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How big is dance? How many people, how many kinds of bodies, how many styles of movement can it contain?

Perhaps like many of you, I have trained or dabbled in several different forms: from ballet and modern to a crash course in First Nations dances here at our home at the Dance Centre, where the studios are filled with tap, flamenco, bharata natyam and too many more to name.

The form changes, but the core impulse — to move in aesthetic, athletic ways — is a constant.

As an audience member, and as *Dance International's* editor, I am drawn to all honest moving bodies — individuals who push beyond the sensible forward trajectory of everyday life to express and to experience something more.

In this issue, you'll find our usual array of genres. Like Bangarra Dance Theatre, premiering an important work on Aboriginal history, *Bennelong*, which Jordan Beth Vincent writes about from Melbourne and is featured on our cover. Or, as Robert Greskovic brings us from New York, three companies who join forces to present Balanchine's masterwork *Jewels*, crossing international borders in a way this magazine salutes. Or Chengxin Wei's account of his first sight of *The Nutcracker's* Chinese dance and, years later, his own and other more culturally authentic interpretations at Aspen Santa Fe Ballet.

Hilary Maxwell, in her feature "Dance for Every Body," showcases several groups from various Vancouver communities who gather to express their individuality in a welcoming space of participant-led expression. Some have previous training in dance; some don't. The door to this space is wide open.

All forms, all bodies, all dance! Dance is very big indeed.

Kaija

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Dance International



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Photo: Vishal Pandey

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Photo: Courtesy of Stratford Festival

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RICHARD SIEGAL AND BALLET OF DIFFERENCE

BY JEANNETTE ANDERSEN

MUNICH'S NEWEST COMPANY



The dancers were wrapped in roaring applause when Richard Siegal presented his newly founded company, Ballet of Difference, last May in Munich. With two new ballets and the rework of an older piece, all by Siegal, he showed what his company is about: diversity, inclusion and an exploration of the boundaries of social norms.

His dancers are all shapes and heights, with a variety of training. His style is a mix of ballet — in some pieces the women are on pointe — with sharp angular movements, jazzy swings of the hips and an expressive way of moving that seems to vent deep, inner feelings.

Siegal — the American-born choreographer in residence at Muffatwerk, a performance space in Munich — has high aspirations for his company. Over coffee before rehearsal one morning, he says he wants to create a counterpoint to “today’s institutional ballet.” Eloquent and soft-spoken, wearing a knitted cap, he elaborates: “What I see is a disconnect between the role of a classical ballet company that is the conservator of tradition — which, of course, is extremely important — and contemporary experience. Making ballet relevant for the times in which we are living is a great challenge. Ballet of Difference is trying to tell new narratives, including conflicts between what is normative behaviour and what is considered by some as subversive.”

An example is *Excerpts of a Future Work on the Subject of Chelsea Manning*, his work about the American whistleblower who began gender transition while in prison, which premiered at the company’s launch.



**Left: Vânia Vaz in Richard Siegal's *In Medias Res*
Photo: Ursula Kaufmann**

**Right: Zuzana Zahradníková and Léonard Engel in Siegal's *Unitxt*
Photo: Wilfried Hösl**

**Below: Nicha Rodboon in Siegal's *Model*
Photo: Ursula Kaufmann**



He develops his pieces in collaboration with musicians, mostly from the techno scene, fashion and industrial designers, multimedia artists and scientists. For Siegal, "It is about bringing strangers into our house. You collaborate with somebody for two reasons. One is that they realize your ideas, the other is that they are going to subvert your work, to bring in ideas that re-frame everything you have done and produce something greater than your own imagination."

Every work is an experiment. For *BoD*, the opening piece last May, the music by the up-and-coming musician, DJ Haram, was developed simultaneously with the choreography. "I love DJ Haram's sound, but I do not think she had ever made an actual composition before or participated in a stage project. I tried to shepherd her into our field without distorting or destroying what is different about her sound."

In 2013, Bavarian State Ballet commissioned Siegal to do his first piece for a ballet company. The piece, *Unitxt*, is like an urban streetscape where people meet and part in a sex-filled atmosphere. The pounding beats of the music, by Carsten Nicolai a.k.a. Alva Noto, add to the feel of a never-sleeping urban rhythm. But, for Siegal, *Unitxt* is about the pointe shoe as an object that makes possible movements that can't be performed without the shoe and that extend the human movement potential. On this project he worked with the industrial designer Konstantin Grcic, who created a bodice with handles for the women's costumes. This allowed the men to partner them in new ways: balances were extended beyond the laws of gravity, and the women could curl up and let themselves be carried to new places. The ballet was so successful that, two years later, Bavarian State Ballet dedicated a whole evening to Siegal's work.

Unitxt brought Siegal a huge following in Munich, and commissions from the National Ballet de Marseille, Göteborg Danskompani, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet and São Paulo Dance Company, among others, followed. It also changed his way of working, which until then was primarily based on his *If/Then* method. "The thing about an *If/Then* process," he says, "is that it is completely interdependent. It is contingent upon each person involved in the process, so if someone is not there all the way through, it won't work."

Coming in as a guest choreographer, he says, "I'd get three dancers for 45 minutes and then eight dancers for an hour. Then the next day, I'd want to work on the trio, but one of the dancers was missing."

The If/Then method was developed in 2005, when Siegal founded the Bakery in Paris, a platform for new media. “I was particularly interested in interactive technologies and research with machines. Making the acquaintance of some researchers at IRCAM [the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics and Music] gave me access to all sorts of cutting-edge technology that dovetailed with the choreographic method I was calling If/Then.”

Siegal describes the method as “a gameplay with a system of predetermined rules that govern the choices the performers are making.” For example, if A hits B’s shoulder, B can either hit A’s shoulder or grab A’s wrist. If the latter choice is made, A can either raise a hand to their own face or grab B’s elbow, and so on. If one of them does a certain movement, the game is over and a new one starts. In a sense it is like a computer game, where the dancers are the players. “I am slightly removing myself from the product of the work,” says Siegal. “I have made the choreographic rules, but I cannot determine the outcome.”

In *Homo Ludens* (2009), made for ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie) in Cologne, Siegal took this a step further in a collaboration with Frédéric Bevilacqua from IRCAM. Bevilacqua was working on a computer program for gesture recognition. Together, they generated 12 gestures based on movements. With a sensor on his wrist, Siegal, as the performer, controlled both the images, which were shown on a screen behind him, and also the music. The computer program sometimes mirrored his movements and sometimes projected other movements, which, when facing the screen, he reacted to, thus turning the piece into a dialogue between the living body and the digital one.

This particular work featuring the If/Then method led to the invention of a new notational system, workshops, essays, a DVD and an interactive installation based on the same principle as in *Homo Ludens*, but with an image of Siegal doing a movement, which visitors mirrored.

Through his work with the Bakery, Siegal met Dietmar Lupfer from Muffatwerk. In 2010, Lupfer invited him to become choreographer-in-residence, which he has been ever since. For the time being, Siegal is the most important contemporary choreographer in Munich and the only one who is creating pieces for the big classical ballet companies as well as experimental works for the contemporary scene.

In 2016, when Ivan Liška left the directorship of Bavarian State Ballet, Siegal was on the list of possible successors. Ultimately, Igor Zelensky got the job that Siegal would have liked to have because, he says, “large-scale work is really hard to realize in the contemporary scene.”

The City of Munich’s cultural department, wanting to keep Siegal in town, stepped in and awarded him three years of funding to establish his own company, Ballet of Difference. The head of the department, Hans-Georg Küppers, said a major reason for supporting Siegal is that he works in an inclusive way, bringing people with different cultural and aesthetic views together, out of which he creates something new. Permanent support is not feasible. But two presenters in Cologne, Schauspiel Köln and Tanz

Köln, have come on board and new pieces will premiere by turn in the two cities. A large-scale dance and theatre production between Ballet of Difference and Theater Köln is also planned. Küppers sees this kind of co-operation as the way into the future.

Other projects Siegal has been working on include a research project with the Goethe Institute, investigating how the Ballet Russes’ South American tours after the Second World War seeded many communities with cultural artefacts from Europe.

He has also been busy with the August presentation of his trilogy, based on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, at the Ruhrtriennale in Bochum, Germany. The first part, *Model* (2015), featuring the Inferno, is all dance; the second, *In Medias Res* (2016), featuring purgatory, is a mixed performance piece. The new part, *Eldorado*, is about paradise, and is a duet between the protagonist of the trilogy, Corey Scott-Gilbert, who is 34, and Gus Solomons, Jr., who is 78.

When we spoke before the premiere, Siegal said, “I see Corey as the Dante figure — he is the one going on the journey — who encounters Gus, whose body has been ravaged by different medical problems and the signs of the aging process are evident. But the two of them, nevertheless, have physical resemblances. So to

have them onstage together suggests certain familiar relationships or self-reflections, which is a really loaded subject for me.”

At 17, Siegal dropped out of Bard College in Upstate New York, went to New York City and took dance classes. From 1997 to 2004, he was a soloist with William Forsythe’s Frankfurt Ballet. As a dancer, he was and still is supple, light and sharp as a razor’s edge. When Forsythe cast him in his first duet, however, he felt very intimidated, partly because he was coming from the contemporary scene and not, as many of the other dancers, from renowned ballet institutions.

“I just have so much to learn from you,” I said to Bill, to which he answered, ‘And I have so much to learn from you.’ I did not understand in the slightest what he was talking about then. But now I do.” Today,

Siegal treats his dancers with the same humble and respectful attitude.

During rehearsals, wearing one of his inevitable woollen caps, he never raises his voice and never gives outright negative criticism. Instead, after carefully examining the dancer’s movements, he’ll say something like: “That was very nice. You are doing something interesting with your left leg, but don’t overdo it.”

Forsythe was a big influence and inspiration for Siegal. “I think Frankfurt Ballet was a school for all the artists who passed through. People came out different, so in that sense everybody who was there is the progeny of Bill. It was a confluence of ideas and possibilities and his greatest ability was to teach people what they knew, but weren’t aware of.”

Siegal is also a radical innovator of contemporary ballet, fusing new ways of moving with new music and controversial themes unusual for ballet. With Ballet of Difference, he is drawing a choreographic pictogram of his generation. ❖





All Bodies Dance Project in Rianne Švelnis' *Scaled*
Photographer: Erik Zennström

Engaging communities and making Vancouver move

Dance for Every Body



by Hilary Maxwell

E

Everybody can dance. This notion lies at the heart of community-engaged dance, where diversity and inclusivity are embraced, and the artistic process is shared between professional dance artists and community members. For several Vancouver dancemakers, working in community contexts plays an essential role in their practice.



Karen Jamieson (centre) with members of the Carnegie Dance Troupe in Jamieson's *Metamorphose*
 Photo: Chris Randle



Julie Lebel
 Photo: Riz Herbosa



Naomi Brand
 Photo: Courtesy of All Bodies Dance Project

In the early 1990s, when community-engaged dance was beginning to take hold on the west coast, the term did not even exist and there was little awareness about this type of work in the professional arena or among funding bodies. Nor was there the same kind of infrastructure in place to support community projects. Three choreographers who were significant in opening the conversation about where the borders of artistic practice lie are Judith Marcuse, Joe Laughlin and Karen Jamieson.

In the booklet, *Dancing our Stories* (2005), City of Vancouver cultural planner Douglas D. Durand highlights the ways in which Marcuse, Laughlin and Jamieson were broadening the scope of their professional work to connect with people in what he refers to as dance animation — “developing new relationships between dance artists and diverse members of the community.” What

interests Durand is the potential for dance animation to address social issues, develop community, stimulate creativity and build audiences.

Marcuse’s background in dance is rooted in classical ballet. Her résumé includes dancing with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal and Ballet Rambert in England, and founding her own repertory company, Judith Marcuse Projects, in 1980. As she explains in *Dancing our Stories*, Marcuse developed an interest in expanding her choreographic exploration and, in the mid-1990s, she began a series of workshops that engaged large groups of youth to make dance that tackled social issues, hoping to tap into youth concerns in an authentic way. The first one, *ICE: beyond cool*, focused on teen suicide, and evolved into a three-year project of workshops, resulting in performances at home and on a national tour. It successfully built a broad community network through partnerships with various youth-centred organizations and service agencies.

Marcuse’s work with community eventually took her into a partnership with Simon Fraser University when, in 2007, she spearheaded the launch of the International Centre of Art for Social Change.

Laughlin, artistic director of contemporary dance company Joe Ink, established in 1995, came to community-based work after his experience in Johannesburg, where he collaborated with Moving into Dance Mophatong to create *Sonke Sisonke / Every Body Dance* (2002). While working with the South African company over a span of five years, Laughlin was introduced to their Edudance program, which offers a curriculum that teaches academic subjects to students through movement.

In 2001, Laughlin established Move It! in Vancouver, inspired by the positive impact dance can have within the community, and by the vibrant intergenerational culture of South Africa. Move It! continues to run free workshops for people of all ages, levels of experience and abilities, providing the opportunity for participants to learn basic dance steps and engage in a creative process. Facilitated now by members of the city's contemporary dance scene, Move It! still harnesses the spirit of what first excited Laughlin to embark on the project — the idea that movement is an expressive tool to empower and elicit joy among participants.

Of the three, Jamieson has maintained the longest ongoing community dance practice, and is regarded today as a leader in this field, mentoring younger choreographers. Before venturing into the community arena, Jamieson had already developed a significant body of work as a modern dance choreographer and founded her company, Karen Jamieson Dance, in 1983. Today, Jamieson has built a rich practice that weaves her interests in staged choreography, site-specific performance, cross-cultural collaborations with First Nations artists and thinkers, and community engagement.

Jamieson's perspective around dancemaking and performance started to shift during the creation of *Passage* (1990), a commission by Ottawa's National Gallery of Canada, which was developed and performed in the public spaces of the gallery. The company of seven dancers, including Jamieson, inhabited the building, jumping and spinning through the hallways, climbing up and down stairs, and rebounding off walls, all the while monitored by an army of

Jamieson Dance, says, "If someone decides to participate a few days before a performance, Karen always finds a way for that person to be involved."

Every workshop begins the same way, with a warm-up that brings the dancers' awareness to their breath, to the weight of their body and its connection to the earth, and to the rebounding energy the earth gives back to the body. Often working in a circle, and never using mirrors, Jamieson guides the group through various forms of improvisation, encouraging them to experience the work from the inside, exploring movement that gives the dancers a sense of rooting to the ground. Creating with a focus on connecting to the earth gives the dancers a "greater ability to stand up in their own world," says Jamieson.

At the end, the group will share what resonated, any problems they encountered and any ideas they want to contribute to the process. "After people have been moving for a while, they are much more relaxed. The fretting anxieties they may have come into the room with don't colour the words that come out," Jamieson says.

Jamieson believes dance is an embodiment of spirit and place, which inspired her first project with the Carnegie Dance Troupe. *Stand Your Ground* (2008), a travelling site-specific work, began with three years of workshops. "The act of creating something, working together toward an outcome, is empowering and builds a sense of belonging," she says. The piece served as a vehicle to engage the performers, the audience and community residents,

"The act of creating something, working together toward an outcome, is empowering and builds a sense of belonging."

