range of composers, unfolded as a joyous kaleidoscope of Quanz's signature movement vocabulary. Guest artist Émilie Durville, from Montreal, and Q Dance company members Philippe-Alexandre Jacques, Josh Reynolds and Jo-Ann Sundermeier wove their bodies and limbs throughout the 13-minute work like threads in a tapestry. Each of their individual solos was playfully conceived, with flexed feet, hip swivels, wriggles and soaring leaps. Quanz showed a deft hand with fluid transitions, recalling his 2010 work *Luminous*, with the dancers seamlessly morphing between the smaller ensembles, and even breaking the fourth wall by dashing out in front of the stage's lowered curtain as the piece ends.

The second premiere, Myers' more abstract *In the Wake*, opened in stillness, with the same dancers joined by two new Q Dance members, Liam Saito and Yue Shi. Dressed in Myers' own costume design of simple white trousers, cotton shirts and ballet slippers, the pensive work, driven by gestural choreography and body isolations, is set to an electronic score by Ben Frost and Daníel Bjarnason. Myers infuses her work with a postmodern sensibility, as pairs of dancers stand motionless, facing into dim shadows, while individuals take turns performing solos. Durville's solo, in which she teeters as though walking a tightrope, or Sundermeier's, performed in silence, were harrowing highlights. The 25-minute work could — and should — be whittled; however, its final moments where Durville slowly walks upstage as lights dim underscored the entire piece with mystery, and was worth the wait.

Winnipeg | by Holly Harris



Contemporary dancer Kathleen Hiley reprised Quanz's *Sans Titre*, premiered during her Kathleen Hiley Solo Projects' inaugural production last February. Dressed in simple black shorts and a long-sleeved shirt, the intensely physical solo, set to Tan Dun's *Symphonic Poem of 3 Notes*, features the dancer rolling across the stage, hurtling through space or slamming her body against the floor. Only a few, fleeting moments in which she pauses to catch her breath or performs molasses-slow deep knee bends provide relief from Quanz's otherwise percussive, hard-driving choreography. As Hiley finally comes to rest, shuddering in designer Robert Mravnik's shards of decaying light, a final gunshot rings out, punctuating the visceral solo with a forceful bang. The work was testament to how effectively Quanz is able to translate his classical ballet lexicon to contemporary movement.

The program also included the Canadian premiere of neoclassical pas de deux *Blushing*, performed on pointe by Sae-ka Shirai and Shi, who presented the same duet at the 2016 Varna International Ballet Competition this summer. The pair moved as lightning-speed quarks throughout the intimate work, their trust palpable as pirouettes end in hop-skips, or sky-high lifts end with quickly beating feet. In one thrilling moment, Shi swings Shirai over his head with the joy and abandon of youth.

Finally, the madcap *Murder Afoot* that debuted at the much smaller Gas Station Arts Centre in 2014 appears to have found

its true home, with Quanz cleverly making full use of the "Burt's" nooks and crannies, as well as balconies, loges, backstage area and aisles, courtesy of live video projections. The tongue-in-cheek murder-mystery story ballet displays Quanz's wit as it skewers classical ballet conventions. Montreal's Sylvain Lafortune guested in the role of the Ballet Director and former Royal Winnipeg Ballet dancer Jaime Vargas was the Costume Designer.

The Baden, Ontario-born choreographer's dance card has been particularly full lately. Since 2015, Quanz has divided his time between Canada and China, where he has been immersed in creating new works for two companies: the Guangzhou Ballet and the Wuxi Song and Dance Theatre. Founded in 1974, the Guangzhou Ballet is recognized as one of China's top three ballet companies. The troupe performed Quanz's *Luminous* last October, and will premiere his as-yet unnamed neoclassical ballet for 23 dancers set to a score by Chinese composer Du Mingxin later this year.

Quanz's full-length classical Chinese dance, *The Red Crowned Crane*, choreographed in 2015 for the Wuxi company, marked the first time that a non-Chinese choreographer has been invited to create for a traditional Chinese dance company, with Quanz casting Royal Winnipeg Ballet dancer, Tristan Dobrowney, in a lead role. Plans for a North American tour are currently in the works. ▀

Jo-Ann Sundermeier and Josh Reynolds
in Peter Quanz's *1490*
Photo: Stanislav Belyaevsky

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal first presented Stephan Thoss' *Dream Away* in 2012, but the restaging last May featured many new dancers, including a rather subdued Vera Kvarcakova alternating with Valentine Legat in the challenging female Dreamer role. Elegantly partnered with characteristic self-effacement by Jérémy Galdeano as the male Dreamer, Kvarcakova traversed a typical Thoss series of enigmatic tableaux.

A German neo-expressionist, Thoss had touches teeming with symbolic suggestions, like a hanging red-draped figure and two figures in oversized top hats swaying under a nightmarish glow. Large frame structures and contrasting light and dark suggested portals to the Dreamers' conscious and unconscious states. The finale in which the two Dreamers slowly linked hands stayed in the memory long after the curtain fell.

The tempo slowed when Robert Abubo appeared, and the two charged at each other like matador and bull. Later, they leaned upside down against the back wall, rolling to and fro. Lecavalier's confrontations with her own fears of the new and unknown underlay *Battleground's* physicality. Throughout her career, she has faced and overcome similar trepidations with tremendous artistic results. *Battleground* ended fittingly with Lecavalier and Abubo seated calmly. Battle over — at least for now.

Performing onstage holds fear, yes, but also great attraction, a subject broached by two quite different Festival TransAmériques shows. Mélanie Demers in *Pluton – acte 2* had six-footer Marc Boivin in high heels and a cheap jacket doing an awkward striptease while mature dancer Linda Rubin sported fishnet stockings and a come-hither look as she vainly tried singing Broadway songs in tune. At once funny and sad, the work dealt with

were two small kids, two elderly folk, a lad with Down syndrome and a sparkling lass in a wheelchair. All gamely performed a pirouette, a moonwalk, a waltz and some ensemble numbers. Most lacked “dancer bodies” or strong technique, but their enthusiasm, creative flashes and willingness to dance in front of a large audience silenced all criticism. Unlike Demers' *Pluton – acte 2*, *Galá's* people were not desperate to be admired, simply happy to dance. Was my reaction aesthetic or sentimental? I'm still trying to decide.

The five identically coiffed and dressed women in Manon Oligny's *Fin de Série* clearly illustrated the many facets of contemporary womanhood from Barbie doll to breastfeeding mother. Toward the end, a male magician skewered one woman inside a box. When opened, the box was empty, a comment surely on women's illusory images. Presumably the brief finale — in the nude — showed women without any artifice.

Undoubtedly Montreal's coolest show in June was the North American premiere of *Inferno*, a “robotic” dance by local media artists Bill Vorn and Louis-Philippe Demers. Presented as part of the 17th International Digital Arts Festival, Elektra, *Inferno's* “dancers” were 24 volunteer audience members who wore aluminum suits over the upper body that allowed Vorn to control their arm movements. Participants could move their legs freely.

Techno rhythms boomed and strobe lights flashed in the cavernous Arsenal Contemporary Art gallery, while Vorn created a constantly varying choreography for individuals, small groups and the ensemble. As a participant, I relinquished control of my arms and brought them into harmony with my feet and body — an energizing, fun sensation. Later, as an observer, I enjoyed the kaleidoscope of group movements that were at once coordinated yet free.

If *Inferno* was not a true confluence of humans and machines — a human controlled the mechanical suits, after all — it nonetheless seemed to portend a future in which machines increasingly supplement humans. Some choreographers might revel at the thought of total control over their dancers. Be careful, though, of what you wish for ... ▯



Montreal

by Victor Swoboda

For a decade now, the two-week Festival TransAmériques has taken over June with a lineup of Canadian, American and European contemporary troupes. The latest edition saw a happy mix of young and old spectators attending mostly sold-out shows.

Following her first marvellous choreography in 2012, *So Blue*, Louise Lecavalier presented a new hour-long creation, *Battleground*, a work as exhilarating and even more exhausting than the first. Indeed, from the moment her right hand twitched to life beneath her Yso-designed, close-fitting black suit, Lecavalier was in rapid motion for some 20 minutes. As her feet pattered across the stage in tight steps, her arms and hands wove fanciful patterns. The impression was one of jazz made visible.

people's attempts to attract attention and its offspring, love. But the sheer desperation of the characters made their attempt more depressing than poignant.

Trajal Harrell's *Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem* featured Harrell, Thibault Lac and Ondrej Vidlar as a trio of Greenwich Village avant-garde types in loose black robes preparing to go voguing in Harlem. Before they showed off their slinky, fashion-model moves, tears were shed, soulful songs were sung and a ritual was held. “Don't stop,” Vidlar intoned repeatedly. It was intense, though the weak voguing sequence outlasted its appeal.

Jérôme Bel gathered a score of local amateur dancers and one pro — Alexander Hille of Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal — for *Galá*, a touching ode to democratic dance. Along with some youthful dancers

Whatever else will linger in the mind about San Francisco Ballet's 2016 season, it will likely be remembered as the year Justin Peck came to town. At 28, the New York City Ballet's resident choreographer has long outgrown the wunderkind designation assigned him by lazy headline writers; he is now simply the most indecently talented American choreographer of his generation. He seems to use everything, to go for broke in anything he touches; nothing is ignored or wasted.

That's why Peck's *In the Countenance of Kings*, unveiled April 7 at the War Memorial Opera House, is the most exhilarating San Francisco Ballet commission in years. It evoked a dazzling response from the six principals and 12 corps dancers, who animated the 34-minute ballet with a verve that suggested they'd been performing the piece for years.

The work begins with a brooding section of Sufjan Stevens' orchestral score, *The BQE* (Brooklyn-Queens Expressway), and an arresting image: dancers clustered in a clump upstage in a tangle of limbs. They appear later in groups, arms jutting to the roof, or subdivided into straight lines or lolling at the footlights. It all happens with such spontaneity that you have barely recovered

from one thrill before the next is upon you. Everything you see reflects Peck's response to the changing moods and metres of the score.

I have observed elsewhere that he works like a baroque architect, erecting the structure first and then filling in the curlicues and doodads. Yes, it is easy to spot the influence of Balanchine and Robbins; Peck, after all, has spent his entire career at New York City Ballet. So, when you see a trio of women descending on dancer Joseph Walsh, you naturally think of Balanchine's *Apollo* and the three muses. But then Walsh took off in an enigmatic solo that mixed intense torso work with playful kicks, in one of many inspired moments.

Note that Peck assigned character names to the dancers, in the allegorical style of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, although there's nothing remotely narrative about the ballet. To expend energy figuring it out robs the viewer of the visceral effect of the work.

Peck gave his A-team dancers plenty to do. Luke Ingham engaged with Jennifer Stahl in a conventional pas de deux. Dores André and Frances Chung shared a unison and mirror duet. Gennadi Nedvigin (who retired at season's end to direct Atlanta Ballet) entered late in the game and plunged into in a quick waltz with Chung.

Occasionally, a vivid moment, like the

four women on pointe converging at the centre of a square, astonished. But Peck never lingers, preferring to move on to the next surprise. The piece is so slick that one local critic opined that *In the Countenance of Kings* belonged on Broadway (it doesn't). As for the title, the kings may reference Louis XIV or they may allude to Kings County, Brooklyn, an allusion to the Stevens score. I'll think about it every time I see the ballet, which I hope is often.

New also to the company (April 7) was Alexei Ratmansky's *Seven Sonatas*, created in 2009 for American Ballet Theatre. It proved an utter joy, a chamber work for three couples to keyboard Scarlatti, but one that easily transcends the format clichés of the piano ballet (of which we had four this season). It doesn't much resemble the Ratmansky dances we have seen here, those that probe the history of the choreographer's homeland. In *Seven Sonatas*, an onstage pianist performed while the sextet in Holly Hynes' sparkling white costumes dashed in and proceeded to captivate us for 37 minutes.

They began in unison, but Ratmansky soon adds individual touches. The movement style favours full-bodied lunges. Busy arms seem to pull along the torso, while the sudden freezes establish a unique rhythm. Elbows work overtime, and movement is supple, without frills.

The six sank to the floor and rolled on the stage. The most famous sonata gave Nedvigin the opportunity to kick out as only he can. The mood darkened, and Mathilde Froustey turned her back on Walsh, and we seemed to be eavesdropping on something painful. A tipsy male trio brought the influence of folk dance and restored the balance. Chung, Davit Karapetyan and Vanessa Zahorian completed the sterling cast.

There was a delicious feeling of evanescence about *Seven Sonatas*, staged faithfully by Nancy Raffa; you felt it would look the same the next time around. It won't. Nedvigin will be gone and so will two other retiring male principals, Joan Boada and Pascal Molat, bulwarks of San Francisco Ballet for the past two decades. A late-season revival of *Onegin* with Nedvigin (Lensky) and Boada (Gremm) reaffirmed how much we will miss them in 2017. ❧



Frances Chung and Gennadi Nedvigin in Justin Peck's *In the Countenance of Kings*
Photo: Erik Tomasson

NEW YORK

by Robert Greskovic



In a move some called bold and others, likely, foolhardy, American Ballet Theatre planned its annual spring/summer season at the Metropolitan Opera House with works having little name recognition and in good part without invited guest dancers with international reputations to entice ticket buyers. Whatever the final result, my casual take of audience numbers told me the programs didn't sell impressively.

By my non-scientific count, the only offerings that sold better than average, some to the near 3,000-seat capacity of the Met, were those that were cast to feature Misty Copeland, the much-written about African American dancer who was promoted to principal in 2015.

Copeland's audience-attracting ability seems to be flourishing as individuals from all walks of life come to see the dancer who had a much-publicized advancement to top rank — the first-ever African American principal dancer in this major U.S. ballet company where it's sometimes said racial bias has kept others from thus advancing.

To that end, from the appearances by Copeland that I've seen, these have been solid, often boldly accented performances that can't be said to rank with the most stellar, accomplished and charismatic of efforts historically associated with the ballets in question. As Lise in Frederick Ashton's fine, witty and challenging 1960 ballet *Sylvia*, Copeland showed spunk and colourful character if not stirring classical details. As Gulnare in Anna-Marie Holmes' 1998 staging of *Les Sylphes* she showed warmth and strength if not shimmer and particular finesse. In the title role in

Les Sylphes, Alexei Ratmansky's 2012 reworking of the 1910 ballet, she again made a forceful showing, though not the season's most impressive, which was given by Isabella Boylston, who was promoted to principal rank the year before Copeland.

Most happily, and rewardingly, came Copeland's portrayal of the Queen of Shemakhan in *Les Sylphes*, Ratmansky's 2012 version, new to ABT. Here Copeland shone, lifting the second act of this extensively pantomimed staging with a personality and dance presence that proved potent. Taking the orientalist upper body plastique and sometimes brazen steps and postures that Ratmansky devised for this Eastern queen with an ego and ambition that makes her ruthless, Copeland winningly projected strength, wit and radiance. Compared to her bright efforts, those of the ballet's other ballerina/queens in this production's run, Veronika Part and Stella Abrera, were thin and ordinary. (Without making unnecessary comparisons, this role has the legendary personalities of Tamara Karsavina and Irina Baronova in its past.)

Elsewhere, in performances not nearly as well patronized as Copeland's, ABT's current leading dancers, two of whom are classed as exchange artists, made high-water marks for themselves and for the ballets in which they performed. Of the ballerinas, Gillian Murphy, who was given a 20th-anniversary celebration in late May, shone as Lise in *Sylvia*, giving it a sunny tone and effortless physicality that tells of a farm lass with an artful accent and surefire confidence. Boylston also made this same part as well as the title role of Ashton's poetic, witty and majestic *Sylvia* an occasion for breathtaking

dance power. (Murphy also performed *Sylvia*, which I missed.)

As the title character in *Sylvia*, Skylar Brandt made a dazzling impression, executing the semi-mechanical accents and daring thrust that Ratmansky worked into this key role on pointe with unbridled energy and charisma. At opposite ends of ABT's female spectrum this season, a number of performances from the younger and senior ends stood out. In the technically rigorous *Odalisque* trio of *Les Sylphes*, Cassandra Trenary, Brittany DeGroff and Catherine Hurlin revealed the freshness of youth alongside the fine points of ballet schooling. Performing now as a retired ballerina and teacher at ABT's school, the ever theatrical and compelling Martine van Hamel played the king's housekeeper in *Les Sylphes* with warmth and wit of uncommon dimensions.


Among the leading men, exchange artists Xander Parish of the Mariinsky Ballet and Mathias Heymann of Paris Opera Ballet made strong showings: the former, with charm and skill as the lovesick, poetic shepherd Aminta in *Les Sylphes*; the latter, as the one-note Conrad in *Les Sylphes*, which he coloured with grace, power and unaffected classical form.

ABT regulars Cory Stearns, Marcelo Gomes and Herman Cornejo all distinguished themselves further this season. Stearns proved glowingly romantic and classically poetic as Colas in *Les Sylphes*, and charismatically dark-toned as the trouble-making Orion in *Les Sylphes*. Likewise as related wizards, in character-filled portrayals as Kaschei in *Les Sylphes* and the Astrologer in *Les Sylphes*, Stearns brought slinky, sly details to enunciate their sinister dimensions. Gomes proved a fine character

dancer when he took on the travesty role of Widow Simone in with relish and verve. Cornejo stood out most impressively as one of the seven men featured in Ratmansky's new (to Leonard Bernstein's music of the same name) by gamboling through the complexities of his choreography like an eager scholar scaling the heights of formidable challenges.

In other roles from , Calvin Royal III, a willowy corps de ballet dancer, made stellar work of the choreography's silken aspects. Soloist Joseph Gorak danced his solo with his now familiar precision and power. Soloist Roman Zhurbin continues to make rich and memorable all the parts he's given, from a beguiling Widow Simone to a feisty, blustering general in . Gabe Stone Shayer, still corps de ballet rank, brings to his every role — increasingly prominent ones — a daring and generosity that match his skill and power.

With luck, word will get out that even dancers without Copeland's newsworthy background have a drawing power all their own. *DI*



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UNITED STATES • CANADA • AUSTRALIA • SPAIN • MEXICO • FRANCE • SINGAPORE • ARGENTINA • THAILAND • BRAZIL • GREAT BRITAIN

Everyone “knows” the story of *Frankenstein*: mad scientist, lightning, monster, kill, kill. Of course, James Whale’s classic film is very different from Mary Shelley’s classic novel, but that skeleton of a plot is common to both. The same is true for Liam Scarlett’s new full-length work for the Royal Ballet (co-produced by San Francisco Ballet), which cleaves closely to the original Shelley rather than to Whale. Which is why it feels so odd to find yourself, half an hour in, still uncertain who the characters are, what is happening and why.

The ballet, which premiered at the Royal Opera House in May, begins promisingly enough: ominous swells of sound, a title sequence of grand landscapes and portentous storms projected onto a frontcloth. Just like in the movies. But nearly all of the 50-minute first act feels like a misguided prologue, an attempt to give the drama an explanatory emotional backstory by illustrating the childhood love between Victor

Frankenstein (Tristan Dyer, on the night I went) and his later wife, Elizabeth (Sarah Lamb), the pain caused by the death of his mother, the thirst for knowledge encouraged by his father — all set within a polite Victorian household and choreographed with well-mannered steps. But *Frankenstein* is a gothic tale, not a case history; such drawing-room psychologizing diminishes — domesticates, even — its uncanny force.

In any case, it’s hard to tell who the sketchily drawn characters actually are, and writing on the frontcloth spelling out that Victor is “thinking of his mother and life and death” feels like a vain gesture toward big ideas. The blood quickens only once we get to the anatomy theatre scene, and thence to the heart of the story: Frankenstein and his monster.