— Karen Jamieson

guards whose job it was to protect the artworks. Over the seven-week residency, the guards naturally started to become almost part of the piece, guiding the public in and around the dancers to places where they could get the best vantage points. "They became an intermediary between the audience and the dance," says Jamieson. After *Passage*, she felt inspired to continue exploring the interface of creative engagement between professionals and community.

One response to that vision is her work with residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where poverty and homelessness is widespread, and issues of addiction and mental health are common. Believing that dance has the power to heal, Jamieson was drawn to engage with the people living in this area and, in the early 1990s, she ran her first dance workshop there as part of a University of British Columbia course called Humanities 101. In 2005, she established the Carnegie Dance Troupe through a partnership with the Carnegie Community Centre, offering a series of free creation workshops and performance processes to residents of the area, and has remained engaged with this group ever since.

The Carnegie Dance Troupe consists of non-professional and professional dancers, made up of a core group who have been working with Jamieson since the Humanities 101 days, and of people who come and go. The troupe operates with the mandate of absolute inclusivity. Pam Tagle, general manager of Karen

through a journey linking historical landmarks in the Downtown Eastside.

Jamieson does not view her professional and community work in a dichotomous relationship. Creative exploration in each arena, she says, "opens up my ideas of what dance is, how it functions and what its powers are." She acknowledges that while there are profound differences in each, they are both grounded in a similar foundation of values where dance is empowering, develops a sense of identity and roots us to place.

Today, community-engaged dance is widely recognized as a relevant and beneficial practice that demonstrates how creative engagement is not limited to the professional artist. Collegiality among practitioners and the Vancouver Park Board's commitment to develop community through arts and culture processes has a lot to do with the growth and awareness of this work in the city. Marie Lopes, arts programmer at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver, believes that "when there are people who want to talk about what you want to talk about, you find each other." Leading from Beside, an 11-day celebration of community-engaged dance presented at the Roundhouse last fall, was an example of this coming together.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, the Roundhouse is a key player in community-engaged dance, providing opportunities



Carnegie Dance Troupe participant
in Karen Jamieson's *Metamorphose*
Photo: Chris Randle



Foolish Operations Ensemble in
Julie Lebel's *Dancing the Parenting*
Photo: Chris Randle

Today, community-engaged dance is widely recognized as a relevant and beneficial practice that demonstrates how creative engagement is not limited to the professional artist.

for artists to experiment through its residency program. Lopes is interested in projects that stimulate the creative exchange of ideas, encourage risk-taking and nurture relationship-building among all involved. “What I look for is a realistic sense of what it means to work with non-artists,” says Lopes.

“I look for a sense of imagination that understands the significance of not approaching work in a discipline-based way,” she adds. In other words, the objective of this kind of work — be it dance or otherwise — is not merely a transactional process, in which the expert’s knowledge and skills are acquired by and developed in the non-expert. While that has a valid place in the world, she says, the goals here are to make work together and for shared ownership of the final creation.

Such collaboration is integral to choreographer and facilitator Julie Lebel’s practice. Her company, Foolish Operations Ensemble, engages parents, caregivers, children aged four and under and professional artists in creative practice and performance. In a conversation with Lebel, I hear a resounding passion around drawing from the different skillsets, experiences and knowledge base of the participants in the artistic process. “You work with the material and skills you have in the room; some people might have a long background in dance and then maybe they decided to become a nurse, others might not have ever danced before, but practise karate or martial arts.” Lebel explains that looking to the diversity of expertise among participants is often a great starting point for choreographic exploration. While she might teach some skills to support the process, like improvisational techniques or ways to build

choreographic structures, she stresses, “I am not coming in saying ‘Here’s how you dance, here’s how you create.’”

Lebel’s work *Tricoter* (meaning to knit) involved a group of children and adults, including some professional artists, and drew in audience members, too. Developed through an artist and community residency at the Roundhouse, the work re-creates the spirit of a knitting circle and questions how we build social fabric, using yarn as a way to explore ideas around connecting and belonging. At a performance of *Tricoter* on International Dance Day last April, the audience was arranged in an intimate circle, made up of small children, parents, passersby who were invited to sit in, and one woman who was deeply involved in knitting a scarf. We all sat closely side by side connected by a thick crimson strand of yarn that was placed on our laps. A little girl was asked to hold the end of another piece of vibrant wool, while Anne Cooper, an experienced professional dancer, leaped and twirled in the enclosed circle, with numerous balls of multi-coloured yarn strewn about. Cooper’s body cut through the space and the material like knitting needles, knotting and unraveling herself and the wool. Two other spectators were asked to catch balls of yarn. Together we all shaped and became the dance.

“There has been more recognition that ‘high art’ practice doesn’t necessarily engage with everyone in a way that is accessible,” says Naomi Brand, artistic director of All Bodies Dance Project. Brand and her co-director Sarah Lapp, who is a dancer, wheelchair user and advocate in the disability community, are committed to removing barriers that exclude participation. These include high

costs, locations that have spaces with stairs, that don't have wheelchair-accessible washrooms or are not accessible by transit, and elitist attitudes about what kind of bodies can dance.

Brand, with a background in contemporary dance and contact improvisation, has worked for many years as an interpreter and choreographer. Like Lebel and Jamieson, her creative practice draws on the differences of the people in the room as a creative strength. She is interested in the tension between the individual and the group, and in spatial design. Brand sees All Bodies as a meeting ground for creative engagement, where each member brings something to the table, and her role is to guide that process while also being a part of it. "I'm actively being challenged by the practice. By interpreting and translating movement that is created by a seated dancer or a dancer who perceives differently than me, I'm learning new ways to move that my typical dance training never presented," she says.

All Bodies engages with more than 100 participants in a season, running several free sessions a week, and provides performance opportunities to its core group of 20. Dancers range in age from 16 to 65, are of all genders and include those with both visible and invisible disabilities. There are manual and power wheelchair users, folks who use crutches and other mobility aids, and standing dancers.

Brand, who leads the majority of the classes, begins by inviting everyone to join in a circle, and asks the participants to say their name and their preferred pronoun, and to tell the group what they need to know about themselves in order to dance with them that day. "Nobody is asked about their disabilities. It's not relevant to the practice." She then leads the group through a warm-up with movements that help develop a sense of body awareness. Brand uses a lot of imagery, sensation and touch as a way for people to get into their bodies, as opposed to instructing with specific exercises or set pathways. The dancers travel through the space, in and around one another, in straight lines and curved lines, coming close together and moving far away. "Moving in space is an important part of what we do because people need to develop their awareness to work with bodies different from theirs, and in different ways," explains Brand.

All Bodies Dance Project was recently awarded with a Canada Council for the Arts New Chapter grant, intended to honour Canada's 150th anniversary, which will provide substantial financial support in the realization of an innovative project about the aesthetics of accessibility. The project, titled *Translations*, will be developed in collaboration with VocalEye, a live audio description service for people with vision loss that works with arts theatre organizations to support the accessibility of their productions.

VocalEye provided audio description for dance for the first time at *Do Make Show*, an All Bodies mixed bill presented last June at the Roundhouse. "How do we hear what dance looks like?" asked Brand at the pre-show introduction. Some audience members had the chance to experience just that, wearing a headset that played back a description of each piece while it was performed, as told or interpreted by a "describer." VocalEye's director Steph Kirkland explains the describers don't attempt to tell an all-encompassing narrative of the performance. "It might be more useful for us to think in terms of conveying a dream, rather than telling a story, told through a series of scenes or images or actions that may or may not be related to what comes next," she notes. "There's no plot, but something unseen propels us forward."

For *Translations*, All Bodies will tackle how dance can be experienced not only visually and through live audio description, but also through "tactile" description; the latter refers to a system of lines, patterns and rhythms "drawn" on a surface of a spectator's body by a describer's fingers, which evoke the dance.

All Bodies Dance Project was conceived with the goal to open the boundaries of who can participate in the act of dancing and, now, who can witness it. The Canada Council's support of this experimental, research-based community-engaged dance project reflects how ideas of excellence and the role of art itself are changing; we seem to be in a moment where a shift is happening. But is it truly possible to view dance, a visual and kinesthetic art form, through hearing and touch? Brand and her team are going to try and find out. "It's an ambitious project," she says, "but we're driven to discover ways for dance to be experienced and presented that is inviting to everyone and every body." ▫



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ISADORA DUNCAN'S

Marche Slav

Kathleen Hiley tackles an iconic modern dance solo

BY HOLLY HARRIS



Isadora Duncan in *La Marseillaise*, circa 1917
Photo: Arnold Genthe

Like *Marche Slav*, *La Marseillaise* is one of Duncan's explicitly political, allegorical dances.

Out of the crucible of the Russian Revolution sprang sweeping political change, social upheaval and rebellion — and Isadora Duncan's *Marche Slav*. The iconic solo, which marks its centenary this year, was first performed by Duncan to celebrate Nicholas II's abdication in 1917, an act that ultimately led to the rise of the Soviet Union.

The 12-minute work, described by Duncan in her autobiography, *My Life*, as portraying a “downtrodden serf under the lash of the whip” who throws off the bonds of tyranny, is fueled further by Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slav*, which adds its own brooding ethos with overtones of *God Save the Tsar*, the national anthem of the Russian Empire.

“It is so brutally raw. I would call it primordial,” says renowned Duncan scholar and solo dance artist Jeanne Bresciani. Bresciani has served as artistic director and director of education for the New York City-based Isadora Duncan International Institute since 1987. As the main protégée of Maria-Theresa Duncan, the last of Isadora's six adopted daughters known as the Isadorables, Bresciani learned the work directly from her. German-born Maria-Theresa, who co-founded the Duncan Institute in 1977, performed well into her 80s before her death, at age 92, in 1987.

“Every Duncan dance has that animal, human and divine level, and, I would add, the mineral and inanimate, too,” Bresciani says. “You have to be a composite being of all of those elements in order to attempt to encapsulate this work.”

Throughout its history, only a handful of artists have been granted permission by the institute to perform *Marche Slav*. Its latest proponent — the only Canadian to date — is Winnipeg-based contemporary dancer Kathleen Hiley, who has been nurturing a solo career in recent years. Hiley is the artistic director of Kathleen Hiley Solo Projects; *Marche Slav* was presented as part of her company’s second show, performed at the Gas Station Arts Centre in November 2017.

“Being able to perform this great work of art created by the revolutionary Isadora Duncan has been a dream come true,” says Hiley of this rare opportunity to learn the solo and get it into her own blood and bones. “Isadora’s choreography is steeped in imagery, gesture and pure emotion, which is harder to express because we don’t always live in one emotion. So if it’s fear, it’s pure fear, not anxiety. If I’m expressing love, then it’s pure love. Her work is very human, and I try to tap into that as well as draw on my own experiences in life. There’s nothing mechanical about it, and I’ve learned how to not go into my dancer training, but simply bring myself to the work as honestly as I know how.”

Hiley first met Bresciani during the latter’s workshop, the Isadora Experience, held during the Winnipeg Art Gallery’s 2015 exhibition, *Olympus: The Greco-Roman Collections of Berlin*. Bresciani knew immediately she had discovered a dancer with a similar sensibility, subsequently inviting the younger artist to her Tempio di Danza studio located 150 kilometres north of New York City to begin their collaborative process in June 2016.

In addition to *Marche Slav*, Hiley began learning Duncan’s complete set of solos to Chopin’s *24 Preludes*; she performed seven of them during her November show in Winnipeg, accompanied live by classical pianist Alexander Tseluyakov.

“No matter what Isadora has gone through, there’s never the loss of soul in her dances. As with all her works, *Marche Slav* is ultimately about the triumph of the human spirit.”

— JEANNE BRESCIANI



Hiley also accompanied Bresciani to Delphi, Greece, last May for the newly reinstated Festival of the Delphic Games; the historic games’ first reincarnation was launched by Duncan in 1927. Hiley presented Duncan’s *Prelude in D flat major*, known as *Raindrop*, at a mini-amphitheatre situated on the archeological grounds of Mount Parnassus. She has been invited to perform *Marche Slav* during the 2021 Greek festival.

“There’s never been anyone that I would have wanted to remount *Marche Slav* on, until Kathleen. She has this wonderful combination of being mature enough, and also strong enough, with a real understanding for this work,” Bresciani enthuses. “In Duncan’s works, if you see an elbow, it’s wrong. If you see a straight line, it’s wrong ... Every movement has to come from the solar plexus. Also, Kathleen has a true sense of theatre and a grasp of emotional content that one doesn’t see so often.”

Created during the third and final “Heroic” period (1913-1927) of Duncan’s career, *Marche Slav* is considered the first of her explicitly political, allegorical dances; others include

La Marseillaise, *Pathetique* and *Polonaise Militaire*. Each is characterized by greater angular movement vocabulary with a stronger emphasis on the downbeat, in contrast to earlier dances from her “Lyrical” (1877-1903) or even “Dramatic” (1903-1913) periods. *Marche Slav* boasts an impressive pedigree, with its official premiere at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House in 1917, preceded by an earlier staging as a work-in-progress in 1909.

Duncan originally created the solo while haunted by memories of Russia’s 1905 Bloody Sunday, a key event that led to the 1917 Revolution, writing in *My Life* that the solo, which “has been fermenting inside me for a long time ... burst out of me.” That first incarnation featured a similar musical interpretation, yet different physical expression of its choreography, according to Bresciani.

“*Marche Slav* differed tremendously as it went from a war cry of encouragement at the U.S. entry into the First World War to its presentations in Russia, which was even more stark in the first third of the dance ... in order not to incite the Bolsheviks with the Czarist hymn,” she states of its deepening evolution.

Reviewing Bresciani’s 2006 performance at the Art of the Solo mixed bill in Baltimore, American dance critic George Jackson wrote in *Dance View Times*: “In Isadora Duncan’s *Marche Slav*, subtlety wasn’t the point. Power was! Jeanne Bresciani was a figure larger than life. Weight seemed a burden, tension threatened to tear this body apart, resistance became a revolution and liberation from bondage the ultimate transfiguration. Bresciani, moving like tubular Picasso women must if set free in time, brought ‘The Art of the Solo’ to a rousing close.”

Marche Slav’s sole male interpreter remains Jamaican-born dancer Clive Thompson, who also performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Thompson presented the work during the memorial service for Maria-Theresa, from whom he learnt it, at Lincoln Center in 1988.

“Being Jamaican, Clive had an innate understanding of the tradition of being persecuted, although he was a creature of light and love and happiness,” Bresciani recalls of his portrayal of the physically demanding work, in which the “serf” ultimately casts off heavy red ropes of oppression and creates visceral full-body whip cracks. “The amazing thing about Duncan is that her dances can be done in so many different ways, including by different ages and body types, and can still have a similar power and range.”

The New York Times’ Jack Anderson agreed: “Portraying a slave who breaks the bonds of oppression, Mr. Thompson demonstrated that this solo concerns a desire for freedom that can be shared by men and women alike.”

Therein lies one of the great ironies of Duncan, whose artistry is defined by opposing forces. Even her bold social protests inspired by the fiery spirit of revolution are simultaneously driven by profound messages of universal peace.

“Isadora Duncan is a divine, paradoxical person. Her very nature was terribly contradictory,” Bresciani says. “She was not a person of dogma, but a person of faith. Not an academic, although she was a part of the intelligentsia, but self-educated as an otherworldly citizen of the world. Also, Isadora was a much larger figure than just one political cause. It was never for a specific group except in the moment, and then it would be transferred to the next and the next after that.”

Is there any joy in this solo? “There is, and that’s the beauty of it,” she says. “No matter what Isadora has gone through, there’s never the loss of soul in her dances. As with all her works, *Marche Slav* is ultimately about the triumph of the human spirit.”

As its latest interpreter, Kathleen Hiley is deeply appreciative of the opportunity to become a vessel for one of the “Mother of Modern Dance’s” revolutionary works that shook the world. ²¹



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QUESTIONING THE DIVIDE

Traditional meets contemporary

by Jenn Edwards

The blending of traditional and contemporary forms is an increasingly common practice in dance. As cities become more and more multicultural, new movement discoveries rooted in cross-cultural exploration are a natural progression. In England, Akram Khan discovered his voice by utilizing the intricate hand gestures of kathak, an Indian classical dance he learned at an early age, on top of the grounded, fluid movements in the lower body and torso typical of the contemporary dance discovered in his teens.

French choreographer Hervé Koubi juxtaposes Sufi whirling with breakdance performed by an Algerian ensemble in his 2013 *What the Day Owes to the Night*. In Italy, choreographer Alessandro Sciarroni borrowed a Tyrolean folk dance called the schuhplattler to create his pared-down 2012 work *FOLK-S will you still love me tomorrow?* By sourcing ancient forms, these artists are continually redefining theatrical dance, and pushing audiences and critics to question the relevance of “traditional” and “contemporary” as labels.

Some artists use dance to critique certain traditions, while others pay homage to a cultural history, or invoke nostalgia over practices that are dying out. Thailand’s Pichet Klunchun accomplishes all three, bringing the essence of khon, an ancient Thai royal court dance form in which he is a master, to contemporized works. *Unwrapping Culture*, a 2015 duet by Klunchun and Vancouver’s Alvin Erasga Tolentino, replicates a globalized Thailand by filling the stage with cheap toys from tourist markets and blasting generic electronic dance party music. Klunchun effectively contrasts the delicate and precise movements of khon with these souvenirs of present-day Thailand. As Klunchun stated in a TED Talk in 2015, “We must not mix them up, truths and traditions.”

With the sourcing of traditional dance forms comes conversation about appropriation. In a sense, all contemporary artists appropriate. There is always a reason to think of a tradition as not one’s own, whether it originates in a foreign country, a different region within a country or simply from a different time. Yet, in order to integrate, strip down, question or borrow a traditional movement, one must first be educated in that form. Otherwise, choreographers run the risk of relying on, and perpetuating, stereotypes.



Rosario Ancer fights stereotypes regularly as artistic director of Flamenco Rosario. From her office at Vancouver’s Dance Centre, Ancer clarifies, “Flamenco is not a folk dance, and it’s not static. It’s a movement language, a foundation for exploration.” While the form is rooted in a 12-beat rhythm and a set of common steps, flamenco performance contains a lot of improvisation and has evolved greatly over centuries. Today, costumes are often simpler, new themes have emerged and there is room for experimental accompanying music. In *La Monarca*, which will be touring British Columbia in the spring of 2018, Ancer collaborates with a computer programmer to convey chaos theory by projecting visual patterns of the performers’ music and footwork on an onstage screen. As she states plainly, “Everything that stays the same dies.”

To describe a dance work as a fusion between traditional and contemporary is to assume that forms like flamenco and khon are static. But, like all artistic and social dance mediums, these forms are evolving and responding to forces like globalization, technological innovation, political dynamics and shifting perspectives on body issues like gender, which has in the past dictated who can do what dance.

Traditional dance can become a catchall term for forms that audiences are unfamiliar with. There is a tendency to put these forms into an intellectual box, away from critical engagement. Even if well intentioned out of respect for cultural tradition, this attitude ultimately widens the divide and keeps such works on the margins of the dance milieu. We are quick to call a dance style “fusion” if it seems somewhat contemporary but has cultural markers such as traditional music or costumes. What if instead we acknowledged that every performance stems from a tradition, whether it’s ballet, Indigenous dance, tap, butoh, or even younger movement languages like hip hop, contact improvisation and gaga? *or*

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Photo: Rod Braun Choreography: Constance Cooke



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Dance notes



Stage Door Collection

Online publication *ART Habens* recently featured artist Ferenc Flamm's Stage Door Collection. The series is a visual narrative about commitment, and developing talent and potential, portraying dancers in rehearsal. For this series, Flamm, who grew up in Budapest and has been based in Sweden since 1976, often attended rehearsals by GöteborgsOperans Danskompani and the Gothenburg Ballet Academy. According to *ART Habens'* curators Dario Rutigliano and Barbara Scott, "One of the most impressive aspects of Flamm's work is the way it accomplishes the difficult task of creating a point of convergence between traditional heritage and contemporary visualization practice."

Oil on board, approximately 35 x 37 in.
Digital file courtesy of Ferenc Flamm

land/body/breath

At this year's Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa, iconic contemporary dance artist Peggy Baker remounted her site-specific *land/body/breath* at the National Gallery of Canada. Eight dancers performed individually in a central space. There, along with two vocalists, the group's combined voices created a rich soundscape of melodies, text and sonic textures. Audience members were free to travel through the galleries and craft their own personal experience of the performance, which premiered in 2014 at the Art Gallery of Ontario.



Peggy Baker's *land/body/breath* at the National Gallery of Canada
Photo: Ali Jafri



Jay Hirabayashi and Barbara Bourget in their work *Embryotrophic Cavatina*
Photo: Chris Randle

A Butoh Song

Kokoro Dance artistic directors Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi began working on *Embryotrophic Cavatina* in 1998, the year Poland's Zbigniew Preisner premiered his 69-minute orchestral composition, *Requiem for my friend*, to which it is set. In September, *Embryotrophic Cavatina* premiered at Vancouver's Roundhouse, performed by Bourget, Hirabayashi and Molly McDermott. In it, the dancers strip themselves bare — literally and figuratively — in the butoh-inspired company's signature surreal style, "embodying the rawness of humanity and transcending all superficial layers of persona and ego." The title comes from the word "embryotroph," referencing the embryonic nourishment of placental animals, and "cavatina," a short, simple song without repetition.

BARYSHNIKOV'S PRAEMIUM IMPERIALE

Mikhail Baryshnikov has been recognized with a 2017 Praemium Imperiale International Arts Awards. The global arts prize, now in its 29th year, celebrates lifetime achievement in painting, sculpture, architecture, music and theatre/film/dance, and carries with it 15 million yen (approximately \$136,000 US).

After beginning his career with the Kirov Ballet, Baryshnikov defected to the West in 1974 in search of artistic freedom, becoming a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre. In 1980, he was appointed ABT's artistic director. From 1990 to 2002, Baryshnikov was director of White Oak Dance Project, co-founded with choreographer Mark Morris. In 2005, he launched Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York, designed to support multidisciplinary artists from around the globe.



Mikhail Baryshnikov in *Letter to a Man*, 2015
Photo: Lucy Jansch, courtesy of Baryshnikov Productions

RELAXED PERFORMANCES

Birmingham Royal Ballet is offering its first “relaxed performance,” of *Sleeping Beauty*, at the Birmingham Hippodrome in February 2018. Relaxed performances cater to people who may find going to the theatre challenging, such as those with autistic spectrum condition, learning disabilities, or sensory and communication disorders. Family and friends can experience live performance together in an adapted environment where formal theatre rules don't apply — audience members can move around, sing, dance, clap and talk, whatever makes them feel comfortable.

Some seats are left empty so there is room to move around and the show has a shorter running time. Lighting and sound levels are adapted to avoid sensory overload. Audience members are free to come and go during the show, and there is also a chill-out zone.



CHAGALL ONSTAGE

Chagall: Fantasies for the Stage spotlights the principal role of music and dance in Marc Chagall's artistic career. Concentrating on four productions — the ballets *Aleko*, *The Firebird* and *Daphnis and Chloe*, and one opera, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* — the exhibit is at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until January 7, 2018.

Born in Vitebsk, Russia (present-day Belarus), Chagall and his family, who were Jewish, immigrated to New York in 1941, fleeing persecution from Nazi-occupied France.

In 1942, American Ballet Theatre commissioned Chagall to design scenery and costumes for Léonide Massine's *Aleko*. His second ABT commission was *The Firebird* (shown here), which the Ballets Russes had premiered in Paris in 1910, with music by Igor Stravinsky and choreography by Michel Fokine. For this 1945 production, with choreography by Adolph Bolm, Chagall re-envisioned the stage curtain, sets and costumes.

Marc Chagall, costume design for *The Firebird*: Blue-and-Yellow Monster from Koschei's Palace Guard, 1945, watercolour, gouache, graphite and India ink on paper, 18 5/16 × 11 7/16 in., private collection © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, photo © 2017 Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris



Hsin-Ping Chang in Tom Mossbrucker and Jean-Philippe Malaty's *The Nutcracker* for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet
Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

UPDATING

The Nutcracker's Chinese Dance

by Chengxin Wei

One of the first full-length ballet productions I saw after immigrating to Vancouver from China was *The Nutcracker*. It was Christmas 2000, and it was exciting to experience what I knew was a family tradition to many.

I had learned about *The Nutcracker* in my dance history class at Beijing Dance Academy and had watched excerpts on TV, but had never seen a live production. I remember appreciating Act I for its festive atmosphere, grand set and the way it appealed to audiences of different generations.

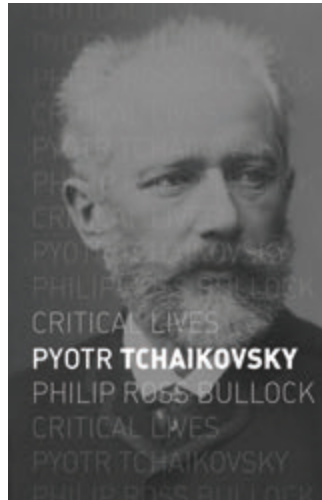
Then, in Act II, I saw what I now know is a typical *Nutcracker* version of Chinese dance. In it, two dancers hopped around the stage, index fingers pointed up in the air. Their bodies were crouched and they kept bowing to each other profusely like bumbling fools.

Having studied classical and folk/ethnic Chinese dance at the Beijing Dance Academy for 11 years, I was troubled by this deeply inauthentic choreography.

Chinese dance has a rich history of more than 5,000 years. The earliest cultural relic that depicts dance in China comes from the Neolithic period. It is a pottery bowl with a painting of people dancing in a line holding hands. Today, Chinese dance can be categorized into two main branches: classical (which, like ballet, has origins in the royal court, and is comprised of movements from Chinese opera, martial arts and ballet technique) and folk/ethnic; in neither are there any movements where two index fingers are pointed stiffly up in the air.

I glanced around at the audience members beside me, many of them enraptured children, and cringed at the thought that this one-minute dance,

Quotable



Excerpt from
PYOTR TCHAIKOVSKY
By Philip Ross Bullock
Reaktion Books' Critical Lives series
www.press.uchicago.edu

based on racial stereotypes and ignorance of Chinese dance culture, would shape their impression of Chinese dance.

Ten years later, when I was working on my MFA at the University of Washington, I began researching Orientalism and depictions of Eastern cultures through a colonialist Western view. That Chinese dance I saw in my first *Nutcracker* is a perfect example of this Orientalist view. The dancers appeared not only buffoon-like, but also inferior in refinement and development compared with the vigour and virtuosity displayed in the Russian dance, or the grace and bravado of the Spanish dance.

A growing number of artistic directors and choreographers share the view that *The Nutcracker's* Chinese dance needs a major update. Among those is Tom Mossbrucker, artistic director of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, who has hired authentic Chinese dancers to perform a traditional Chinese dance during the company's *Nutcracker* production for many years now. I have myself performed a classical Chinese sword dance in that production, in 2014 and 2015. The sword dance, which comes from Chinese martial arts, challenges the dancer to use the sword as an extension of the body. It combines the strength and agility of martial arts with the elegance and flow of dance, and highlights classical Chinese dance's emphasis on breath and the body centre as the origin of movement.

The Nutcracker is a classic 19th-century treasure of ballet repertoire. With more cultural awareness and sensitivity, every contemporary production can be updated for 21st-century audiences. ⁰¹

“*The Nutcracker* flashes by in a series of fleeting and inventive vignettes whose decorative and self-conscious superficiality delights the ear and enraptures the eye in equal measure. Yet Tchaikovsky's genius is in transforming the frivolous plot of *The Nutcracker* into something not only delightful but at times profound too. The music inventively articulates outrageous moments in the libretto that defy obvious practical realization on stage, such as the moment when the family Christmas tree grows in size, the transformation of the house into a pine forest, the scene where a sugar house melts in the rays of the sun, or the final apotheosis featuring a giant beehive. Here, Tchaikovsky conjures up the realm of the imagination and dreams in a way that only music can; but he is also profoundly sensitive to deeper human emotions, as in the music for Clara and her prince, which harks back to works such as *Romeo and Juliet* in its expansive lyric warmth. It is also worth remembering that *The Nutcracker* is based on a story by the German Romantic author E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose work was also the inspiration for Delibes' *Coppélia*. Like *Coppélia*, *The Nutcracker* features an automaton which, when brought to life, transforms the world around it; and, like *Coppélia*, it clothes its evocation of the fantastic power of magic with deceptive humour. Hoffmann's Romanticism is never entirely superficial or merely enchanting; it always entails something unsettling, uncanny even. Petipa's libretto may have purged Hoffmann's original tale of much of its original darkness, but Tchaikovsky was always alive to its ambiguous charms.”

Bronislava Nijinska's Revolutionary Art and Life

The inspiration behind *The Chosen Maiden*

by Eva Stachniak

To position Bronislava Nijinska in the history of modern ballet, I often evoke the famous Parisian premiere of *The Rite of Spring*: the riots and insults from balletomanes enraged by Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography, including the frenzied sacrifice of the Chosen Maiden who dies to make new life possible. "Vaslav created the role for his sister," I say. "He always believed that no one but Bronia could dance it the way he envisioned."

What drew me to write a novel inspired by Bronislava Nijinska, or Bronia, as she was known to her friends? There was, of course, the tantalizing connection to Vaslav, God of Dance, her mentor and her inspiration, for whom, in turn, she was the best interpreter of his choreography. *The Afternoon of a Faun* was created in their St. Petersburg apartment, with Bronislava modelling the Faun's movements for her brother, her body turned into clay from which he shaped his first ballet. Every time Sergei Diaghilev, the demanding impresario of the Ballets Russes, doubted if his dancers were up to the daring choreography of *Rite of Spring*, Vaslav responded, "Bronia is." Bronislava, with her inspired execution, her ballon, her sturdiness, was the dancer he wanted and needed for his revolutionary ballets. No one else would do.

But that's not all. Bronislava was not only an extraordinary artist, but — in a world that ultimately crushed her brother — she never surrendered. She fought for her own place in the sometimes misogynist world of ballet; even Diaghilev, who hired her as his in-house choreographer and called her his daughter, couldn't stop himself from repeating, "Oh,

Bronia, what a choreographer you would've been if only you were a man."