Following a mordantly wicked divertimento of nurses cavorting with assorted body parts, Victor takes off into vertical jumps of excitement while his splendid electromechanical contraption of wheels and wires pops and crackles. At first he believes his experiment has failed, unaware that the creature is twitching

horribly into life. The monster (Ryoichi Hirano) looms large behind him, ghoulish and ghastly in a costume of flayed skin and suppurating sutures — and then all it does, pretty much, is run out of the room. The “It’s alive!” moment has been squandered.

It’s a real shame that Act 1 is such a dud, because it weighs heavily on the far superior Acts 2 and 3. The choreography now begins to unsettle more than explain. The pas de deux for Elizabeth and Victor is a lyric skein of steps threaded with anxiety: flows and congruencies that unexpectedly double back, pitch off balance and slip out of line. It’s a beautiful embodiment of the disquiet infusing their romance.

The garden party scene — Victor’s young brother William playing blindman’s bluff until he encounters the creature — elicits both repulsion and sympathy for the monster. We feel the horror of the young boy’s murder, yet sense it as an act born of pain more than evil. The final act’s ballroom scene is haunting, with the creature shadow-waltzing among the guests at Victor and Elizabeth’s wedding

party, the spectre at their feast. He stalks, then kills, each of Victor’s remaining loved ones — a trail of death and vengeance that leads inexorably to the monster’s final doomed encounter with his maker.

Throughout, John Macfarlane’s suitably exaggerated set — gloomy landscapes, upright interiors — works wonders for the mood without crowding the dancers, though Lowell Lieberman’s televisual score is more workaday than inspiring. Scarlett himself has a genuine gift in making steps both lyrical and meaningful, even if he sometimes seems overly constrained by balletic good taste.

Several critics accused him of imitating scenes from ballets by past masters (Ashton, MacMillan), but I have no problem with imitation if it works in context; moreover, here you could plausibly argue that stitching in parts of other ballets is entirely appropriate for this creation. No, the real problem is that *Frankenstein* never comes to life as an entity. You

recognize the sparks of quickening within it (the ballroom scene, the turbulent duets, the crafted steps), yet every scene that hits the spot then goes on to outstay its welcome — the opposite problem of that wasted awakening scene, over before it began.

Frankenstein led to something of an outcry from British critics, most of them arguing that, as with several of the Royal’s recent narrative creations, the ballet should have had far more editorial guidance — parenting, if you like — before it was let out into the world, especially given Scarlett’s age (29) and his stronger record with abstract than narrative works. I agree, but think there’s also another context. Too many current large-scale creations rely on a well-known story (to boost audience recognition and advance sales) combined with lavish production values that can go a long way toward masking artistic weaknesses. It’s creation as marketing, focused more on the package than its contents, and I do wonder if *Frankenstein* might be one of its monsters. *DI*



London

by Sanjoy Roy



A el Rojas is one of the busiest men in Spanish dance. His 20-year creative partnership with fellow dancer/choreographer Carlos Rodríguez has blossomed into the creation of one of flamenco's most recognizable brands: Rojas and Rodríguez. The duo is responsible for founding Madrid's Nuevo Ballet Español in 1995 and the Municipal Dance School in Mostoles, one of Madrid's largest suburbs, where they were both born. Individually, Rojas has produced a number of solo shows, as well as choreographing, directing and dancing in productions by others, including such flamenco legends as Antonio Canales and La Lupi.

In late June, Rojas was in the United States for the premiere of *Iroko*, a contemporary flamenco piece that Rojas and Rodríguez choreographed for the Chicago-based Ensemble Español, as well as to perform as a guest artist in the group's 40th Anniversary Gala. It was then that we sat down to discuss Rojas' latest venture and what he describes as his "greatest [professional] surprise": the Flamenco Madrid festival.

In 2015, Rojas received economic and infrastructure support from the City of Madrid for an original flamenco festival format that is giving the capital's other flamenco festival, Suma Flamenca, a run for its money. The always diplomatic Rojas says that Suma Flamenca "meets some of the need for flamenco in Madrid, but there is still a lot of need it does not cover." With nearly 6.5 million inhabitants within the Province of Madrid and more

than three million of them in the capital city, there's a huge potential market, and Rojas argues that "there is a lot of diversity and a lot of productions that a single festival just cannot attend to."

Now in its second year, Flamenco Madrid's rise can be described as nothing short of meteoric. Despite overlapping dates with Suma Flamenca (both are in June/July), 97 percent ticket sales for the entire festival are being reported.

Flamenco Madrid strives for plurality and besides dance and musical performances, includes master classes, exhibitions and talks. Audience engagement and diversity are paramount for Rojas, and as this year's theme, "A place to share among generations," suggests, productions for children and adults were included.

The theme is also a reference to the range of performers presented, which featured established masters, including Canales and Rojas himself, as well as young artists, such as Vanesa Coloma, who, says Rojas, "is not yet widely known, but she has a following in Madrid. They never get to see her because she's rarely programmed locally, and that's unfair to the audience and the artist."

Audience demand and interest seem to trump star power for Rojas, and Flamenco Madrid also includes performances by Spain's dance conservatories. The difficult to fill Tuesday night slots were assigned to conservatories on the condition that 100 percent of ticket sales be donated to a non-profit of their choice.

Not only does this scheme give back to the community, but it also provides emerging dancers with performance experience. The caveat was put in place because, as Rojas explains, conservatory students are not in the same league as professional dancers, and therefore, "should not be contracted the same way."

The most singular aspect of the festival is its financial structure. Flamenco Madrid provides all technical and backline needs, such as providing large instruments and stage furnishings at the almost 700-seat Fernán Gómez Theatre in the historic city centre, and festival promotion, but the artists are expected to cover all other expenses, such as travel and accommodation, in exchange for a majority percentage of box-office earnings. In Spain, where performing arts festivals have been entirely financed since the 1980s by local governments and corporate sponsorships, with little concern for ticket sales, Flamenco Madrid's setup is practically unheard of. The fact that Rojas has managed to convince performers accustomed to substantial guaranteed artist fees to go out on a limb and participate under these terms is a testament to their trust in his ingenuity and leadership.

The reasoning behind this shared-risk structure is pragmatic. Spain's prolonged economic hardship means the government can no longer invest in the arts the way it used to, so Flamenco Madrid has had to look for new ways to do more with less. Plus, directly involving artists in the success of the festival and their performances makes for a team effort: the festival administration handles advertising and press coverage, and has a legion of artists promoting the festival through their own social networks.

At the first edition of the festival, not all of the artists turned a profit at the box office, but Rojas assures me that this year not a single group has gone home empty-handed. The excellent audience turnout and buzz surrounding the festival means that government funding has already been increased for the third edition, which Rojas expects will give him the ability to finance all of the artists' expenses, thereby reducing their risk. However, Rojas doesn't expect to revert to the classical guaranteed artist fee format anytime soon, as artist involvement and financial investment is key to his conception of festival presenting. ^{DI}

COPENHAGEN!



by Anne-Marie Elmby

The spring season of Royal Danish Ballet offered some red-letter days. On April 10, character dancer Eva Kloborg celebrated her 50-year jubilee with the company as Juliet's Nurse in John Neumeier's *Romeo and Juliet*. Kloborg is also an esteemed Bournonville pedagogue and, together with her husband, former artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet Frank Andersen, stages Bournonville's ballets worldwide.

On April 6, 22-year-old Ida Praetorius received her long-expected promotion to principal dancer after a live-streamed performance of *Romeo and Juliet* to cinemas all over Denmark. Later, she crowned her fine season dancing a sprightly Kitri in *Don Quixote* opposite Marcin Kupiński. His quick turns and light jumps were executed with such ease in Basil's virtuoso variations that one forgot what technical skill they actually demand.

Another cast in the principal roles of Basil and Kitri featured the strong, tall Jón Axel Fransson parading J'aime Crandall in lengthy lifts on one arm; she even opened and closed her fan while turning the endless fouettées. Also as Basil, Jonathan Chmelensky, with a salute to his Cuban training, openly enjoyed spicing up his spectacular jumps and pirouettes, as well as serving as a gallant partner for the talented Lena-Maria Gruber.

As the Toreador, Ulrik Birkkjær, who is also a principal with Los Angeles Ballet, embodied Spanish flavour with his torso bent backward in a tense bow and with sharp eye-catching footwork. Character dancer Mogens Boesen was the epitome of a melancholic, dreaming knight, with Poul-Erik Hesselkilde as his amusing, trusted Sancho Panza.

The late Jens Jacob Worsaae's colourful scenography and costumes for Yuri Grigorovich's 1983 staging for the company still looked wonderfully fresh in Nikolaj Hübbe's present version.

The last premiere of the season was of a completely different nature. With *Rystet Spejl (Shaken Mirror)*, the London-based, Danish choreographer Kim Brandstrup has created a ballet springing from his reflections on poems by Danish poet Søren Ulrik Thomsen. Brandstrup and Thomsen, both in their 60s, have been close friends since high school, but this was the first time their art forms combined.

With a background in film, Brandstrup is mainly a narrative choreographer, and Thomsen's poems frequently seem to imply a male "I," and a female "you," writing of aspects of love, which is a favourable stepping stone for a physically articulated story. His poems reflect the contrasting themes of presence and loss, youth and old age, and they bring echoes of a past that has changed when reflected in the mirror of time.

In connection with her 101st birthday on June 15, former Ballets Russes dancer Nini Theilade received the prestigious 2016 CORPS de Ballet International's Lifetime Achievement Award. The award presentation took place in Denmark, where Theilade lives, and was filmed and then shown in Sarasota, Florida, at this year's CORPS de Ballet International Conference, together with a reading of messages from the international dance world.

The presentation can be watched on YouTube together with *Titania I, II and III*, filmed in 2015 by Thomas Seest, in which Theilade re-enacts her expressive hand movements from her role as first fairy in Max Reinhardt's 1935 Hollywood film *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Seest won a first prize at the 60secondsdance online competition in Stockholm for the edited vignette.