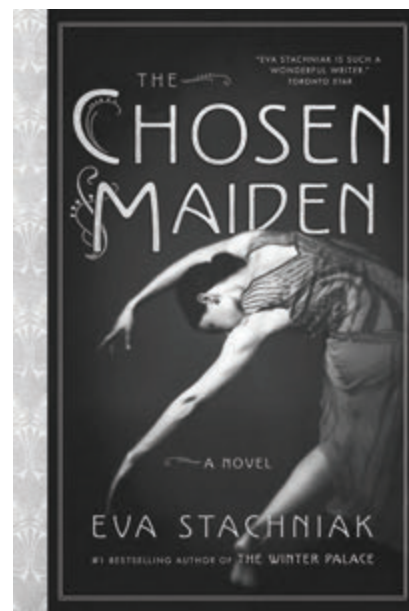
Where did Bronislava find the strength to resist such put-downs? In search of answers, I found myself at the Library of Congress in Washington at its Bronislava Nijinska Collection among boxes of documents, lovingly gathered and preserved. These papers — intimate diaries, letters and hundreds of snapshots — testify that she grew up in a family of dancers for whom the art of dance was the highest of vocations. This passionate belief in the importance of art fuelled her own fight for recognition, first in the Imperial Theatres of St. Petersburg and then in the Ballets Russes. It stoked her resilience when others told her she didn't have the body of a ballerina or that she should content herself with interpreting her brother's visions and not bother with her own. Art also gave her the courage to resist the repressive political regimes determined to engineer her soul and to pick herself up after each paralyzing personal loss life dealt her.

But the belief in the importance of art wouldn't have been enough to keep her going without the fierce solidarity of the Nijinsky women. For as the men were erased from the family story by choice or by cruel fate, the women — Eleanora, her daughter Bronislava and then her granddaughter Irina — took their place. As the world around them was torn apart by wars and revolutionary upheavals, Eleanora, once a professional dancer herself, encouraged Bronislava's artistic ambitions, raised her daughter's children, and continued to be her best and most trusted friend. On the day of her mother's death, Bronislava could only write: "July 23, 1932 — 6:30 p.m." In time, Bronislava's daughter, Irina, would become her mother's assistant and steadfast supporter, devoted to the preservation of her artistic legacy and the memory of her life.

On May 29, 1913, Bronislava didn't dance the Chosen Maiden. Four months before *Rite of Spring* premiered, she found herself pregnant, confronted by the certainty that the extreme physical demands of her dream role could endanger the life of her unborn child. Vaslav was devastated. He knew no one could replace her, and he was right.

Russian dancer Maria Piltz, who was selected as substitute, could only manage a simplified version of the dance, adjusted to her abilities and more delicate body. "It was like seeing a photograph of a painting," Bronislava, heartbroken, noted in her diary. She reconciled herself to the great disappointment with thoughts of the future. She would go back to Russia, give birth to her child and return to the Ballets Russes. There would be time to dance the Chosen Maiden, and many other roles in the brilliant new ballets her brother would choreograph.

Fate had other plans. The next time Bronislava would see Vaslav, in 1921, after her daring escape from Soviet Russia with her mother and — by then — two small children, her brilliant brother would be a comatose patient at a mental asylum outside Vienna, and Bronislava would create her own roles. She would become La Nijinska, whose claim to fame includes the avant-garde choreography of her revolutionary Russian ballets and her post-First World War modern masterpieces: *Les Noces*, *Les Biches* and *Le Train Bleu*. She would also become a beloved teacher and mentor to the dance greats, such as England's Alicia Markova and Maria Tallchief, the American ballerina who would call her "a personification of what ballet was all about." ^{DI}



Eva Stachniak is the author of *The Chosen Maiden*, a historical novel based on the life of Bronislava Nijinska, published by Doubleday Canada in 2017.

Michael Crabb's Notebook

In celebration of its 50th anniversary, Toronto Dance Theatre has taken flight in more than a metaphorical sense. In November, the company jetted to Colombia for performances in Bogotá, Cartagena and Medellín. In January, TDT will brave the hazards of winter to visit six cities throughout Atlantic Canada before heading west the following month for performances in Alberta, British Columbia and Yukon.

TDT has never claimed to be a “national” company. However, it has occupied an important place in the evolution of Canadian dance. The school TDT co-founders Patricia Beatty, David Earle and Peter Randazzo established alongside their company in 1968 quickly became a major Canadian centre for modern dance training. Many graduates went on to perform in the company. As such, they were regularly seen by audiences across Canada and occasionally abroad, establishing a national presence in the process. So, it’s good to see that, despite all the daunting funding hurdles that nowadays inhibit touring, the company is poised to remind us of its historical importance.

Meanwhile, in October, the National Ballet of Canada took its production of John Neumeier’s *Nijinsky* to Paris for five performances at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the very stage where the legendary Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky performed and where his avant-garde staging of Stravinsky’s musically tumultuous *Rite of Spring* triggered an audience riot in May 1913.

In contrast to TDT, the Toronto-based ballet troupe, Canada’s largest by far, does style itself “national.” In 1951, it was a foundational aspiration of those who, whether they admitted it or not, hoped to establish in Toronto a Canadian equivalent to the then Sadler’s Wells (now Royal) Ballet in London. This did not go down well in Manitoba where the Winnipeg Ballet aspired to a position of national leadership. The company added “Royal” to its title in 1953 before eventually rebranding itself as Canada’s Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

At one time both these companies — and later Montreal’s Les Grands Ballets

Canadiens — toured far more extensively than now. They criss-crossed the country and the United States with occasional sorties overseas. The RWB, being small and compact, had an advantage in the international department.

Canadian taxpayers significantly underwrote these activities through public grants and, although on a proportionately lesser scale, they still do. Why, then, one may ask, do audiences across the country not get to see a variety of their major ballet troupes on a regular basis the way they used to?

It’s perfectly reasonable for a company of the National Ballet’s stature to want to dance in major international centres. It’s been a primary goal of Karen Kain since becoming artistic director in 2005; and she’s had notable success, leading the troupe back to London, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., and now, after a 45-year absence, Paris.

There’s no question that having an international profile helps attract and retain talent, lends an artistic credibility that makes it possible to engage leading international choreographers, and enhances the company’s image in the eyes of its local supporters.

All that accepted, the question remains; how could the National Ballet come up with the almost \$900,000 needed to visit Paris and yet not tour *Nijinsky* across the country?

A simple answer is that the money for the Paris tour came from well-heeled donors, interestingly in this case not Toronto donors but “exclusive tour partners” David and Margaret Fountain, part of a philanthropic Nova Scotia dynasty that has generously supported a wide range of charities and causes.

Barry Hughson, the National Ballet’s executive director, is far too diplomatic to say so outright, but obliquely concedes that raising that kind of money to support a cross-Canada tour would be “more challenging.”

Putting aside the fact that there’s far less glamour in domestic touring, there seems to be this underlying assumption that where Canadian touring is concerned, it should be federal and provincial governments that step up to the plate. They do still hand out grants, but not at a level that could support touring major productions like *Nijinsky*.

The National Ballet is not unaware and

certainly not dismissive of the desire of Canadian dance fans across the country to see its big productions, but there are considerations beyond funding.

The general decline of touring is not just a Canadian phenomenon. The ecology has changed. Cities that once relied on the National Ballet — or, in the United States, American Ballet Theatre — to deliver the big spectacles fans still adore now have companies capable of doing much the same. “The landscape has changed,” says Hughson. “We don’t want to compete on the ground locally.”

There’s also the matter of scale. For its first 20 years or so, the National Ballet would build smaller, more flexible touring sets of its major productions. That’s no longer feasible. Some of the company’s current productions just wouldn’t fit into theatres it once routinely visited. Even the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, where the National Ballet regularly appears, is a bit of a squeeze for the company’s biggest shows.

There are, of course, other ways of disseminating work to distant audiences, namely via digital media. The National Ballet is in discussion with the Canadian Opera Company — the two organizations share Toronto’s spacious COC-owned Four Seasons Centre — on a “digital strategy” that could potentially offer audiences outside big centres an opportunity to see their work.

“It’s a massive undertaking,” says Hughson, “but we’re trying hard to chart a path.” Let’s hope it leads somewhere. ▀

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Santee Smith | Photo: David Hou

Photographer in Black and White

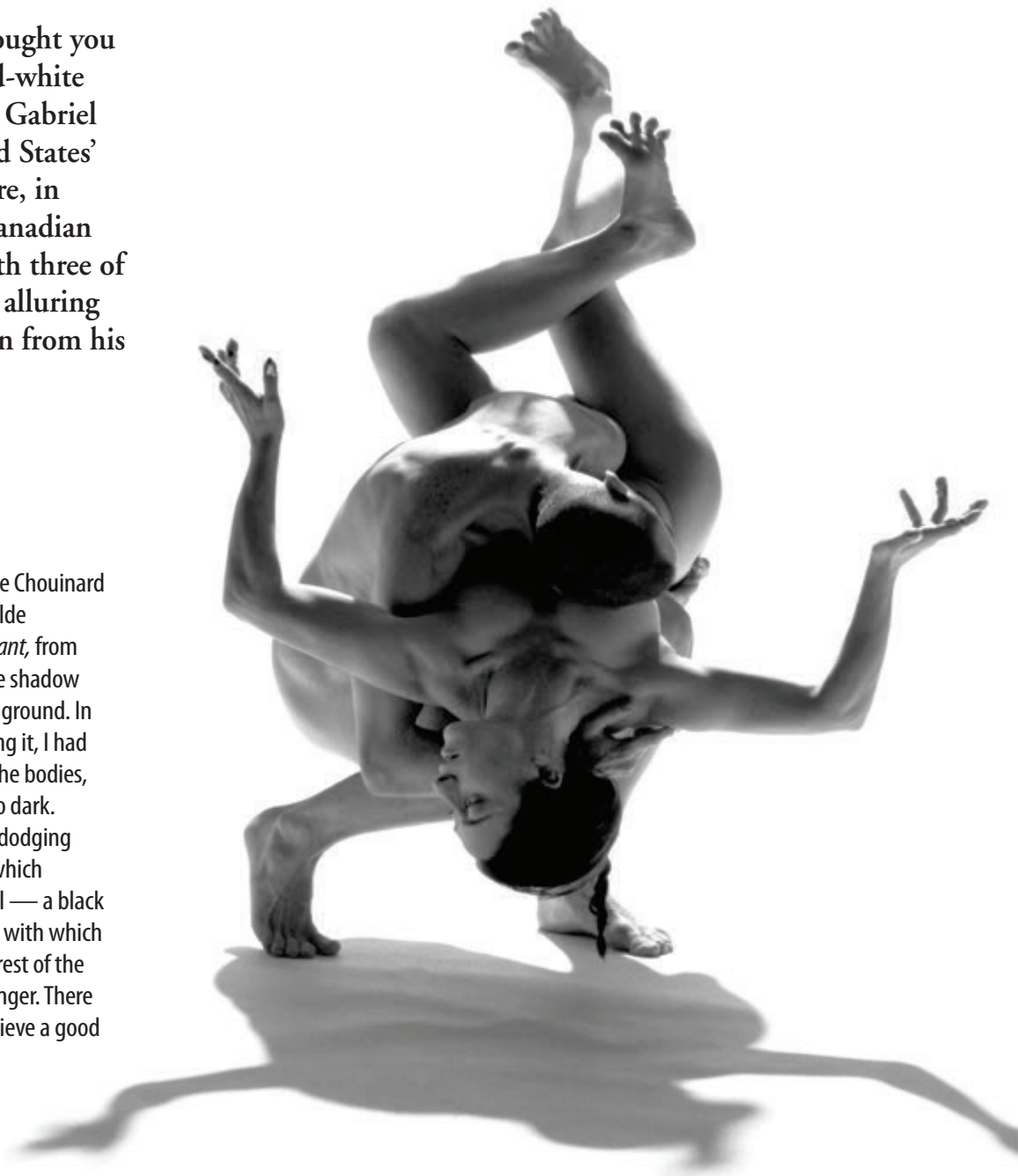
Montreal's Michael Slobodian

by Toba Singer

In our Fall issue, we brought you the evocative black-and-white photography of Cuba's Gabriel Davalos and the United States' Rosalie O'Connor. Here, in part two, we feature Canadian Michael Slobodian, with three of his favourite photos in alluring black and white, chosen from his personal archives.

In this photo of Compagnie Marie Chouinard dancers Louis Gervais and Mathilde Monnard in *L'Amande et le Diamant*, from the mid-1990s, I like the way the shadow reproduces their position on the ground. In the darkroom when I was printing it, I had to expose the image longer for the bodies, but then the facial detail was too dark. So I made another print using a dodging technique to lighten that area, which involved using a homemade tool — a black circle of paper on a thin wire — with which to hold back the light while the rest of the print was being exposed a bit longer. There was a lot of trial and error to achieve a good result.

— MS





This photo, also taken in the mid-1990s, is a study of Ginette Laurin from the Montreal company O Vertigo. I wanted a solo indoor shot of this very physical choreographer. The shot was spontaneous, in the moment. I like it because you can see all the tones, pure white to all black.

— MS



I like the introspective mood of this photo, which I shot in colour and then turned into black and white later. Black and white covers the semi-nudity: you're not looking at a bare body in a dance belt, but at the overall shapes. If it were colour, you'd focus on skin tones. The pose, which took several tries to get right, was a co-creation with the dancer, Scott Fowler of Ballet BC. Both feet were in parallel at first, but I wanted a different line, so I asked him to flex one.

— MS

In 1978, Michael Slobodian was backstage at Place des Arts in downtown Montreal watching a girlfriend perform with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens when he met Ian Westbury, the company's photographer. After that, Slobodian often watched Westbury work, then studied his photos. "I gradually learned what a good dance shot was and when to take it. Ian worked on instinct and could shoot in between movements, as well as capturing perfect leaps and jumps."

Slobodian began taking photos for Les Grands Ballets, then had a stint in fashion photography, but returned to dance, explaining, "I wanted to capture the body in motion, as well as at rest." One of his constant subjects has been his wife, the choreographer Gioconda

Barbuto, who he met when she was a dancer (notably with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and Nederlands Dans Theater 3).

With black-and-white photography, he says, "You have to train your eye so the whites are not burned out or the blacks too black, and to capture grey tones that lend subtlety." He likes the way black and white "forces the eye to look more at composition."

Since the stage is lit according to the choreographer's wishes, in the theatre "what you see is what you get. I used to take a Polaroid to check lighting; nowadays, a digital camera gives me that check." Still, live performance can be unpredictable, and he relies on experience to shoot "somewhere in the

middle of the lighting level. Finding the ratio of temperature to time is an art form," especially when confronted with black costumes against a black background.

Studio shoots provide the most pleasure. "There's no pressure. The dancers and I negotiate, they can try jumps at different levels; we might even try a few non-dance shots. We collaborate. What does the dancer want to say? Maybe it's not that grand jeté."

He enjoys being invited to Vancouver to shoot Arts Umbrella students. "Kids are ready to give so much," he says. At the other end of the spectrum are companies such as Ballet BC, where Slobodian's photographs make a key contribution to marketing. ^{or}



Donna Feore on the set of *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Stratford Festival
Photo: Erin Samuel

In Conversation

Musical theatre director-choreographer
Donna Feore talks with Gary Smith



Guys and Dolls
Photo: Courtesy of Stratford Festival



Fiddler on the Roof
Photo: Courtesy of Stratford Festival



Crazy for You
Photo: Courtesy of Stratford Festival

“Out front there are 1,800 people with their arms folded staring at the stage. And like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, they seem to say, ‘Show me.’” Donna Feore smiles. “That’s what it feels like when you hear the trumpets sound the opening fanfare and watch the lights dim at Stratford.”

Feore, arguably Canada’s most inspired director-choreographer working in musical theatre today, is relaxing in the Donor’s Lounge at the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario. Not that Feore actually relaxes, you understand. She’s never still. Throughout our interview, she’s up on her feet demonstrating steps.

If she didn’t move at all you’d still know she’s a dancer just by the way she sits and stands. You’d know, too, she’s a director, by the way she dominates the conversation, moving it politely, but forcefully, in the direction she wants it to go.

Feore, 55, grew up in Dawson Creek, a small town in northern British Columbia. “I think I was six,” she says about starting ballet lessons. “It wasn’t like now; parents didn’t

believe every dancer can choreograph. Those disciplines inhabit two different worlds. But I did think maybe I could.”

Back in Vancouver for Expo 86, Feore found it was a time of great cultural growth in Canada. “I danced in little revues, created choreography, performed in pop-up shows like *Shut Up and Dance*. I learned so much.”

In 1990, when Feore was still in her 20s, lightning struck. She was in a massive revue at the old Imperial Room of the Royal York Hotel when, she says, “Brian Macdonald came to see the show. He was doing *Guys and Dolls* at Stratford, and offered me a chance to dance in the Havana number. More than that, he became my mentor.”

Macdonald was an important ballet choreographer of international repute who also staged legendary productions of *The Mikado* and *H.M.S. Pinafore* at Stratford that featured a rich imaginative experience and made the musicals come to life onstage.

“Stratford was where I learned my craft,” Feore says. “It was my theatre school. I’m a very curious person and I just soaked it all up.”

Another break came when director

the main characters. And that’s actually rare. In Feore’s production, no one does a back flip just because they can. Everything creates energy, pace and movement that helps to build the scene.

“I have every performer write a detailed back story, which we share. It’s important to know who you are.”

That’s because in a Feore show, it’s impossible to hide. “I always say, on this stage, in the festival theatre, if you don’t know who you are and what you’re doing, you can’t help me make things work. Together we provide the camera lens that ensures audience focus.”

Before she starts rehearsals, Feore creates a storyboard for each scene. She knows what she wants when she enters the rehearsal room, but she’s always willing to change her mind, to create a community where invention can be shared.

“I’m detail oriented,” she says. “You know all the great choreographers are story driven. You have to make sure the story never stops. It can’t be put on hold until a production number ends.”

Ask Feore if she’s a tough taskmaster and she looks at the floor. “Well, there’s no

Feore knows old musicals have a shelf life, though the good ones like *Oklahoma!* seem to go on forever. She also knows there is a responsibility to renew them with fresh ideas.

put you in everything. But I was just such a physical kid, dance seemed to make sense.”

She might have tried jazz and tap, but there were no classes available. “It was strictly ballet, but never mind, I loved ballet. And, by 11, I was thinking I was getting pretty good. I was a synchronized swimmer and loved hockey and skiing, too. I was all about movement. But, even in those early years, I knew I wanted to be a professional dancer.”

Eventually, Feore got herself to Pacific Ballet Theatre in Vancouver where she trained in its apprentice program. She also worked with Judith Marcuse’s company, which opened her up to contemporary dance.

“I loved moving in new ways. I was an explorer. I decided to go to Los Angeles and show those folks down there what was what. Ah, youth. I was the one who learned a lot out there. New movement styles — freer explorations that were less formal than I was used to — liberated my thoughts, especially toward choreography.”

The more Feore explored movement, the more she became interested in choreography. For her it was a natural extension, something that allowed her creative control. “I don’t

Richard Monette asked Feore to choreograph the Luperclia scene in *Julius Caesar*, which would be her first choreography at Stratford. “Why not, I thought? The truth is I didn’t even know what the scene was. I had to look it up.”

She laughs, adding: “That play was how I cut my choreographic teeth. Choreographing a play is so beneficial because you can’t rely on steps. You have to work with the narrative and extend the story through movement. It ought to be the same in a musical. You don’t suddenly think, ‘Oh, let’s all dance.’ The dance comes out of the action. In a perfectly constructed musical, dance always says something about what’s going on in the story.”

Macdonald taught Feore that musical numbers in a show are the anchors. If they don’t work, the show doesn’t work. Feore has gone one step farther. The dances in her recent Stratford production of *Guys and Dolls* created a seamless vision of characters and story. Every person on the stage had a reason to be there at that moment, in that place: sailors, streetwalkers, panhandlers, shoppers, they were all part of the story. Their movement informed what was taking place with

reading or talking in my rehearsals. I need everyone concentrating on what’s happening onstage. I need everyone giving energy to the scene. I’m asking audiences to invest totally in the show. My performers need to do that, too. We can’t have actors who are just standing in place, or just waiting for their moment.”

Feore’s interest in film sometimes causes her to talk staging as if it were related to the images on a screen: “There’s no master shot on the Festival’s thrust stage. As a director, I have to consider every direction.” Feore jumps up and faces three sides of the room, suggesting the way audience members see three different images according to where they sit in the auditorium. “Everyone needs a picture, but it’s not the same picture. Yet when it’s critical to the story, everyone has to get the image. It’s about the geography of that stage space.”

In her work since 1995, directing and choreographing Stratford productions of *My Fair Lady*, *Oliver!*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Sound of Music* and *A Chorus Line*, Feore has used movement to find new ways to make musicals move.

In *Oliver!*, she created a dream scene that took us inside an orphan boy's heart and mind to reveal desperate desires. In *The Sound of Music*, she used inventive choreography to keep the story moving while servants and gardeners changed sets while dancing. In *A Chorus Line*, she gave the choreography more depth, removing the numbered straight lines dancers had always stood on and on which the show depended since day one.

Her triumph with *Guys and Dolls* was the male ballet, with all those men — some dancers, and some actors, too, who had to be there for the story. “That number goes on forever,” she shrugs. “There’s no escaping that. The audience is wiped out when it finishes. So are the dancers. The audience is so close they can hear the dancers breathe. They’re in there with them. When the guys nailed this thing for the first time, they were shocked they could do it.”

Feore expects a lot from everyone on her team. “Sometimes I’ve had actors say, ‘Maybe I could just do some little step here and there and the chorus could handle the rest.’ I say OK, I can give you step, ball, change, but I guarantee you won’t be happy when you’re up there doing the show.”

Feore says that her big rant comes when she hears a member of the chorus say they’re “just a dancer.” “It makes me crazy,” she says. “A dancer is something awesome.”

Feore admits her expectations are high — for the dancers and for herself. “If you’re not prepared, you’re wasting everyone’s time. And time is money. Well, one minute it’s a democracy; the next it’s not.”

As for the future, there are film, opera and television assignments. And there are two musicals next season at Stratford: *The Music Man* and *The Rocky Horror Show*.

“Sometimes my husband, Colm [the stage and film actor], wakes at 3 a.m. and sees me sitting up in bed going through things in my head. ‘You’re not,’ he says. But, of course, I am.”

For Donna Feore, it’s always about raising the stakes. She doesn’t settle. When the kids in *Oliver!* tried to give her cute, she told them, “Don’t give me cute. Cute lasts 10 minutes. Then you’re dead.”

Feore knows old musicals have a shelf life, though the good ones like *Oklahoma!* seem to go on forever. She also knows there is a responsibility to renew them with fresh ideas. “With an old musical, it’s never just a repetition of what someone did before. I may be staging revivals, but we’re in a different time and place. It’s not just doing what Agnes de Mille did 60 years ago.”

Over the years, there have been some bold female musical theatre choreographers, such as De Mille, Onna White, Valerie Bettis and Susan Stroman. Did the audience always know how sophisticated their dances were? “You know, the audience doesn’t really need to know anything about dance. They know when they’re moved. And they know when you are taking them with you some place special. That’s what it’s all about.” ²¹



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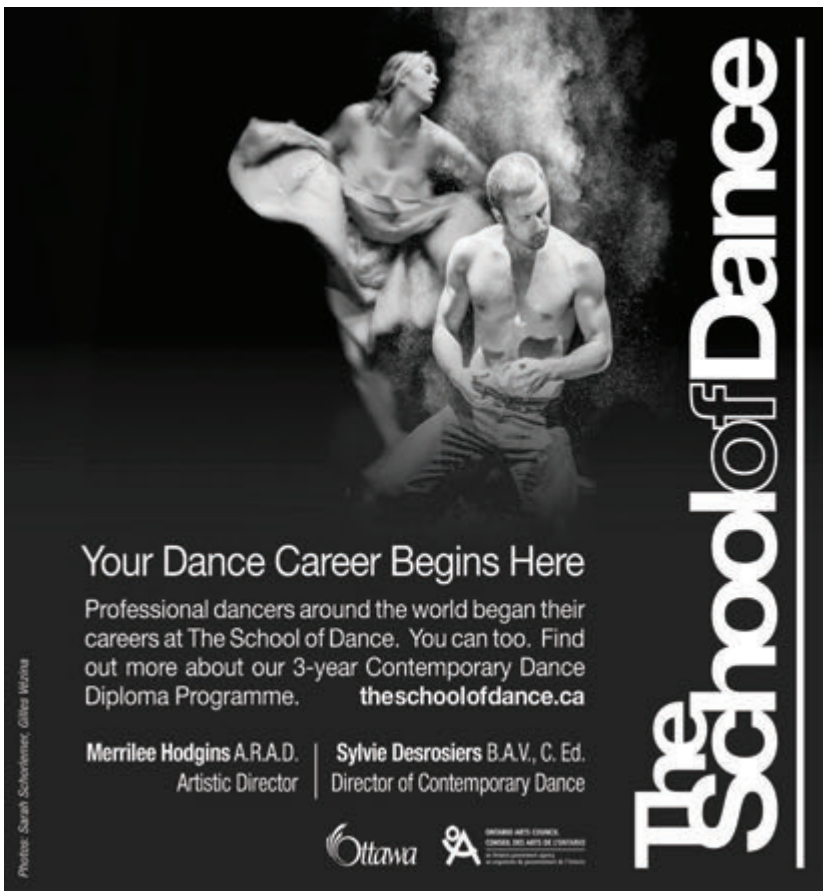
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Permission to Touch

by Deirdre Kelly

Finding the right protocol for ballet classes

Tyrrannical teachers who abuse dancers in the name of art is a common trope in popular culture and films, from *The Red Shoes* to *Black Swan*. There's truth behind the stereotype that many in dance would like to see disappear. Ballet teachers accused of inappropriate behaviour in the classroom — among them a teacher in England who reportedly hits students with a fly swatter — have recently focused attention on the role of touch in dance instruction, and whether physical contact ought to be permitted by teachers offering corrections to students. It's a contentious issue that is pushing dance school owners everywhere to review their policies, if only out of fear that a lawsuit could shut their businesses down.

"It's essential to be wary of the fact that physical touching can carry negative implications in this day and age, and to work toward a non-touch policy," says Jane Davis-Munro, operator of the Royal Academy of Dance-affiliated Pegasus Dance Studios in Toronto. "But it can take years to train — or retrain — yourself as a teacher to use really inventive imagery to get through to a child to pull up and press down, for instance, without applying touch to their bodies."

So what is the correct approach? Should a dance teacher physically correct a student or rely solely on verbal and visual cues in order to avoid a potential scandal? If touch is permitted, then when is it too much? Are all cultures accepting of touch as an integral component of dance instruction, particularly where young children are involved?

In China, for instance, touching is permitted, but it is respectful, geared toward producing the best possible dancers, says RAD teacher Georgia Leung, who teaches Chinese dance as well as ballet. "Although the training in China is tough, I have never witnessed any hitting or inappropriate touching," says Leung. "We just basically

train for more hours and have very strict and disciplined routines."

Which begs the question: is the fear of touch more a first-world problem stemming from middle-class concerns about political correctness?

Bartira Barreto thinks so. A RAD teacher who has taught in her native Brazil, Portugal and Canada, Barreto is of the opinion that North Americans are more uptight about touch in dance compared to Europeans and South Americans. "From my experience of many years teaching in Brazil, there isn't any problem or restriction with touch in ballet class," she says.

"I have to be honest — I first heard of it as being an issue here in Canada. I never had to think and restrain my hands-on correction either in Brazil or Portugal. In Brazil, you actually would choose to be taught by those teachers who made the effort to stand up and walk by to touch a dancer's body as this helps the student understand what a specific correction means. Having a kinetic connection with hands leading the muscle, limb, joint and head will do wonders."

There is very little consensus on the subject. Edward Hillyer, a former Les Grands Ballets Canadiens dancer turned teacher,

offers a contrasting approach. "As a teacher, I never felt any need to touch the students at all. I have a good vocabulary and can explain myself well in words and illustration. I know there are teachers who say 'I need to physically put the student into position.' I do not support this view."

"All dance schools should have in place a policy for the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults," says Michelle Groves, the RAD's director of education and training, "as well as information on why it may be necessary in certain circumstances to use touch in the learning and teaching environment. Such policies should be shared with teaching staff, students, parents and carers, and be easily accessible. There should also be clear procedures on how to report concerns, and information on how concerns will be dealt with. Dance teachers should also be aware of any government legislation on physical contact with students to ensure they are operating with best practice."

Increasingly, dance schools are pulling back, believing that even a well-intentioned touch could be misconstrued as a physical assault, if not an abuse of power. "So now the general rule is no touching," says Svea Eklof-Grey, who danced for

Should a dance teacher physically correct a student or rely solely on verbal and visual cues in order to avoid a potential scandal? If touch is permitted, then when is it too much?

George Balanchine in Geneva before finishing her international career at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in the 1980s.

“My first teacher did hit us lightly with a stick, but I was not upset by this,” she recalls. “What is more upsetting when you are young — and older — is being ignored or emotionally punished by the teacher. That can make a student desperate for their attention and willing to do anything to please them.”

The former principal dancer is today a ballet mistress for Ballet Jörgen, a Toronto touring company headquartered in a community college where physical contact in the classroom is forbidden, regardless of the discipline. “There are many policy restrictions about this, mostly for the teachers’ protection,” Eklof-Grey says.

Is this going too far? Does prohibiting touch in dance class “discriminate against excellence” as Jeffery Taylor, founder of Britain’s National Dance Awards, put it? Speaking to London’s *Daily Telegraph*, Taylor said that British ballet training had become “a disgrace,” largely because “teachers

no longer are allowed to touch or manipulate young dancers’ bodies into the correct positions — to straighten their backs, legs or arms — because of fears that they could be accused of sexual harassment.”

It’s a legitimate concern. Type the words “touch” and “dance class” into a search engine and up pop stories involving teachers publicly accused by their students of having touched them in ways that made them feel uncomfortable, or even violated. Some, like Katie Champagne, a dance teacher at a high school in Lafayette, Kentucky, faced criminal charges after students said she had touched them inappropriately in dance class. The ensuing investigation in 2012 saw all charges dropped for lack of evidence. The teacher ultimately was exonerated, and the students found to have exaggerated or lied about what happened in her class. “In my opinion, they misinterpreted what happened,” said criminal defence attorney William Goode at the time. “She’s a dance teacher teaching people how to dance and create choreography. They have to touch at times.”