In the opening scene, "snow," on a semi-transparent tulle curtain at the edge of the stage slurred the view of the dancers, and the revolving stage made it look as if some of them were skating. Brandstrup selected music by the internationally acclaimed Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen — one of them titled *Schnee (Snow)* — that underscored the intimate situations. At times, single words or lines from the poems would appear on Bente Lykke Møller's architectonic wall design that revolved and suggested both indoor and outdoor spaces. Jean Kalman's lighting design generated both distorted human shadows as well as realistic lights from a car driving by.

The dancers ranged from age 11 to 67, which allowed a portrayal of a wide spectrum of human relationships. They



wore regular clothes from the 1960s, with the exception of two pairs of pointe shoes, but their relationships were of a timeless nature. Brandstrup's expressive choreography made it easy to identify with the diverse emotions and reactions of these genuine human beings. It was fascinating to witness how the dancers could relate inner feelings, alone or together, just by moving a foot or a finger, or sitting on a chair in a certain way. At times, two couples danced on the stage simultaneously, a young one in happy love and an older, more resigned one, which made me wonder if it was meant to be the same couple at two stages in life.

There was cheerful dancing in groups of all men or all women, but the major part of the ballet tended toward a more serious atmosphere. Character dancer Lis Jeppesen and the young Tobias Praetorius appeared together several times, maybe a loving mother and eager son. They later returned, her body now shrunk into a frail and disoriented little woman. In spite of his caring support that kept her from falling, she was unable to recognize him and shuffled off absorbed in her own world. Later, the sensitive Christina Michanek lovingly used her own body to revive the lifeless Praetorius, in the final tableau sending him floating upward into higher spheres.

After closing the spring season with an open-air performance tour around Denmark, the Royal Danish Ballet left on June 13 for a two-week tour to China. The 64 dancers and 12 children performed August Bournonville's *Napoli* and *La Sylphide* — both in Hübbe's new versions — as well as George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*. ^{DI}

Above: Royal Danish Ballet's Susanne Grinder and Ulrik Birkkjær in Kim Brandstrup's *Rystet Spejl (Shaken Mirror)*
Photo: Per Morten Abrahamsen

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PHOTO: PER MORTEN ABRAHAMSEN

The producers and performers of folk dance work extremely hard to ensure that traditional steps are executed correctly, the way they have always been, at least here in Norway. It is considered almost a sin to experiment with folk dance. But one person who does not agree with this is Hallgrim Hansgård. He established a small dance group in 2006 called Frikar, loosely translated as “a dancer with a free mind,” to give folk dancing wider artistic freedom.

Hansgård, who has been a Norwegian folk dancing champion four times,

Tragédie opens with the dancers entering from the back behind curtains. The pattern is the same, with tiny variations: 12 steps forward, turn, 12 steps back. Dubois shifts the pattern slowly, almost unnoticeably at first, but as time passes — this section lasts nearly half an hour! — the dancers have come to form two distinct groups that start challenging each other. They end up going back to the first pattern, before shifting again, taking more grotesque shapes.

The music by François Caffenne increases in intensity, which the dancers follow. After a while, they arrive in an inferno, and end up in one big pile,

Theater guested at the Salzburg Festival in 1991. The common denominator throughout was the Baroque touches, such as white powder wigs, swords and crinolines.

The evening was divided into three sections, starting off with *No More Play* and *Petite Mort*, which both feature big crinolines on wheels. There is no linear storyline in Kylián’s pieces, but his emphasis on male/female duets suggests that the relationship between men and women is important to him.

In *No More Play*, Kylián’s extreme musicality was present. Every musical tone was accentuated in the dance, which continued throughout the evening. And, let’s not forget that he is a man of the theatre, which was clearly evident in *Petite Mort*, where the men danced around with swords. The women entered the stage unseen under huge pieces of silk clothing, and they disappeared the same way after some beautiful duets.

The middle section showed strong contrasts. *Sarabande* was danced by six men, torsos bare, moving around with aggression and high energy in a space decorated with dresses, puffed out by crinolines, on wheels. We are reminded of the human duality. The electronic landscape of sound entered a terrifying level, and the men were dripping in sweat as a result of the challenging choreography.

Following this strong male piece, *Falling Angels* was danced by eight fantastic women. The music from Steve Reich, *Drumming*, is extremely intricate, and so is the choreography, which also has a lot of humour woven into it.

Sweet Dreams, which was not sweet at all, was the most surreal work of the evening, with the women reaching out for apples from the men, and the stage filled with apples rolling all over. This piece, which has biblical allusions, is actually quite humorous.

To end this long mixed bill came *Sechs Tänze*, which lifted the mood quite a few notches. Here, all of the main elements of the other works were found again: the crinolines, the swords, the wigs, the musicality and, of course, the beautiful dancing. When the dancers laugh as the air filled with bubbles, audience members laughed with them. ▀



specializes in halling, an acrobatic dance performed only by men, with lots of special tricks and moves. One features a woman standing on a stool holding a hat high above her head with a cane or stick. The male dancer’s goal is to kick the hat off and land safely on his feet.

Nudity continues to be a trend on the main stage at Dansens Hus (House of Dance), with French choreographer and dancer Olivier Dubois’ 18 nude dancers performing his 90-minute *Tragédie*. This work premiered in 2012 in Avignon, France, and has been on continuous tour since by the company he now directs, Ballet du Nord, in Roubaix.

and then they are back to the opening pattern. But Dubois does not give up there. The audience is taken through a heavy, orgasmic section, until the dancers leave the stage slowly one by one.

Over at Norwegian National Ballet, Jirí Kylián ballets have formed a large part of the repertoire — 23 pieces, in fact. The first one was danced 30 years ago, *Symphony in D*, and, this spring, the company presented an evening titled Black and White, referring to the six ballets Kylián calls his black and white works. Only once before have they all been danced on the same evening, when Nederlands Dans



Land, which had its Southeast Asian premiere at the Esplanade Theatre. In the latter, by troupe founder Ushio Amagatsu, a wall grained with crinoid-like shapes loomed over a sand-flecked floor bordered on three sides by straight platforms. The lifting and lowering of a curved disc in one corner marked the course of time. But *Meguri* felt difficult to engage with when the choreography never reached past its motifs of mute screams, shuddering fits and limbs unfurling like tentacles to convey something larger about life.

Thai dance artist Pichet Klunchun had more to say with fewer trimmings in *Dancing with Death*, which was sparked by Phi Ta Khon — a vibrant festival similar to Mexico's Day of the Dead — in the northeastern Thai district of Dan Sai. One by one, Klunchun and five others slowly stepped onto a raised oval track that filled half of the Esplanade Theatre stage, steadily gathering pace in striding patterns as they navigated the rise and dip of this endless yellow pathway. This visual metaphor for the emotional landscape was augmented by Hiroshi Iguchi's cyclical soundtrack, which he had infused with the strident yet harmonic voice of the khaen (a bamboo-pipe mouth organ native to Southeast Asia). Finally, a raucous parade of Singaporean extras and masked dancers absorbed and led the cast offstage — death as relief from life's recurring passions.

A week later, Frontier Danceland premiered three new works during its mid-year season at the School of the Arts Studio Theatre. The company's Israeli connection continued with Shahar Biniamini, whose *Flat* contrasted small gestures with bigger, more complex ventures, but made little sense as a whole. And the style of Israel-born Hofesh Shechter could be detected in the percussive bustle of *Māngata* by German choreographer Sita Ostheimer, a former member of Shechter's troupe.

In local dance artist Lee Mun Wai's *Innocent Until Proven Guilty (2)*, one performer murmured through pursed lips a song from the musical *Les Misérables* while he struggled against an unseen force. This was Lee's shot at shining a light on the apparently shrinking tolerance of diverse views in Singapore and around the world. ▯

When kathak dancer Kumudini Lakhia started her dance school in the 1960s in Ahmedabad, the largest city in the western Indian state of Gujarat, and began choreographing for her students, she gave the usual subject matter of Hindu gods and goddesses a break from the north Indian classical dance form. Instead, she experimented with contemporary themes and non-Indian music; she looked beyond the standard solo format to develop group pieces. She wanted her dancers to perform unhindered by excess adornment. Lakhia's innovations have helped redefine kathak as an art form and, in June, a showcase of her pioneering work was presented as part of Dance India Asia Pacific, an eight-day training camp in Singapore taught by top exponents of Indian traditional dance.

The evening featured Sanjukta Sinha, one of Lakhia's star pupils, in most of the dances. In *Yugal*, she and Souvik Chakraborty described a male-female romance without the trappings of narrative. Only the subtle ways in which they related to each other suggested their relationship, like when his gaze followed her even as she traced a circle of quick turns around him. But it was in the solo *Tarana* that Sinha claimed the stage of the Esplanade Recital Studio as her own. Posing on one leg with an arm angled in front and her hair in a high chignon, she could have been mistaken for a Martha Graham dancer — until she proceeded

downstage and unleashed a torrent of rhythmic footwork, the sound of her rapidly stamping feet merging with the taped score of Praveen Rao's wordless raga.

Like kathak dancers who make their own music through their feet, the notion of the dancer as musician was explored further in *Sounding Body*, a tricky collaboration between local group Raw Moves and composer Joyce Koh. Inspired by the guqin, a seven-stringed zither favoured by the ancient Chinese literati, Koh roped in percussionist Felix Leuschner to design and program a computer-based interactive version of the instrument, which the cast of three could trigger via motion sensors on their bodies. How the performers shifted a wrist, finger or toe let them create and hold different notes as well as glide between those notes. The resulting stage picture at the Goodman Arts Centre's Black Box — loosely based on five tunes in the guqin canon — was stark and jagged, with some episodes less compelling than others. However, the production remained vital for initiating dialogue on the ties between movement and music.