On the other hand, there is the highly publicized case of Grant Davies, an Australian dance teacher who in 2015 pleaded guilty to 47 counts of child sexual abuse relating to dancers as young as nine between 2009 and 2013. The victims were students at RG Dance in Sydney, a school the now convicted pedophile, presently serving an 18-year sentence, founded with his sister in 2002. Rebecca Davies told an inquiry investigating the experiences of children at the now defunct RG Dance that her brother was known to touch students inappropriately. But she had done nothing to regulate the touching that went on in class. “There’s so many things that I wish I’d done better and I know it was my responsibility to do better,” she told the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse last year.

Obviously, touch is fraught with controversy, and the Davies case an extreme example. But, when used honestly and prudently, touch in dance remains a useful pedagogical tool “augmenting perception and understanding of a specific technical or artistic correction,” says Gerard McIsaac, a RAD teacher affiliated with Toronto’s National Ballet School and Ottawa’s School of Dance, among other studios. His own approach is to demonstrate and then articulate, in clear and precise language, what he wants a dancer to learn from him in ballet class. “Physically guiding a dancer, when necessary,” is acceptable, he adds, but only after obtaining their consent.

“Everyone will respond differently,” McIsaac points out, “and it is up to the teacher to assess each situation as it arises, and adjust his or her teaching accordingly.” But consent does not give a teacher permission to use force or any other action that could be misconstrued as abuse. Where touch is concerned, teachers must exercise extreme caution, especially in today’s litigious climate.

“All teachers need to monitor carefully how their words, actions, directions, attitudes and use of touch affect perceptions of them in the dance studio,” McIsaac says. “The primary focus should be to concentrate on appropriate, that is healthy and enjoyable, methods of teaching to achieve the highest possible standards of dance training.”^{vi}

An earlier version of this piece appeared in Dance Gazette, published by the Royal Academy of Dance, Issue 1, 2017. It has been revised by the author for Dance International.



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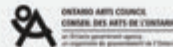
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INSIDE ED

Toward a Scope of Practice by Andrea Downie

Given the holistic nature of dance and its importance in the lives of many students, dance teachers have a responsibility to know and understand the extent of their expertise and to operate within those limits.

At present, there is no standardization in the education and qualification of dance teachers in Canada. The result is considerable range in their knowledge and pedagogical training. As the profession is unlicensed and unregulated, there is no scope of practice to define what practices dance teachers are educated, authorized and able to undertake. Well-intentioned teachers may inadvertently overstep the limits of their knowledge in their efforts to help students deal with physical and psychosocial challenges, which can impede a dancer's ability to stay healthy, well and progressing.

In this regard, dance educators should form partnerships with health professionals to help dancers maintain optimal health, wellbeing and levels of performance. Dance teachers have a responsibility to design and lead safe dance classes that incorporate effective and appropriate material for their particular students. When problems arise that are outside their area of expertise, dance teachers must be prepared to refer students to appropriate health professionals. The wrong kind of help can be worse than no help at all and may exacerbate health concerns.

Teachers should avoid counselling in areas outside of their knowledge base and learn how to apply their unique expertise in situations involving health and safety. For example, if a student complains of pain or injury, it is within the teacher's scope to examine their technique for faults that could be contributing to that injury, but it is beyond the teacher's scope to diagnose it. This is where a health care professional can complement a dance teacher's expertise. A proper diagnosis enables proper treatment; proper assessment of technique reduces the risk of re-injury and increases performance and confidence.

Beyond this kind of teamwork, dance educators need training in pedagogy

(teaching methods and practices) that includes not only learning *what* to teach (content knowledge), but also *how* to teach (pedagogical knowledge). Core principles include the need to:

- ensure that physical and psychological environments are safe and inclusive
- adhere to principles of safe dance practice and provide appropriate physical training, mental training and stress management tools
- provide diverse instruction and constructive feedback on alignment, technique and artistry
- provide basic information on hydration and proper nutrition for dancers
- help students understand the difference between excellence and perfection
- address normal emotional, behavioural, mental and social challenges through dance and discussion
- recognize the signs of injuries, eating disorders and psychosocial disorders, and make referrals. Understand that it is outside dance teachers' scope of practice to assess, diagnose and treat these problems and that the best help may be to direct the dancer to someone else.

In the absence of regulations and a guiding scope of practice, it is incumbent upon teachers to ensure they are qualified in dance pedagogy and certified by a reputable organization. Dance educators can access information and professional development through a number of avenues to ensure they stay current and are using best practices. Organizations like Healthy Dancer Canada, International Association for Dance Medicine and Science, One Dance UK and Ausdance offer free online resources on dance pedagogy, and safe and effective dance practice. More formal certificate courses are available online from Safe in Dance International, National Dance Education Organization and Harkness Centre for Dance Injuries.

It is in everybody's best interest if dance teachers understand how to appropriately use their specific skills and recognize when it is time to refer students to suitable health professionals. Well-qualified teachers contribute to the personal, technical, artistic and creative development and health of dancers. ¹¹

Andrea Downie is the president and a founding member of Healthy Dancer Canada, and the founding director of EnhanceDance.

GLOBAL REPORTS

Vancouver

Gao Yanjinzi, artistic director of Beijing Modern Dance Company, has a sensual approach to dance, one that is as much about colour and light, texture and sound, as it is about movement. In *Oath – Midnight Rain*, presented as part of the annual Dancing on the Edge Festival, she adds the element of scent, released as clouds of white powder filling the Firehall Arts Centre stage. It's a very textural theatrical approach, with choreography that contrasts strong muscular control with soft flow.

Oath – Midnight Rain premiered at the 2006 Venice Biennale, remaining in the repertoire since. While there is an oddly bombastic quality to the dreamy work for six dancers that doesn't support its Buddhist exploration of "the liminal moment between night and day," it is nonetheless a sincere communication containing much beauty. The work's series of solos were clearly rooted physically in Chinese cultural traditions, including Beijing opera, and the opening solo was a gorgeous riot of sensual impressions, including one male performer's red-painted feet and hands, the deep blue of his tulle skirt, the white face paint and hard pointed feet. I hope Yanjinzi continues her connection to Vancouver, which seems to have become a regular spot on her travel itinerary.

Contemporary dance audiences are very tolerant of mystery, which appeared in many of the works on the festival's mixed bills. One was Tedd Robinson's *Logarian Rhapsody*. A quick Google search failed to explain logarian satisfactorily and there's no explanation in the program note, but the work seemed to be about desperate desire. The dramatic impulse here was certainly intense, as Winnipeg dancers Alexandra Elliott and Ian Mozden, their eyes black-rimmed and popping open, grimaced their way through this ghoulishly delightful, weirdly ecstatic romp in which desire was represented by a crisp green apple over which they scabbled.

There was also mystery in Toronto artist Yvonne Ng's *Weave ... part one*. Performed by Ng, a small figure with large expressive hands and feet, the work weaves together the strands of a story about Ng's mother, abandoned as a baby, and "a

violence" done to her by a man. Rare among dancers, Ng is able to deliver a monologue that is both conversational and yet full of drama and character, and even when she speaks in Chinese the Singapore-born artist's intentions are clear.

Some of the mystery of Olivia C. Davies' *Compass*, an excerpt from the full-length *Crow's Nest and Other Places She's Gone*, came from Davies' very interior performance. Storyteller Rosemary Georgeson gets us neatly into the piece with an introduction to her friend Blue (played by Davies), who is asleep on a bench. But once Blue has slowly awakened, the character's intense emotional states are not fully translated into movement. Davies, of mixed

at a red light became a captive audience when dancers in colourful T-shirts entered the crosswalk and held up triangular traffic signs signifying "yield," with text announcing "50 seconds of art." The young dancers then created just that as they leaped and boogied across the road to get to the other side, proving that cars do not rule.

There's something about seeing dance outside, under a bright sky, with the general public passing by. This kind of dance has to be robust to survive. Two other off-site performances took place as part of Vines Art Festival at Trout Lake, an oasis of green on the city's east side. Situated between a stand of cedar on one side, birch on the other, neither dancer was deterred by the uneven, prickly ground.

Modern dance icon Margie Gillis' 1999 *Loon* was performed by Caitlin Griffin with the same intense physical expression



by Kaija Pepper

Welsh and Métis-Anishnawbe heritage, is building a "contemporary Aboriginal dance-theatre practice," currently in Vancouver. Her desire to perform the choreography "with the same intensity as would be given to ceremony and ritual" is evident in her fierce concentration and striking, dramatic presence. Davies' intensity takes you right there with her onstage, and it only needed more choreography so we could complete the journey — the ceremony, the ritual, the theatrical experience — with her.

One lighthearted Edge piece happened off site, in several crosswalks around the city. During Gail Lotenberg's *Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?*, cars waiting

that made Gillis such a compelling soloist, each long-legged, long-armed pose shouting its presence. There was even the same tossing of long thick hair, a trademark of the master, though long hair is presumably not essential in the grander scheme of the sculptural and vivid choreography.

Marisa Gold's dance and spoken word poetry in her *Tree/Life* was a shout-out to nature, a passionate call of surrender to something bigger than the self. Gold, who recently spent a year at the Ailey School in New York, performed with a full-hearted commitment to rhythm — here, set by her own poetry and voice — that made for a compelling statement in the middle of a sunny afternoon. ▀



The 2017 Winnipeg Fringe Festival produced one lone dance production this year — fairly unusual given past years have had multiple contemporary dance, ballet and touring shows appearing on local stages during the 10-day theatrical fête. However, local contemporary dance artist Rachelle Bourget made it count with her compelling solo production *After the Cause*, which took viewers into her own imagined dark night of the soul.

The 35-minute production held at the Rachel Browne Theatre felt equal parts harrowing confessional and cautionary tale about the perils of drug addiction. Bourget, also seen in earlier Fringe productions *Fresh* (2011) and *Other Stories* (2013) with Nova Dance Collective, begins by sitting on a chair under a stark lightbulb as though at an inquisition, her own voiceover telling of those “addicted to escape,” including rats sipping cocaine-laced water during 1970s “Rat Park” experimental research.

Her imagistic choreography, including at times violent shaking and twisting of her limbs like gnarled tree branches, plus jagged body isolations and abrupt shifts of direction juxtaposed with more lyrical sections, created satisfying visual texture.

The climax comes when Bourget, her face covered with a mask making her an Everywoman, begins thrashing to a driving electronic score under pulsating strobe lights — albeit a few too many floor writhes weakened its crescendo. She

achieves catharsis after pouring water over her head, suggesting a baptism, before walking slowly upstage now stripped of her shirt, shorts and face mask, her aching humanity bellowing like a shot in the night.

Another contemporary show, *Holy Wild*, by independent dance artist Tanja Faylene Woloshen, featured Woloshen with Lise McMillan, presented at Winnipeg’s funky Cre8ery art gallery and performance space. Unfolding as a series of structured improvisations inspired by nature and siren calls to freedom, Woloshen first appears like a curious Harlequin, dressed in her own costume design of diamond-painted pants and top, with a sparkly toque and orange pom-pom. McMillan, a former company member with Winnipeg’s Contemporary Dancers, followed on her heels, her loose jacket billowing over her real-life pregnancy and clownish pants, further heightening Woloshen’s buffo persona.

The duo’s (mostly) hyper-controlled, sustained movement vocabulary evokes Woloshen’s rigorous training in Japanese butoh, as well as infusing the entire show with a strongly Godot flavour. While the production’s overall slow pace admittedly took some adjustment, I became struck with several compelling sections, such as when Woloshen begins to slam stacked stones into the white-box theatre’s floor as McMillan lines up tiny gilded plastic animals, including a bear, cougar and cows, into silent procession. This juxtaposition between destruction and creation spoke to the harmony — or lack thereof — of

humankind and nature, and felt more timely than ever.

This 45-minute production succeeds best by creating a potent series of stream-of-consciousness images. However, at times it also felt overly cryptic, and I longed for a greater physical and emotional connection between the pair that would have created a more resonant emotional arc in the show’s loosely based narrative, as well as further dimension. A pastiche score featuring music by Laurie Anderson, Airto, David Lang and Sylvain Lemêtre proved effective, countering the show’s quieter moments with strategic sections of driving percussion, electronica and a voiceover intoning “I lose control” pitted against the dancers’ carefully executed movement.

Finally, *Much Too Much To Say*, directed and choreographed by Zorya Arrow and presented by Company Link, an organization dedicated to promoting experimental theatre and dance artists helmed by former WCD artistic director Tom Stroud, featured a five-member company comprised of Arlo Reva, Arne MacPherson, Bo van der Midden, Emma Beech and Arrow. Performed in a repurposed storefront in the city’s richly multicultural inner city, the one-hour production billed as exploring “identity as a verb” grew out of Arrow’s own grief over the unexpected death of her longtime life partner last fall.

The performers displayed a palpable trust between themselves, with the multi-talented van der Midden morphing into a Pied Piper with melodica in hand to lead the audience throughout the two-tiered space. The introspective show ranged from the experiential, including viewers being invited to close their eyes and “imagine you are the sunset,” to downright absurd, for example, Reva pulling a working radio out of a refrigerator. One highlight became Reva’s mesmerizing solo in which she slowly extends one leg high above her head, only to hold her toe while balancing on her other leg — a singular, captivating moment fueled by the dancer’s strength and grace, highlighted further by effective lighting by jaymez.

The show draws to a gentle close as van der Midden plays repeated, melodic phrases akin to Philip Glass on a spinet piano, punctuated by his recited poetry that washed over the ears like cresting waves, a haunting elegy to lost lives and never to be forgotten great loves. ▀

Toronto



by Michael Crabb

A very accomplished dancer, Fyffe is also a good actor. The way she presented her own naked body with a mix of pride and vulnerability compelled her audience to ask the question posed by the solo's title. Her skill in modulating the emotional tone of the work and in making points without being preachy made for a rich experience. Montreal-based Gerard Reyes, for several seasons an admired member of Compagnie Marie Chouinard, also deployed nudity in his solo, *The Principle of Pleasure*. Reyes is a compelling performer, but his lengthy solo is an elusive work. It's never quite clear whether the bald and

bearded Reyes is portraying a character, taking us on a quasi-autobiographical story or simply doing what he loves doing. He credits his visits to a Montreal trans bar, Manhattan vogue balls, Berlin fetish parties and Portland strip clubs as inspirations.

Encased in revealing black mesh tights that morph into a spider-web top, Reyes struts in stiletto-heeled boots. He does much self-observing as well as attending to his maquillage in a pair of large movable mirrors. He engages the participation of audience members, one of whom he ties up to a chair before performing a lap dance. The most exciting dance elements are his dazzling voguing moves. There's an oddly austere, almost clinical quality to it all that rather undermines what appears to be a theme of anything-goes sexual liberality and indulgence.

Returning to the perennial bugbear of potentially limiting genre categories, dancer Santee Smith is another artist who refuses to be bound by them. Smith, the founder/director of Kaha:wi Dance Theatre, produced *Living Ritual: International Indigenous Performing*

Laura Nanni, artistic and managing director of Toronto's annual Summerworks Performance Festival, is not a fan of labels. Like her predecessor, Michael Rubinfeld, Nanni would prefer not to assign categories to the extraordinary range of genre-blending/bending work the festival presents. For Nanni, "it's all performance."

To support Nanni's preference, Summerworks' shows are catalogued alphabetically. "We'd like people to happen on a show they might not have sought out if they were looking simply by genre," Nanni explains.

Audiences, however, love their labels. So, as a concession, the fine print does assign each show a genre. It must be a hard call sometimes. What, for example, precisely distinguishes "dance" from "physical theatre"? Is it the type of movement involved or, perhaps, the quotient of spoken word? At times, the distinction seems irrelevant.