Earlier, an arts festival called Super Japan held its inaugural edition with two headlining shows. One of them, at the Esplanade Concert Hall, *Himiko: Memories of the Sun Goddess*, starred kabuki actor Kotaro Nakamura in a turbid dance-drama about the Shinto deity. The other was butoh troupe Sankai Juku's *Meguri: Teeming Sea, Tranquil*

The Australian Ballet's triple bill *Vitesse* provided an evening of satisfying contrasts and a chance to admire the company's versatility, even if performances tended to the very good rather than the transcendent. The evening of certified hits by Jiri Kylián, William Forsythe and Christopher Wheeldon had plenty of glamour and, in Wheeldon's *DGV: Danse à grande vitesse*, something new for Sydney audiences. Add a handful of exceptional individual contributions and there was much to enjoy.

Interest — along with an extra degree of difficulty — was added to this autumn's Sydney season with the staging of a mixed bill that ran in repertory with *Vitesse*. Balanchine's *Symphony in C*, a grand classical display taking only 30 minutes to dispatch, was given a curtain-raiser of five short ballets, two of them premieres by members of the Australian Ballet's corps. That these 10-minute pieces represent the only new work commissioned by the company this year is disheartening, but one of the choreographers was female, which is something.

Vitesse opened with *Forgotten Land* (1981), one of Kylián's mysterious appeals to the heart and soul; took a charge through the cerebral and physical complexities of Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* (1987); and finished with Wheeldon being fast, flashy and entertaining in *DGV: Danse à grande vitesse* (2006).

The Australian Ballet has an affinity for Kylián and all the dancers looked deeply engaged with *Forgotten Land*'s passionate, swooping choreography. The dance may be abstract, but it poignantly evokes life's joys and sorrows. *In the Middle* is nearly 30 years old, but still has the ability to disturb. Not everyone in the first cast entirely captured the work's formidable contrasts between action and stillness and thrust and resistance, but principal Kevin Jackson looked like a god.

DGV is a large-scale hymn to going places as it evokes speed, travel and the momentum of technology. It couldn't be called profound, but it's smart as paint and neatly danced by the Australian Ballet, although without the drop-dead glamour New York City Ballet brings to it, a quality helpful to a work that's essentially all surface. It's a terrific surface though, with the large corps suggesting the waves of departing crowds, the actions of a train in motion and the heady rush of groups in transit. Four strong pas de deux anchor *DGV*; in the slow third movement, Jackson and the

ravishing Robyn Hendricks were sublime.

In the *Symphony in C* program — the title ballet was crammed onto the Sydney Opera House stage, but benefitted from the presence of eight principal dancers — the big news was the main stage opportunity given to emerging choreographers Alice Topp and Richard House. In a significant act of faith, their works were shown alongside Wheeldon's *After the Rain* pas de deux and venerable gala warhorses *Grand Pas Classique* and the *Diana and Actéon* pas de deux.

The new pieces are unlikely to challenge the others for longevity, but were given the right resources and looked glossy and confident (audiences were highly enthusiastic). House's *Scent of Love*, to the music of Michael Nyman, is an idyll for two couples that is as attractive, gauzy and evanescent as the name suggests. Topp's *Little Atlas*, for a woman and two men, troubled me. Topp has previously made four works for the company's choreographic development program, *Bodytorque*, and she is very much worth encouraging. However, *Little Atlas*, which Topp describes as being about memory, romanticizes and aestheticizes anguish. Topp has fallen victim to contemporary ballet's fetish for displaying women as objects to be stretched, dragged, folded and lifted on high with legs dismayingly splayed.

The biennial Keir Choreographic Award, in its second iteration this year, offers the substantial amount of A\$30,000 to its winner, plus A\$10,000 for the

people's choice award. Eight semi-finalists are chosen from applicants and supported to develop their ideas into a piece of about 20 minutes; the winner is then selected from four finalists. The 2016 semis were held in Melbourne and the finals at Sydney's Carriageworks in May. Cross-disciplinary practice and the desire to "challenge conventions about what the moving body is or can be in contemporary society" are among the goals.

Ghenoa Gela won both prizes with *Fragments of Malungoka – Women of the Sea*, by far the most emotionally engaging work — warmer, more human, more inviting than the other finalists. It was also the most dancerly. *Fragments* included some use of technology — the desired "interconnectivity between disciplines" — but its power was in the questioning of meaning inherent in or imposed on indigenous dance. Three women wearing stylized masks danced while being "watched" as a camera relayed movement to a large screen. Game-playing informed aspects of the choreography and the alert, watchful pauses often seen in indigenous dance took on a different flavour in this context, as did the enlarged shadows of the performers.

The other three works — Rebecca Jensen's *Explorer*, Martin Hansen's *If It's All in My Veins* and Sarah Aiken's (*Tools for Personal Expansion*) — had a glum quality that suggested the choreographers found dancemaking in the digital age a burdensome, alienating business. ¹¹



Sydney |

by Deborah Jones

St. Petersburg I



by Laura Cappelle

presence of Russian guest artist Denis Matvienko that Peer Gynt came across as a coherent character, lost, melancholy yet unable to change his ways. Clug shrewdly chose a score by Edvard Grieg, the Norwegian composer who created the original music for the premiere of *Peer Gynt* in 1876. Supplemented by other pieces, it sets the atmosphere beautifully, and Maribor Ballet did justice to Clug's vision with complete commitment to his earthy, modern style.

The closing Dance Open Gala was restored to its full glory, complete with the awards ceremony that was cut last year. Its most enjoyable aspect has always been the

There is a special joy in seeing an upstart company or festival fulfill its promise, and St. Petersburg's Dance Open has done just that. Last spring, it celebrated its 15th anniversary, rebounding from budget cuts to present a satisfyingly full program, geared toward recent creations. The Vienna Ballet returned, while Dresden's Semperoper Ballett and the Slovene National Theatre Maribor Ballet appeared for the first time ... where else would such a range of ballet companies appear together?

At the Alexandrinsky Theatre, a venue with a medium-sized stage, the Semperoper Ballett showcased its strong affinity with neoclassical creation under director Aaron S. Watkin. *Tanzsuite*, created in 2014, deserves more exposure, for this witty exploration of ballet's courtly origins is one of Alexei Ratmansky's best short works to date. Pontus Lidberg's voice was less clear in *Im Anderen Raum*, which sets its dancers wandering through dreamlike spaces with standard angst.

Two days later, Edward Clug, the director of Maribor Ballet, presented his latest creation, *Peer Gynt*, which premiered in Slovenia last November. The Romanian-born choreographer, at the helm of the company since 2003, has been able to experiment and shape the company's style while creating works on the side as well for

the likes of Stuttgart Ballet.

Peer Gynt is a tall order for a narrative ballet. Ibsen's play is convoluted and episodic, with surreal scenes, a story that involves extensive travelling, and encounters spanning the entire life of the eponymous hero. It was a brave choice on Clug's part; while not fully successful, his ballet manages to condense a lot of material and convey some of its existential despair in two short acts.

The sets by Marko Japelj are simple yet effective. In Act I, a circular platform allows Clug to economically represent changes of scenery, from the wedding of Peer's friend, Ingrid, to the trolls he comes upon. The mysterious girl in green who lures him to their kingdom transforms into a troll herself by means of an ingenious costume by Leo Kulaš. When she turned her back to us and flipped her hair up to reveal a mask, her "real" appearance was revealed, her ungainly backward walk an unsettling effect fit for the character.

Act II brought yet more strange adventures, including the Bedouin character Anitra, who steals from Peer Gynt by rolling him up in a carpet and pulling his pants down. It's a testament to the



diversity of the excerpts presented, most of which stray far from the usual repertoire of warhorse pas de deux.

This edition brought a welcome duet from Ted Brandsen's *Mata Hari*, which premiered in Amsterdam in February. Anna Tsygankova (ably partnered by Artur Shesterikov) earned the Ms. Expressivity award for her quietly moving, unostentatious performance, making the utmost of Brandsen's elegant lifts.

Stuttgart Ballet's Alicia Amatriain and Jason Reilly worked their way through a slinky creation by Eric Gauthier called *Punk Love*. Its violent undertones — Reilly holding Amatriain by the neck, costumes consisting of tattoos on a nude unitard, a hint of Frankenstein about their

relationship — lacked direction, though showed the pair's physical command.

The Mikhailovsky's Irina Perren and Marat Shemiunov conjured feats of Soviet acrobatics in Fyodor Lopukhov's *The Ice Maiden*, while Remi Wörtmeyer presented a witty solo from Hans van Manen's *Five Tangos*. After an impeccable *Satanella* pas de deux with Dinu Tamazlacaru, Iana Salenko returned in a contemporary pas de deux by Raimondo Rebeck, *Not Any More*. It offered a neat visual trick — Salenko running in the air, held by her partner (and husband) Marian Walter with the help of a hook under her costume — but was mostly generic emoting.

The evening's Grand Prix was awarded to the Bolshoi's Olga Smirnova and Semyon Chudin for their pristine form in *Marco Spada*. The People's Choice Award went to veteran superstar Manuel Legris, who, in addition to bringing his Vienna Ballet to the festival, performed an excerpt from Roland Petit's *La Chauve-Souris* with Maria Yakovleva. Legris brought Charlie Chaplinesque flair to the slapstick scene; he rarely performs now, and his inimitable personality is still missed onstage, nowhere more so than in Paris.

A trio from different companies — Oxana Skorik, Matthew Golding and Tamazlacaru — closed the evening with Leonid Lavrovsky's complete *Walpurgis Night*. Skorik is very tall for the female role and lacked some of the attack required, despite her technical strength. Tamazlacaru proved a true virtuoso, as Osiel Gouneou had earlier in the evening, with his ability to slow down turns on a dime in *Don Quixote*.

The excellent Compania de Flamenco de Úrsula López brought a little relief from the classical technique on display, as did the Argentine-born Lombard Twins, Martin and Facundo, who interpreted Astor Piazzolla with a rousing mix of tap, street dance and Michael Jackson-style moves.