Nanni tried to further subvert the tendency of audiences to cleave to what they think they might like by programming eight double bills at the August

festival, each comprising works from different genres. Apart from creating opportunities for shorter pieces to be shown within a standard one-hour festival slot, it offered audiences unexpected juxtapositions.

Well, that was the intention. It did not stop some of dancer/choreographer Jasmyn Fyffe's fans from skipping the opening half of a double bill she shared with another female Black artist, storyteller Djennie Laguerre, or some of the latter's audience from leaving once she was done.

Fyffe was among a substantial contingent of 2017 Summerworks artists whose contributions were labelled dance. Yet, the variety of work included under that genre underlined Nanni's more appropriate "it's all performance" description.

Fyffe's solo, *what do you see?*, is a smart, wry and incisive exploration of ideas and stereotypes swirling around the Black female body. At once unsettling, provocative and sardonic, it referenced all manner of prejudices and lampooned stereotypes while tracing a trajectory of personal empowerment.

Arts Festival, a three-day event at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. "Today, performance practices are more integrated. I don't want to silo out disciplines by labelling the festival simply as dance, with all the preconceived notions that implies," Smith said.

The festival's daytime workshops and discussions were capped by evening performances by artists from as far away as Australia and New Zealand. In *[MIS] CONCEIVE*, Thomas E.S. Kelly and his ensemble posed questions of identity in a high-energy mashup of traditional Australian Aboriginal and contemporary styles. In its unrelenting and effective challenge to prejudicial stereotypes, it bristled with a mixture of ironic frustration and buoyant confidence.

That same sense of resilience infused *Material Witness*, a very substantial dance-theatre piece dealing with violence against women. It's a collaborative work, developed over several years by Nipissing First Nation arts collective Aanmitaagzi and New York's Spider-woman Theater.

The musical selections range from Lady Gaga's *Til It Happens to You* to *Rainbow Connection* from 1979's *The Muppet Movie*. Costuming is zany and colourful. The décor of hanging quilts is equally colourful. They are story quilts from a related project, Pulling Threads Fabric Workshops, which still travels to Indigenous communities. The all-female cast is superb and while its members' personal stories are often harrowing, there's an underlying theme of courage and defiance expressed through good-humoured banter, deliriously funny physical antics and some pretty awesome dancing.

There was also awesome dancing in *Miigis*, Red Sky Performance's newest production, given a preview performance at Jacob's Pillow and then, again on an outdoor stage, at Toronto's Fort York National Historic Site, with 10 traditional Indigenous dancers providing a thematically linked processional introduction. Unfortunately, for all its high-energy dancing, *Miigis*, choreographically, did not fulfill its initial promise.

Conceived and directed by Red Sky founder/director Sandra Laronde, *Miigis* is a contemporary dance work that references a traditional Indigenous theme. The title is the Anishinaabe name for a type of cowry shell that possesses spiritual significance in Indigenous culture and relates to the Seven Fires prophecy and westward movement inland from the Atlantic.

Production designer Julia Tribe costumes the cast of three couples — British Columbian Julie Pham and New Zealander Eddie Elliott were standouts — in silky shades of blue, redolent of the waterways that offered passage into the interior. Tribe's coup de théâtre is a huge skeletal carapace from which the dancers initially emerge. When inverted, it suggests a boat. It's a stunning poetic image and the choreography Jera Wolfe builds around it is *Miigis*' best.

From there, however, the flow of imagery becomes blurred in a surfeit of movement that is often repetitive and unclearly related to an excellent accompaniment by four musicians and two singers. »

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Montreal

by Victor Swoboda



Summer is no lull period for Montreal dance. Festivals and touring shows bring unexpected surprises. Take, for instance, the three-hour acrobatic dance/theatre show called *Vice & Vertu*, a unique exercise in showmanship and stagecraft presented by circus troupe Les 7 Doigts de la Main as part of Montreal's 375th anniversary celebrations. The show reproduced the spirit of Montreal's cabaret heyday in the 1940s and 1950s. Individual numbers were staged on two floors of the Société des arts technologiques (SAT) as well as on a makeshift outdoor stage in the tiny park adjoining the SAT. Split into three groups, the audience rotated in turn from one performance area to the next.

Outdoors, Song Enmeng and Pan Shengnan tossed and caught the spinning double-disc diabolo with such virtuosic finesse and imagination that this circus trick became an eye-popping *pas de deux*. Equally captivating were Nadine Louis and Pablo Pramparo, who tumbled over each other, locked limbs in pretzel configurations, pulled hair and mock slapped each other in an acrobatic rendition of the Apache dance, an old European cabaret staple whose sadomasochism is nowadays crude and unacceptable. But the choreography by Isabelle Chassé was so stylized that there was little fear of the audience perceiving the duo's interaction as anything but a satirical throwback — or so one hopes!

A highlight indoors at SAT was a portrayal of the 1950s burlesque icon Lili St. Cyr by local neo-burlesque star Lady Josephine, who brought her own elegance

to St. Cyr's famous tease in a bathtub.

Lady Josephine's dancing goes far beyond comic bump-and-grind routines. A few days later, in a sophisticated number at Montreal's premier neo-burlesque showcase, the Wiggle Room, she began with a stately showgirl pose, lightly drumming her fingers on her bare shoulder to suggest sensuality. Increasingly larger movements followed, alternating with delicate gestures, even belly-dance-like swaying, always in rhythm with a throbbing musical beat. Her doffing of accessories was consistently original, as in the way she balanced on her knees on a stool and coquettishly flicked off a shoe. Of course, burlesque must revel in flesh, and Josephine still has a tendency to finish routines with bump-and-grind gestures that rouse audiences to hooting applause.

In 2003, Gerardo Sanchez, director of the Montreal tango school, Tango Libre, began the Festival International de Tango de Montréal with accomplished invited dancers and orchestras from Argentina. The annual event helped to solidify Montreal as a North American tango centre, not only attracting outside aficionados, but pricking the interest of local residents, many of whom have made tango a rich part of Montreal's social and cultural life.

Among the invited couples at the 15th festival, Milagros Rolandelli and Lisandro Eberle executed their gentle lifts, dips and turns with a smooth, quiet élan that exemplified the classic tango tradition. Subtle innovations such as Eberle's doing a little hop into Rolandelli's arms were well integrated into the choreography,

which presented a unified whole, not the aimless series of fancy steps too often seen even among accomplished tango performers. The pair's duets evoked a mature passion.

More daringly innovative and blatantly passionate were Soledad Buss and Cesar Peral, whose lifts, though showy and expansive, were logical outcomes of the preceding phrases. Long-legged, with an impressive stretch, Buss made a striking figure. Sometimes crouching or lying prone during brief solos, she almost ventured into contemporary dance territory.

Silvana Nuñez and Ivan Romero showed what Argentines derisively call tango por export or tango for the tourist crowd. Their bland choreography was all nervous, flashy legs and lifts executed with visible effort and without underlying motivation. Romero's open-mouthed grimaces and little twitches of the hand simply could not be considered serious artistic statements.

The 15th edition of Festival Quartiers Danses unfolded its indoor shows at the Cinquième Salle of downtown Place des Arts, a departure from previous years when they were spread among several "Maisons de la culture" theatres across the city. This year, the neighbourhoods were reserved for outdoor performances in parks and squares. Festival artists, many of them young dancemakers, probably welcomed the prestige of playing at Place des Arts, but some audience members might well have felt short-changed in light of the festival's mandate of bringing dance to the neighbourhoods.

The festival's opening show was a solid double bill of Kyra Jean Green's sextet, *The Man Who Traveled Nowhere in Time*, and Andrea Peña's *El Vientre del Animal*, also for six dancers. A dancer/teacher at Les 7 Doigts de la Main, Green's multiple styles — hip hop, breakdance, acrobatic — to much-varied music — percussive, waltz and the classic rock song *Rock Around the Clock* — generated frequent visual delights.

Recorded throat singers appropriately introduced the animal-in-human theme of Peña's thoughtful work. The dancers' fringed sheepskin-style jackets and billowing white pants by designer Polina Boltova emphasized their tribal primitive instincts as they scurried across the stage. Peña and Green are choreographers to watch. *oi*

Until July, one might have suspected that San Francisco was afflicted with a severe case of cultural schizophrenia. The elegant War Memorial Opera House has served as the home for the establishment performing arts, like San Francisco Ballet and San Francisco Symphony; this was an unusual venue for neighbourhood-generated projects like the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, which for 38 years had sought more demotic homes. But San Francisco remains a most astonishing town, and here the neighbourhoods met the nabobs with surprising success. The percussion effusions of Gamelan Sekar Jaya on the steps of the grand Beaux Arts structure seemed symbolic of a new cultural synthesis.

All 18 of the soloists and companies who participated in the festival's main-stage concerts this year either are native to the Bay Area or have made it the centre of their cultural life — and this dedication suffused the festival. Every visit afforded its share of revelations. Before the July 8 opening, I had never heard of San Francisco Awakko-Ren. The group's festival debut offering, *Awa Ogori*, is a traditional Japanese ensemble work celebrating ancestors that was stunning in its configuration and musicality. A serpentine promenade preceded a mixed gender dance; the men are in printed skirts, the women are clothed in scarlet kimonos and elaborate head-dresses.

The most remarkable aspect of the evening was the live music that accompanied all eight companies, a first in my experience. The Opera House's superior acoustics exerted an almost visceral effect on the dancing, and hiring great musicians, like tabla master Zakir Hussain, did not hurt.

Political grievances were inescapable, but they were often cloaked in superior dancing and infectious music. You might never guess that the company named De Rompe y Raja was dancing about colonial subjugation of the African population by the Spanish in Peru. Robust performing and a musical score that included a solo on an

instrument fashioned from a donkey's jaw mesmerized. Patrick Makuakane, founder of the popular hula company, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu, recalled Hawaii's resistance to U.S. annexation with a stirring ensemble that pitted dancers wielding poles against a group toting sticks.

Choreographed jubilation proliferated. Festival debutant Ramón Ramos Alayo recreated a street party full of flouncing skirts and unpredictable leaps from his native Havana. The finale, an Afro-Cuban coronation celebration, immersed the Opera House stage in bodies swaying to an intoxicating score. The evening had opened with a sampling of white European ethnic fare, a smooth 19th-century ballroom party dispatched in crisp crinolines and white gloves by members of the Academy of Danse Libre. Festival directors Carlos Carvajal and CK Ladzekpo deserve praise for their theatrical savvy.

The future of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival is assured. I cannot say the same for SFDanceworks, which staged a well-attended and (apparently) well-financed season at ODC Theater. The haphazard programming suggested that founding artistic director James Sofranko is still struggling to find a

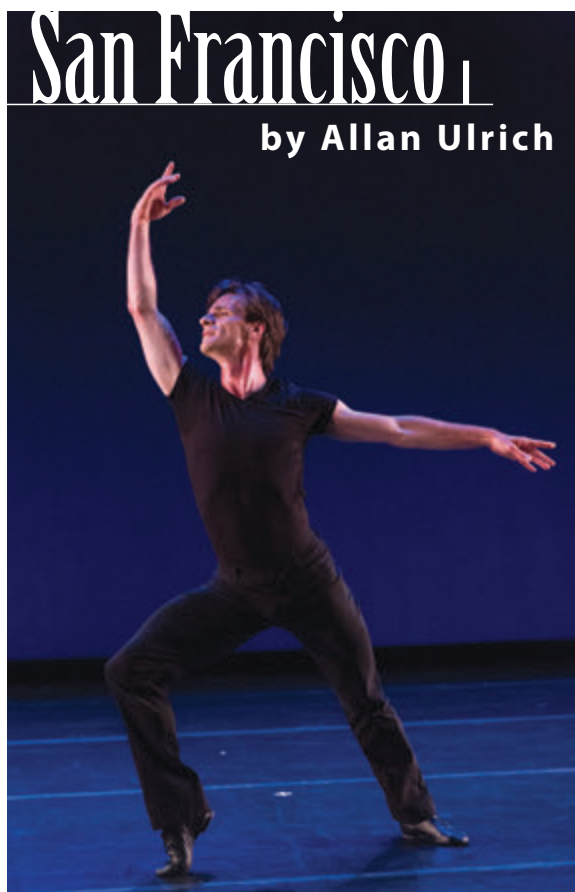
workable aesthetic; right now, Sofranko, a veteran soloist of the San Francisco Ballet, seems most impressed by Hubbard Street Chicago.

The fatally eclectic repertoire ranged from classic Americana, contemporary classicism, edgy romanticism and talky postmodernism. Despite the impressive contributions from performers on hiatus from other troupes, it was faintly indigestible.

There were exceptions. Sofranko made a brilliant decision to engage his old San Francisco Ballet colleague Pascal Molat (now retired) to perform José Limón's 1942 solo masterpiece *Chaconne*, and what we got was the finest dancing of the season. Molat's artistry has not dimmed since he exited SFB two years ago, and the performance was wonderfully musical (thanks to the live reading of the unaccompanied Bach violin score) and searching. The French dancer may not possess the weighted attack one expects from Limón interpreters, but he reveled in the sweeping arms, the knowing transitions and the eloquent contractions that have made *Chaconne* central to the American repertoire.

The single American premiere, Christopher Bruce's dour 2014 *Shadows*, made a bit of news. Four dancers sit upstage at a formal table, breaking away for ensembles that might signify family discord or expulsion from familiar surroundings. The suitcases carried about suggest pain that wells up from the soul. It was good to see the English choreographer working at top form.

The rest of the program bewildered, particularly Penny Saunders' 2015 *Soir Bleu*. The inspiration was Edward Hopper's 1914 painting of the same name. The choreography does little to clarify its connection to the painting and the anthology score does not help, though a mirrored wall and window frame suggest spiritual estrangement. Very pretentious; Sofranko needs to find better choreography if SFDanceworks survives for a third season. ▯



Pascal Molat of SFDanceworks in José Limón's *Chaconne*
Photo: Alex Renneff-Olson

NEW YORK I

by Robert Greskovic



Top left: Bolshoi Ballet's Olga Smirnova and Semyon Chudin in George Balanchine's *Jewels - Diamonds*
Photo: Stephanie Berger

Top right: New York City Ballet in George Balanchine's *Jewels - Rubies*
Photo: Paul Kolnik

Left: Paris Opera Ballet in George Balanchine's *Jewels - Emeralds*
Photo: Agathe Poupeney

This year's Lincoln Center Festival had limited dance, but, of the three programs on offer, one was uncommonly ambitious. Over four days, the festival helped mark its golden anniversary with a series of five performances celebrating another golden anniversary, that of George Balanchine's *Jewels*, now hailed as the first multi-act plotless ballet.

To be sure, seeing *Jewels* at Lincoln Center is hardly an unusual occurrence. The ballet was first shown by New York City Ballet in its Lincoln Center home, then called New York State Theater, on April 13, 1967. To be historically precise, one might say that the ballet's three parts — Emeralds, Rubies and Diamonds — premiered then. The title of *Jewels* would come later, when the trio acquired its now well-known name.

Today, *Jewels* is danced widely and internationally, but the festival's presentation was unique in that it showcased three different ballet troupes for each of the three parts. Paris Opera Ballet performed Emeralds, while Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet and New York City Ballet danced either Rubies or Diamonds.