Across St. Petersburg, the Mariinsky presented a healthy mix of classical fare. The season's main premiere, Yuri Smekalov's *The Bronze Horseman*, was reportedly a successful neoclassical reinvention of the Soviet ballet, with roles for a large number of soloists and a recording is in the works; but the main story was the changing of the guard happening with young dancers taking on leading roles. Leading the charge was the sprightly soubrette Renata

Shakirova, who graduated from the Vaganova Academy last summer and has already danced *Don Quixote*, *Romeo and Juliet* and a long list of other roles.

Last April, another up-and-comer was tested in a plum part: Vitaly Amelishko, who joined the company in 2014 and made his debut as Solor in *La Bayadère*. He acquitted himself well, with plush jumps and technical ease, though some stiffness is still visible in his stage manner. As a tall dancer, however, he is bound to be a solid addition to the Mariinsky's soloist ranks in the future.

The rest of *La Bayadère's* cast was merely average by the company's standards. Anastasia Kolegova is a more natural Gamzatti than Nikiya, and brought little pathos to the role of the temple dancer, despite lovely form. Yekaterina Chebykina, who joined from Kiev, lacks her Vaganova-trained colleagues' refinement, and made a muted impression as Gamzatti. The performance's true glory was the corps de ballet, at full strength on its home stage, and leading the way from the Himalayas with heavenly beauty in the Shades act. At their best, they are peerless, and enough for audiences to go home happy. ²¹



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Festival Roundup

The 36th Montpellier Dance Festival gave particular witness this year to artistic director Jean-Paul Montanari's concern for major social issues confronting Europe — multiculturalism, racial and sexual identity, cultural integration and generational reconciliation. Most choreographers were non-Europeans, many of whom work in Europe to avoid censorship and discrimination at home.

In an odd solo choreographed by South African-born, Berlin-based Robyn Orlin, *And So You See... Our Honourable Blue Sky and Ever Enduring Sun... Can only be Consumed Slice by Slice*, Albert Ibokwe Khoza initially appeared bound in plastic, apparently symbolizing society's restraints on homosexuality. A knife sliced the plastic away, a hint that South African homosexuals who come out risk danger. Once freed, Khoza had fun putting on what he told us was Nubian Princess makeup, preening before a mirror and inviting sheepish audience members to wipe his rotund, wet body. Khoza's self-admiration was amusing — preferable certainly to self-hatred — but I could have done without watching a huge video close-up of him voraciously slurping on an orange. Khoza's excessively campy goings-on might be tolerated in sympathy with his plight as a South African homosexual, but I'm not sure the piece really helped the cause.

In *The Dead Live on for They Appear to be Living in Dreams*, Iranian-born Norway-based Hooman Sharifi swayed and dipped his body to Middle Eastern sounds by three stellar onstage musicians. With

one arm wrapped in cloth, Sharifi beat painful memories into the ground. He hid under a heavy golden blanket, which by some artistic magic took on a pitiable aspect as it trundled across the stage like a creature alone in grief. Our memories, Sharifi implied, are worn like garments.

Extracts from Glenn Gould's last recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* accompanied Tunisian-born France-based Radhouane El Meddeb's solo, *To My Father*, a *Last Dance* and a *First Embrace*. The famous opening musical variation set a plaintive mood as El Meddeb, his back to the audience, stood shaking his head purposefully for long moments. His arms reached toward a void, grasping futilely as if for the spirit of his dead father. For such a sensitive subject, minimalism was appropriate. Only during the rapid Fifth Variation did El Meddeb's interpretative movement — turning round and round — seem too naive. He performs rarely in Tunisia because, as he said at a news conference, "I am not invited." Though free now of dictatorship, Tunisia still has cultural censors whom El Meddeb called "idiotic." Tunisians can, after all, see whatever they want on the internet.

As a ritual interactive experience, the most memorable show was Brazilian Lia Rodrigues' *For the sky not to fall*. In a cavernous dark studio where audience members stood, the 11 dancers formed a line, disrobed and rubbed ochre on their nude bodies. Individually they approached us and looked us in the eyes for 20 to 30 seconds. My eye-to-eye encounter was oddly relaxed, unaggressive. Later, moaning bod-

ies slithered on the floor. Clearing the centre, the dancers began a long sequence of rhythmically powerful stomping. Never was the absence of music felt less. Gazelle-like leaps followed. The piece quietly ended with trails of powder spread across the floor.

Despite the show's highly ritualistic aspect and the dancers' eye contact, audience members remained voyeurs — too little was demanded for us to become initiates. Program notes spoke nobly of intentions to promote environmental preservation, but the 90-minute spectacle left more of an impression of great theatre than of a clarion call to action. Following bows, Rodrigues read a note deploring Brazil's recent political turmoil and urged a return to democracy.

The next day, Rodrigues and dancer Leonardo Nunes held a free outdoor dance class in a local park, one of several classes that added to the attractiveness of the well-organized Montpellier event. Joining hands around a splendid fountain, participants danced the Brazilian ciranda, a paean to sun, water and earth more genuinely interactive than anything seen on stage.

A marquee show was Cullberg Ballet's *Figure a Sea*, a piece for 17 dancers by veteran American modernist choreographer Deborah Hay on the expansive outdoor stage of the Agora Theatre. Long passages of dancers flitting across the stage, posing, then flitting again, were supposed to evoke the sea. Despite all the action, the to-and-fro eventually became wearying. Laurie Anderson's music had an agreeable lilt with occasional aural crashes suggesting the sea's terrible majesty, to which the choreography regrettably did not rise. Two false endings puzzled the audience. One observer prominently booed as Hay took her bows. In France, people take art seriously.

The festival's sole Canadian entry was Le Patin Libre's ice dance show, *Vertical Influences*, which I saw in Montreal. [*Vertical Influences* was reviewed in *Dance International*'s Summer 2015 issue.] Less absurdist and more theatrical than their previous shows, the five dancer/skaters created and released tension by juxtaposing long glides with abrupt stops, and through lighting effects — dashing out of blackness into brilliant light. No social message here, just the existentialist notion of a beginning, a fully lived middle and an end. Reportedly, the French crowd was thrilled.

— VICTOR SWOBODA

Balanchine, Liang, Fei / Mixed Bill

Hong Kong Ballet ended the current 2015-2016 season in June with its usual mixed bill, including two premieres, performed at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Overall, this was an ambitious program with mixed results.

Balanchine's 1934 early masterpiece *Serenade*, first staged for the company two years ago by Judith Fugate from the Balanchine Trust, opened. Fugate was one of the most musical Balanchine dancers of her time, and I still remember her luminous performance in 1991 of Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3* with New York City Ballet.

Hong Kong Ballet used to have a sizeable Balanchine repertory under former artistic director John Meehan, including *Theme and Variations*, *Concerto Barocco* and *Rubies*. Unfortunately, this hasn't been the case in the past eight years under current director Madeleine Onne, who prefers modish European choreographers such as Nacho Duato and Jorma Elo. (Onne's contract, incidentally, is due to expire next year. No announcement has been made up to now about her renewal or otherwise.)

In *Serenade*, guest principal Yuanyuan Tan danced the "waltz ballerina." Tan, from San Francisco Ballet, normally appears with Hong Kong Ballet in spring; this year, it was good to see her dance with company members instead of with a partner brought in from San Francisco. Tan's performance on opening night was, however, rather bland and lacked poetry.

The lead ballerina in the second movement, to the Tema Russo section of the Tchaikovsky score, was joyously danced by Jin Yao, who was even more Balanchinean than Tan. She danced on a big scale and was extremely musical. It's a pity there was taped music instead of live orchestral accompaniment as previously. No surprise, perhaps, that the corps de ballet danced rather mechanically. Overall, this revival did not match the high standard of the company's performances two years ago, which featured Liu Yuyao as the waltz ballerina. Fugate didn't return to Hong Kong for this remount, and it was left to the company's ballet mistress to rehearse *Serenade*.

The better of the two premieres was created by Taiwanese choreographer Edwaard Liang, who used to be a dancer with New York City Ballet and is currently artistic director of BalletMet. Liang mentioned in the program notes that his inspiration for *Sacred Thread* came from traditional Chinese weddings, as well as the uncertainty and freedom of relationships. Set to propulsive music by John Adams, Liang's choreography was certainly musical and full of vitality. Casual gestures are often used by the corps de ballet, who were dressed in bright-coloured clothing. The joyful and folksy first part reminded me of Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story Suite* for New York City Ballet.

Chang, set to music by Chinese composer Wen Zi, supposedly expresses the Chinese concept of the unity of mankind and the universe in the spiritual realm, according to the long program note. There is a dominant goddess figure who leads the group in a journey from darkness to light, which is meant to symbolize hope. So the dancers appropriately wear white leotards in the end, instead of black as in the beginning.

Jin was superb as the goddess, dazzling in a sinewy solo showing off her long line, and in a stark and ominous duet. The choreography for the small corps was well crafted and full of energy. This dark piece is theatrical, but it is slightly muddled



Hong Kong Ballet

The leading couple, excellently danced by Liu and Li Jia-bo, seem to have an uneasy relationship, as shown by their tense pas de deux in the middle of the work, which has him trying to subjugate her at one point. They later join the ensemble in the finale, which seems to be the couple's wedding celebration. However, it didn't feel all that joyful and lacks emotional resolution. I wonder if Liang was portraying a traditional Chinese arranged marriage!

The second premiere was by Chinese choreographer Fei Bo, whose most famous work is *The Peony Pavilion*, created in 2008 for the National Ballet of China, who has subsequently brought it on overseas tours. The new piece, *Shenren*

at times, as in the middle, when a female dancer seems to collapse for some unknown reason. At the end, Jin is left alone in darkness.

Hong Kong Ballet also presented *Over There*, an earlier piece by Fei featuring two young unknown guest dancers, Zhan Xinlu and Wang Jiyu, from the National Ballet of China. This short and slight pas de deux is rather sentimental, about an unforgettable place in one's memory, depicted by smoke in the wings. It was nevertheless danced with high spirits by Zhan and Wang.

— KEVIN NG



Stuttgart Ballet

Demis Volpi / *Salome*

It's wild. So Wilde, I'm sure Oscar would have loved it. Demis Volpi's *Salome*, which premiered at Stuttgart Opera House in June, offers gut-wrenching, psychosexual drama in a full-length ballet based on Wilde's 1891 French-language play of the same name. In Volpi's version for Stuttgart Ballet, with libretto by Vivien Arnold, the story's religious trappings are cast off, and Salome's seven veils are exchanged for a single see-through chiffon scarf worn by Alicia Amatriain as the Moon, a character developed from the several moon references in Wilde's play, who is onstage throughout.

At the centre of the story of *Salome*, who infamously danced for Herod in exchange for the head of John the Baptist, is temptation. Near the start of Volpi's ballet, two statuesque female servants, looking like very tall Ziegfeld girls, balanced trays of blood-red apples on the tops of their heads. Those apples appeared again later, during an orgy scene featuring sexual satisfaction of every sort. Apples were spit from quivering mouths and pressed where they've not been pressed before, at least onstage. Three nubile male slaves, their bare bottoms laced in provocative leather straps and sporting bulging posing pouches to cover their privates, ripped clothes from willing bodies as the Moon looked on with a watchful eye. From the ooze of desire, a writhing mass of bodies covered in

slick suits that obscured faces added a sense of horror, as if a mass of maggots were set loose to crawl upon the stage.

Meanwhile, the almost naked Jochanaan (John the Baptist, danced by David Moore) was both attracted and repelled by Salome (Elisa Badenes). He struggled to remain pure before the force of the Moon, an image that suggests transcendence as well as passion, and is the ballet's key leitmotif.

Stuttgart Ballet's *Salome* is certainly going to polarize audiences. Some will howl in rage at its frank sexual imagery. Others will love the way Volpi has liberated dance from bewitched swans and ethereal maidens.

Some will find Volpi's choreographic invention, which fuses traditional ballet steps with a more contemporary dance ethos, compelling. Others will shy away from the manner in which he exploits attractive bodies for sheer erotic pleasure. Well, isn't that exactly what Wilde did in his play?

There are cavils with the production, primarily that it's a one-act 60-minute ballet expanded to 90 minutes (with no intermission). More and more this is happening with new choreographed works everywhere. Partly it's the fault of untidy storytelling; partly it's self-indulgent choreography that goes on past its point.

Still, there are stunning performances that lifted the piece beyond anything Volpi has attempted before. Amatriain gave an amazing account of that temptress Moon.

Wafting her arms like some goddess of enchantment, she controlled people as well as the tides. A dancer who explores darker, deeper moments in every role she creates, Amatriain was stunning here. So was Badenes as Salome. Volpi liberated her darker acting powers, tugging her away from all those Swan Queens, Giselles and Kitris we are used to seeing her perform. When she did her dance of seduction, it was all kicking legs, dangerous backbends and flailing arms.

Sex was everywhere. Volpi coaxed Roman Novitzky's edgy Herod into a quivering mass of male hormones. In the orgy scene, he made Alexander McGowan, Ludovico Pace and Noan Alves find sexual urgency that was both frightening and fascinating.

The coup de théâtre came, however, when Salome wrenched open the top of her short dress and used Jochanaan's severed head to caress her bare bosom. When she placed that head between her legs for some necrophiliac oral sex, the audience gasped. Here, Badenes broke the mould with her passionate performance and appeared capable of anything.

Katharina Schlipf's costumes were superb, suggesting everything from grey-suited businessmen, who ripped off their uniforms of civility to reveal fresh and seductive undershorts, to a character out of *Star Wars* in Herodias (Angelina Zuccharini), which added an unearthly look to the proceedings. And those soldiers with berets, guns and billy clubs connected past and present.

A pastiche score by composers John Adams, Vladimir Martynov, Tracy Silverman, Christos Hatzis, Philippe Ohl and Thomas Höfs gave the piece a contemporary, sometimes Eastern sound.

How much you like this *Salome* will probably have to do with how willing you are to experience darkness. It will rise and fall on your ability to believe that the world may not be controlled by God or by man, but by forces of nature we don't understand.

The irrational nature of desire is something Oscar Wilde understood. It's something choreographer Demis Volpi understands, too. He has brought that very thing to urgent life on a sometimes too timid ballet stage. Like it or not, this *Salome* is a success: it does what it sets out to do, and remains true to its own daring terms.

— GARY SMITH

Stanton Welch / *Giselle*

Story is one of the most important ways in which we connect to others, and it's something Stanton Welch, Houston Ballet's artistic director, is drawn to. His skill at building story arcs in classical narrative ballets turns his latest venture, *Giselle*, into the theatrical equivalent of a page-turner.

On opening night, June 9, at Houston's Wortham Theater Center, I found myself drawn right into this 19th-century tale of love, despair, death and redemption from beyond the grave. With Yuriko Kajiya in the title role so present in every step, it was easy to suspend belief and fall for this old ballet warhorse — the Jean Coralli/Jules Perrot premiere was in 1841, in Paris — all over again.

Australian-born Welch did throw in some narrative surprises, bits of action that fill out the score he assembled with Houston Ballet music director Ermanno Florio. Having restored several passages of the original Adolphe Adam commission that have been lost over time, the production ran longer than most today, clocking in at just over two hours (plus intermission).

Notably, *Giselle's* descent into madness in the first act was extended, which allowed more time to develop her breakdown in what was, in Kajiya's case, riveting detail. When Kajiya ran downstage and evoked through gesture and mime her character's high hopes and then her broken spirit, crushed by the revelation that Albrecht is not the man she thought he was, surely every heart in the audience was with her.

Bathilde, *Giselle's* highborn rival, is a more fleshed out character than she often is, one who expresses genuine compassion and generosity, and has moments of foreboding over her own relationship with Albrecht. The men have, in general, more opportunities to dance, and their beats, jumps, turns and perfect landings were strong, über-virile and thrilling. In all roles, and in all three performances that I saw, virtually the entire cast pounced on every opportunity to make their best contribution and bring this incarnation of the well-loved classic to life.

The opening cast, in particular, seemed made for their roles. As Bathilde, Jessica Collado's lively and expressive face and arms conveyed volumes, fulfilling

the small details of action and reaction that made for a fascinating portrait of a wealthy, spoiled but nonetheless decent young woman.

Brian Waldrep, as Hilarion, brought emotional and physical force to what can be a thankless role of the jealous meddler; his physical and emotional sweep took him to the edge, especially in the second act where he hit his marks despite the turmoil he so convincingly danced. Connor Walsh, a longtime Houston principal, was dramatically open and vulnerable as Albrecht, sharing with us his conflicting desires, at times selfish and self-serving, but also genuinely swept up in his attraction to *Giselle*.

The greatest joy was the absolute grasp of the Romantic choreography, both technically and dramatically, shown by Kajiya, who joined the company from American Ballet Theatre in 2014 as a soloist and made principal very soon after. Her heart could be read in every gesture, step and phrase, from the light and frothy skips and leaps of act one, to the gloriously stormy spins and leaps of act two's more sombre and mature *Giselle*. Kajiya danced as if Romantic-era technique was her natural element: not an old and fusty, highly demanding classical styling she put on for the performance, but just the way her body moved.

Roberta Guidi di Bagno's sets and costumes were less ornate than the ones she designed for Welch's 2015 *Romeo and*

Juliet. For the ghostly tale of *Giselle*, the Italian designer used a lighter touch. The mere hint of yellow in *Giselle's* skirt, with a pensive deep grey-mauve for the village girls' dresses, was in keeping with Welch's desire to connect the two acts more closely: light and dark chase each other in story and design. The lacy forest foliage framing the stage remains in place for both acts and in act one, a supernatural Wili is glimpsed through a cottage window.

The second act, set at midnight in a forest clearing by *Giselle's* grave, provided a magnificent opportunity for the corps de ballet to bring to life a Romantic vision of female revenge. Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, was regal in Katharine Precourt's opening night interpretation — her arabesques as cold and beautiful as her pale determined face — as she led the corps in the familiar waves of white that fill the stage.

Guidi di Bagno showed restraint in the long tutus for Myrtha and the Wilis that are such a point of recognition for this ballet, adding no adornment to the white bodices and skirts, with plain pieces of tulle draped from the shoulders, providing a mere suggestion of wings. The austerity seemed to evoke the Wilis' lonely, wild existence, and carried its own grace: when Myrtha or her minions turned, the layers of tulle swirled up like rising mist.

— KAJIA PEPPER



Cherkaoui, Verbruggen, Béjart / Mixed Bill

To close his first season directing Royal Ballet Flanders, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui programmed a triple bill devoted to the music of French composer Maurice Ravel, which sounded ravishing played by the Flanders Symphony Orchestra when I saw it in Antwerp. The triptych of choreographers consisted of Cherkaoui himself, premiering *Exhibition*, flanked by late, legendary Maurice Béjart and his *Boléro*, and new boy on the block, Flemish-trained, Monte Carlo-based Jeroen Verbruggen, premiering *Ma mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*).

It was an evening of abundant theatricality with lush, decorative costumes and imaginative décor by Flemish 'It' designer Tim Van Steenberghe for the two premieres, the stunning *Boléro* setting and Fabiana Piccioli's luminous lighting. But the impact of all this tended to obscure the most important feature, the dance itself.

Boléro dates back to 1928 when dancer Ida Rubinstein commissioned the music. Setting the ballet in a Spanish tavern, choreographer Bronislava Nijinska had Rubinstein leap onto a large table and dance ecstatically in front of a crowd of lustful men as Ravel's music built to a crescendo.

In 1961, Béjart pared the setting down to a minimum, placing a dancer (initially a woman) atop a massive circular table surrounded by an all-male corps. As a spotlight picks out her hands, arms and then travels down the body, the dancer (designated as "the melody") begins the

17-minute solo. Around the table, bare-torsoed men ("the rhythm") gradually join in, hips gyrating, chests and arms flexing and pulsing. The climax with the men leaping onto the table to engulf the soloist has the effect of a gigantic orgasm. To succeed, the ballet's erotic undertones demand a powerful sensuality from the soloist.

Principal Wim Vanlessen coped well in the soloist role, which is often danced by a man, but his slight physique played against him and he was inclined to look desperate rather than ecstatic. Tall, sinewy Drew Jacoby alternated with Vanlessen but there was little sensuality in her androgynous look and steely demeanour. No matter, this *Boléro* — which can be regarded as sensational kitsch or pure genius — had a frenzied reception both nights.

Cherkaoui is a theatrical beast, a man of intelligence and ingenuity who can be relied upon to come up with intriguing concepts. Using the Ravel orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, he created a multi-dimensional piece that, according to program notes, posed the questions: what is a work of art, what is its connection to the audience and where do the artists fit in? Van Steenberghe's scenography was multi-layered, featuring golden picture frames that were manipulated by the dancers. Toward the end, the frames formed a cube in which the dancers enclosed themselves, peering out at the audience. The frames were also used to form a wall of mirrors or a floor covering over which the dancers walked pensively. As the ballet progressed, a design featured on one of the dresses is seen in a framed

painting, later on a larger panel and finally as a blowup covering the entire backcloth.

Exhibition had a promising beginning; in bronze and orange-hued floor-length dresses, the women floated in berezka-like gliding steps over the stage or in and out the frames, using intricate arm and hand movements. Czarist Russia was evoked not only by inflections in the music, but also by the men's gold-embroidered hussar leggings, and their war-like and confrontational moves. Both groups joined up to sit gazing out at the audience, their staccato hand movements giving the effect of continuous chatter, which they concluded with polite applause.

The dancing hands, the cube-like structures — Cherkaoui has done it all before. But it is the dearth of dance invention that disturbs most: even once the women strip off their long skirts and are free to really move, the continual collapsing to the floor, back flips and spiraling bodies never stretches them or the men.

Ma mère l'Oye, titled after the Ravel score that is the main soundtrack, was inspired by the love affair between the late Queen Fabiola of Belgium and King Baudouin, her husband. Verbruggen presents their story as a modern-day fairy tale tinged with spirituality.

It begins with the couple in a lyrical pas de deux, set to Ravel's *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, enclosed in a vast cylindrical curtain. Body ripples, swirling lifts with wide ecstatic arms and tender head inclinations paint a picture of a pair very much in love (Alexander Burton and Nancy Osbaldeston were an expressive duo). With the king's death leaving the grieving queen alone, things fall apart. A figure of destiny (Drew Jacoby) hovers over her, and the two pose and interact endlessly, while an entire corps (male and female) alternate as "Queenies" (dressed in white skirts and exaggerated wigs) and "Kingies" (in black trousers and gauzy veils), waltzing, gesturing and skittering around the stage. Hoisted aloft by the dancers while a giant disco ball pours out stars, the royal lovers are united in death.

Verbruggen's style is inorganic and erratic, and the obscure narrative never revealed anything of great interest, to the extent that, after the pause, the blatant physicality of *Boléro* came as a welcome diversion.

— JUDITH DELMÉ



Artists of Royal Ballet Flanders in Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Exhibition*
Photo: Filip Van Roe

Oregon Ballet Theatre



Nicolo Fonte / *Beautiful Decay*

Historically, Oregon Ballet Theatre has closed its seasons with a mixed repertoire show in the Newmark Theatre, a jewel-like European opera-style house and Portland's best venue for dance. This year, Nicolo Fonte's compelling, evening-length *Beautiful Decay* concluded the company's 26th season, opening an eight performance run on April 14.

According to a program note, a series of 3-D photographs of exotic flowers taken by Mark Golebiowski inspired both the ballet and its title. "[The flowers] are very much dead, but also still very vibrant," Fonte wrote. This perception led him to think about the human life cycle, the toll the passage of time takes on our bodies, the wisdom our experience can give us and the ways that wisdom can be transmitted to the young.

The resulting *Beautiful Decay*, which BalletX premiered in Philadelphia in 2013, constitutes a rep show in itself. In the course of this single, beautifully crafted work, Oregon Ballet Theatre's dancers change character, mood, technique, costumes, even their shoes, as rapidly as they were required to do in the four diverse ballets that made up last year's season closer (by Darrell Grand Moultrie, the late Dennis Spaight, Fonte and Nacho Duato). Those ballets had little to do with each other musically, visually, technically or thematically. In *Beautiful Decay*, however, everything is tied together by Martha Chamberlain's costume designs, Mimi Lien's sleek minimalist set, Drew Billiau's too dark lights, the score and the ballet's theme.

Beautiful Decay was danced to recorded music that includes Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, played on period instruments for Act I, and, for Act II, Max Richter's remix of same, as well as Icelandic composer Ólafur Arnalds' popular songs.

On opening night, Oregon Ballet Theatre's dancers were joined by guest artists Gregg Bielemeier and Susan Banyas, Portland contemporary dancers in their 60s who are known for their improvisational skills. The company gave its juiciest, most versatile performance of the season as they danced, for roughly 80 minutes (with one intermission), this at once intellectual and emotional story with ease, *éclat* and an eloquence that at times brought tears to the eyes.

This was especially true when Banyas and Bielemeier performed directly with Oregon Ballet Theatre's younger (much!) dancers. Early on, Bielemeier is shadowed by Jordan Kindell, suggesting a mentoring relationship; Banyas, in the opening, observes and reacts to Peter Franz's alternating airborne and floor-bound solo. Bielemeier watches and briefly joins a male quintet toward the end of Act I, then, barefoot, tenderly partners Kelsie Nobriga, who wears pointe shoes, in a brief pas de deux. In Act II, Banyas and Bielemeier, seated behind a scrim, gazed at Sarah Griffin (who alas is leaving OBT), who extended her arms imploringly toward them, as if to say, "Stay, stay, please stay."

These, on the whole, are quiet moments and they are balanced by Fonte's fast travelling steps that take groups of dancers across the stage at seemingly mach speed, a metaphor for how rapidly time passes; before we know it, we are reaching the end of our lives. All is not *éclat*, however. There are

playful sections, too: Parsons chasing Xuan Cheng across the stage; Kindell leaping high; some of the men tossing Ansa Deguchi in the air. *Beautiful Decay* ends in stillness, with circular groups of dancers embracing each other, embracing the theme of this bold, complicated, risky ballet.

Fonte, who will become Oregon Ballet Theatre's third resident choreographer in the fall (his predecessors were Spaight and Trey McIntyre), has a history with these dancers and this company that began more than a decade ago. *Beautiful Decay* is the sixth work he has staged on them; in the fall he will make a new piece for an opening repertory evening that includes George Balanchine's *Serenade* and William Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*.

He made an extremely interesting 21st-century version of *Petrouchka* for the company in 2011, and a *Bolero* in 2008; both of those ballets are now in the repertoires of a number of companies around the world. A less successful work that premiered in 2014, *Never Stop Falling (In Love)*, a collaboration with Thomas Lauderdale and his Portland-based band Pink Martini, nevertheless had moments of truly terrific and, as in *Beautiful Decay*, intensely musical dancing.

At what Oregon Ballet Theatre was pleased to call a season unveiling earlier in the spring, Fonte spoke of the pleasure he takes in his new position, which among other things formalizes the relationship he already has with the company's dancers. The Portland audience can also take pleasure in seeing what Fonte does next with dancers who demonstrated, in *Beautiful Decay*, their complete commitment to his work.

— MARTHA ULLMAN WEST



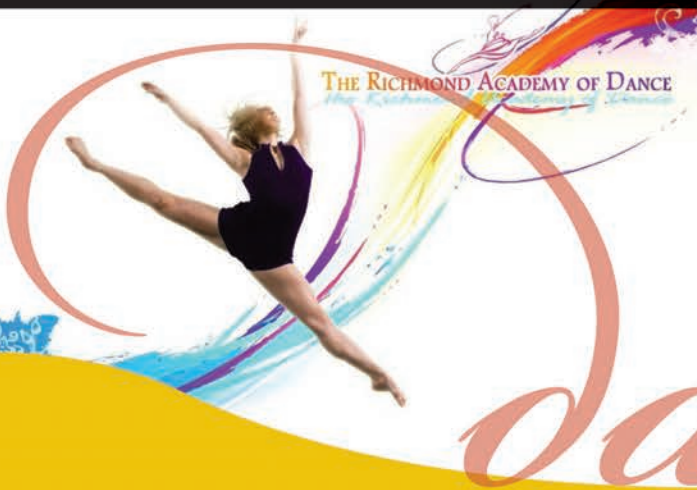
Ludmilla Chiriaeff in the Archives

Watercolour and ink, 41 x 31 cm
Circa 1940-1950

For many in Quebec's dance community, the word "Madame" evokes the great lady who more than half a century ago created the face of dance in this province: Madame Ludmilla Chiriaeff, founder of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (1957) and L'École supérieure de ballet du Québec (1966). This drawing depicts Chiriaeff as a young dancer in an unidentified ballet captured by the loving eye of her husband, Alexis Chiriaeff, a painter and costume and set designer. We received the work as a gift from Sheila Pearce, who was a dancer with Les Ballets Chiriaeff, the ancestor of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Pearce lived with the Chiriaeff family when she came to Montreal in the 1950s; Madame Chiriaeff gave her this drawing as a 17th-birthday present. It is an important addition to our collection, a rare image in which the youth, charm and strength of this visionary artist and pioneer are palpable.

The idea of creating a documentary resource dedicated to dance came from Ludmilla Chiriaeff who announced, in 1964, her desire to establish a national dance library. Today, Bibliothèque de la danse Vincent-Warren, in the heart of Montreal's Plateau Mont-Royal, holds a collection of more than 26,000 titles: books, DVDs, periodicals, prints, posters, performance programs, photographs and more. Explore the collection at www.bibliodanse.ca.

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