The eagerly attended event played out unevenly. On reflection, the very premise of its grand plan might have suggested that. However much Balanchine's triptych can be blithely said to be French, American and Russian in dance tone due to its accompanying music by Fauré, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky, its aesthetic impact comes from finding the choreography's individual shades.

As might have been predicted, NYCB, where the ballet has been a regular and consistent repertory offering over the past 50 years, shone. In Rubies, the

troupe Balanchine founded delivered the ballet's jazz-accented challenges with astute amounts of breezy and brilliant dance dynamics.

In particular, as the lead ballerina, petite Megan Fairchild used her infallible, spinning-top centre to course through the solo strings of dancing as well as through the sometimes tendrilled configurations the role has in concert with her partner. As her casual and cheeky cavalier, Joaquin De Luz rendered his choreographic challenges with easy confidence. In the role of the often pulsating showcase's female soloist, who is sometimes supported by the ballet's four ensemble men, Teresa Reichlen rode the crest of Balanchine's leggy and soaring moments like a classy showgirl.

For its forays into the world of Rubies, the Bolshoi cast I saw, led by Ekaterina Krysanova, Artem Ovcharenko and Yulia Grebenshchikova, belaboured the would-be show-biz aspects. The eager dancers found themselves at something of a loss to fully deliver and control the classically strict elements making up the ballet's solo and duo passages; the ensemble also looked more mannered than to the manner born.

Much more happily, the Bolshoi Ballet rose impressively to the occasion for *Diamonds*. The troupe offered two ballerinas: the already familiar and stellar Olga Smirnova, all cool grace and steely strength beneath silken reach, and, in what proved to be the run's biggest revelation, 18-year-old Alena Kovaleva, reedy tall, luminously featured, making her debut in this formidable role as if it were tailor-made. To any number of New Yorkers familiar with *Diamonds* and its first incomparable interpreter Suzanne Farrell, Kovaleva was something of a fresh and rightful heir. Her poise, her calm, her daring and her spontaneity told of great ballet potential.

With its performances of *Diamonds*, NYCB shone in the limpid and imperial dimensions of the alternately creamy and sharply faceted details that define this thrilling classical showpiece, especially in the magisterial performances of Sara Mearns as lead ballerina.

An unwelcome surprise came with the Paris Opera Ballet's performances of *Emeralds*. With certain exceptions, little was exceptional or memorable about

these dancers in the aqueous atmosphere that permeates Balanchine's often shimmering choreography to selections of Fauré's frequently filigreed music. As the featured ballerina (a role created for the French-born and much admired Violette Verdy), Dorothee Gilbert hit more of the highlights than did the first-cast Laëtitia Pujol, who made dry and almost rote work of her challenges.

As the secondary featured ballerina, Léonore Baulac found an appropriately floating tone for her almost introspective role. Baulac's partner, Germain Louvet, caught much of the intended gentleness to his cavalier role. Finally, an unerringly fine and impressively precise Mathias Heymann danced the secondary leading man as if the role had been fashioned for him. He drew one into his dancing all the while seeming to lose himself in its dynamics.

The other two dance events of the festival stood in strong contrast: the one engaging as dance theatre; the other, off-putting. Saburo Teshigawara's *Sleeping Water* amounted to a 70-minute meditation on, of all non-dynamic things, sleep. In a confident mix of

silence and sound bites of music from Bach to the Rolling Stones, Teshigawara and his six fellow dancers, including Aurélie Dupont, Paris Opera Ballet's current director appearing here as a guest, threaded through or reclined within the often black surround fixed now and again with lucite panels and hanging furniture, to effects both hypnotic and meditative.

The festival's final dance presentation was the Bolshoi Ballet's recently acquired staging of *The Taming of the Shrew* by Jean-Christophe Maillot. Though this desperately contemporary and mostly incoherent take on a classic play, set to a mix of music by Shostakovich, presented some dancers not cast in *Jewels*, it showed them off to little effect. Maillot gives some of the company's more accomplished men, such as elegant Vladislav Lantratov and intense Denis Savin, chances to jump around a bit, but he gives audiences little in the way of a memorable dance experience, turning Shakespeare's insightful *Shrew* into a dancemaker's trendy stunt. ¹¹

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Dance has an interesting, voguish and ambivalent relationship with art galleries and museums: the former tugged by the living temporalities of the human body, the latter by the exhibition of entities or the preservation of times past. Back in 2015, I was wowed by Boris Charmatz's takeover of the Tate Modern in *20 Dances for the 20th Century*, which turned scenes from dance history into a panting, perspiring exhibition. In summer 2017, I was more touched and tickled than transported by Trajal Harrell's *Hoochie Koochie*, an altogether more sidelong take on dance history at the Barbican Art Gallery.

Hoochie Koochie's racial and gender fluidities, as well as its temporal and cultural ones, make it great material for the theorists who cluster around the contemporary art world. I liked it more practically. True, I wasn't transported, and yearned for a more sustained sense of composition or development (gallery settings almost demand a piecemeal approach), but I did find it sly, gently subversive and genuinely disarming. Touches and tickles have their own pleasures, after all.

Wayne McGregor's 40-minute +/- *Human*, with dancers from the Royal Ballet and McGregor's own company, was commissioned as the performative part of an art installation in the Roundhouse,

solos, or when he sustains a motif — a propeller spin, a wave form — long enough for it to register as significant. For the rest, the choreography, like the orbs, looks good and feels hollow.

At nearly four hours, Iceland Dance Company's *Sacrifice* at the Royal Festival Hall is a very long haul, as company directors Erna Ómarsdóttir and Valdimar Jóhannsson keep pointing out during their deadpan prologue patter. Those of us who lasted the course emerged like survivors: alive but not unscathed, in unnameable and possibly traumatic ways. That, by the way, is a recommendation.

The evening is split into three parts, with intervals during which you can watch a shadowy short film of bodies in stark landscapes, go into a cubicle and scream (there were queues for this), or attend a "Hate Yoga" session to access your inner rage. The first piece, Ómarsdóttir and Jóhannsson's *Shrine*, opens with a scene in a plastic dome emblazoned with a Dunkin' Donuts logo, in which an outlandish singer in a kimono is surrounded by odds and sods: elfin figures, a weightlifter, a bicyclist. From there, it only gets weirder. There are blood-curdling shrieks, ropes of yeti hair, communal self-flagellation and a disquisition on death, with pink balloons fartily representing decomposition. It is quite something, though who knows exactly what.

No Tomorrow, by Ragnar Kjartansson, Margrét Bjarnadóttir and Bryce Dessner, is a half-hour female guitar ensemble, with the dancers strumming chords while moving about the stage as if they were chords themselves — meditative, composed and surprisingly transfixing. Matthew Barney's closing 75-minute film, *Union of the North*, references many motifs of the opening *Shrine*. In a vast, sterile shopping mall, the Dunkin' Donuts server becomes a shaman for a wedding rite. Women are daubed with blood and mud, footballs eviscerated, bodies shaved and soaped, trolleys ridden. There is much primal screaming. It's a total mind-scramble. The only way I could process the experience was to think of Iceland itself: volcanic rock and boiling geysers beneath the veneer of civilization. *Sacrifice* taps that sense of the absurdity of our existence, our subjection to primal forces more powerful than we can imagine. *DI*



Why sidelong? Because Harrell's history is mashup, not replay. In one solo, he embodies the impossible intersection between flamenco and Japanese butoh, part existential ritual, part skirt-swishing erotics. Elsewhere, he imagines an encounter between the uptown avant-gardists of New York's Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s with the downtown voguing queens of 1980s Harlem. Harrell also clearly loves dance history that is already reimagined, or indeed fully fantasized: slink-hipped 19th-century orientalism, Isadora Duncan's gauzy Greekness. Harrell is also interested in the commercial or popular forms that are sidelined from the canon of dance history. A sideshow novelty act teases with blatant conceal/reveals of flesh and costume. Periodically, a catwalk parade flounces by, the dancers finessing the sway and jut of the fashion show into phrases at once flamboyant and precise.

a venue usually used for music gigs. It has much to admire in theory; in practice, little to love. The installation, by interdisciplinary creative studio Random International, is an agglomeration of drones in the shape of white orbs, drifting above the dance floor like inscrutable alien observers. They are a vague if striking presence, but hardly addressed by the choreography: the dancers merely look up at them a few times.

The dancing is impressive, showcasing McGregor's trademark style of splayed limbs and fiendishly detailed partner work. McGregor's trademark skimpy underwear is here, too. The dancers are daubed with either a + or a - sign, a symbolic polarity that may perhaps have been used to generate choreographic material, but which carries no communicative charge. The best moments are when McGregor slows the verbose dancing down to focus on duets and

Artists of Iceland Dance Company in Ragnar Kjartansson, Margrét Bjarnadóttir and Bryce Dessner's *No Tomorrow*
Photo: Jónatan Grétarsson



Paris

by François Fargue

For the first time in 10 years, the National Ballet of Cuba was back in Paris, under the auspices of Les Étés de la Danse. Founded by Alicia Alonso and her husband Fernando, National Ballet of Cuba is still spearheaded by the diva adulated as an indestructible dance legend who refused to let the partial blindness that struck at age 21 get in the way of her extraordinary career. Now 97 and totally blind, she still officially runs the company, attends most shows and argues she can actually *hear* greatness onstage. Which is somehow understandable when you consider the purely feline quality of the Cuban dancers and the fiery velocity of the women in particular, not to mention the sonorous response they never fail to elicit from audiences. The pleasure of seeing them in Paris was, however, marred by the venue itself. Salle Pleyel, a legendary music concert hall in the city, was recently renovated with style but poor viewing comfort, especially for people sitting in the stalls. Heads easily get in the way and something about the stage keeps you from seeing the dancers' feet.

On offer were *Giselle*, *Don Quixote* and a gala conceived as a tribute to Alonso's major classical roles. Typically, the company's productions of the classics look, by wealthier Western standards, cheap, gaudy and antiquated. Also, unlike the Paris Opera Ballet, which remains a stickler for a certain sense of style and modesty, the Cubans think nothing of in-your-face virtuosity, gargantuan jumps, leg extensions and phenomenal fouettés. Cuban dancers have long been ravenous creatures who see dance as a way out of their Castro-run country; there is a long list of defectors who have enchanted the world's stages. In Paris, Alonso added three exiled compatriots as guests: Joel Carreno and

Yolanda Correa, both with the National Ballet of Norway, as well as Osiel Gouneo, now with Munich Ballet.

Of the three programs, I caught only *Don Quixote* in what was an unglamorous production, but then who cares about the sets when you can marvel at such prodigious dancers as Viengsay Valdés and Gouneo, not to mention generally super-vibrant soloists and corps dancers.

Valdés is the international dance star who actually chose to stay in the Cuban company. She may now have lost some of the drive required for the role of Kitri, but she definitely makes up for it with a brightly youthful attitude and her legendary, still intact balances. Gouneo's stupendous build makes him a kind of Greek god with an exhilarating sense of rhythm and humour. Besides, he has by now honed his no less stupendous technique into something spectacularly beautiful. A role model, surely, for 21st-century dancers.

On offer over the summer at the Paris Opera was Pierre Lacotte's production of *La Sylphide*. Created in 1832 by Filippo Tagliioni as a showcase for his daughter Marie, it is considered the first Romantic ballet, informed by the spirit and sprites of northern folklore rather than Greek mythology, and exalting the soul as a reaction to the dehumanizing effects of growing industrialization at the beginning of the 19th century.

Set in Scotland, the ballet's tragic hero, James, loses everything, first his earthly fiancée whom he rejects in favour of what he romantically views as a higher, more spiritual type that comes to him in the shape of the gossamer Sylphide. Whether she is only a figment of his imagination or a "real" forest spirit, *La Sylphide* symbolizes the quest for the unattainable to the detriment of what is already there.

Though a phenomenal success at its premiere, *La Sylphide*, unlike its successor *Giselle*, grew out of fashion and was lost until, at the beginning of the 1970s, Lacotte, a premier danseur at the Paris Opera, was injured and set his mind to resuscitate the ballet in order to while away the time. Working on scant archives, his project materialized first in the form of a film that aired on French television in 1971, before the ballet was added to the Paris Opera repertoire.

Whether *La Sylphide* as we know it at the Paris Opera is more Lacotte's vision than a genuine reconstruction matters little. It is a gem, and a technical rite of passage for aspiring étoiles; one that Hugo Marchand passed with flying colours during a Paris Opera Ballet tour in Japan last March. His performance of the role at the Garnier more than confirmed director Aurélie Dupont's decision to make him one of the happy few at the top of the company's hierarchy. Only 23, tall and handsome, he has all the trappings of the danseur noble and showed stupendous technique, agile footwork and easy high jumps. He may only lack dramatic expression, but that can be developed and matured with more roles.

Opposite him, étoile Amandine Albisson showed the full extent of her brilliant and effortless technique, exalting in the Sylphide's ethereal quality, the swift entrechats and slow, decelerating tours en attitude. The role is dramatically complex: is the Sylphide a vision, a true temptress or just a girl in love? Albisson seems to have opted for the latter option almost to a fault at times, radiating too much human joy. But then, both she and Marchand worked it all up to a poignant dénouement.

The role of Effie was sensitively performed by Australian Hannah O'Neill, one of the rare non-French company recruits. Emmanuel Thibault, once the darling of ballet audiences who somehow never made it to étoile, was performing for the last time before his retirement in the peasants' pas de deux.

One cannot help but think of today's darling of the audience, young François Alu who shines with vigorous, exhilarating technique and captivating dramatic talent and yet was rarely seen this season and is still inexplicably not an official étoile within the company. ❖

Paris Opera Ballet's Hugo Marchand and Amandine Albisson in Pierre Lacotte's *La Sylphide*
Photo: Svetlana Loboff

People working in theatres have, like the rest of us, the right to a vacation. In Norway, this generally means that theatres close their doors in mid-June and reopen them only at the end of August, meaning there are few opportunities to see a ballet or a play in the main cities.

If tourists want to experience Norway's performing artists over the summer, however, they still can, often in outdoor settings, despite the fact that Norway is quite far north and seldom experiences high temperatures. For example, people flocked to the annual presentation of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* at Gålå in Gudbrandsdalen (the place that inspired *Peer Gynt*), this time with a revamped production after five years of the same show.

For dance lovers willing to embrace nature, one of the main soloists from Norwegian National Ballet, Eugenie Skilnand, performed outside the usual theatre setting at the Midtåsen Sculpture Park in Sandefjord, 120 kilometres south of Oslo. Together with young harpist Uno Vesje, she put together a program in which she improvises to his harp music.

The Midtåsen gallery, at the same time, featured a show of sculptures by Knut Steen, who is famous for his beautiful works done in the white Italian marble that the city of Carrara is famous for. He has the ability to shape the marble so one just can see the structures of a body, and yet the work is still abstract.

The gallery is built with glass walls in a natural forest setting that has a fantastic view over the fjord leading into the city of Sandefjord. Skilnand performed inside among the sculptures, and audience members could choose to watch from outside or inside.

Though Skilnand is a classically trained dancer, she showed here that she is very capable of doing modern movement with a lot of floor work. The cooperation between her and the harpist, who played some of his own compositions, was excellent. Vesje followed her every move with hawk eyes and she responded to his music with great softness.

Another special occasion — this time indoors — came from the Norwegian National Ballet, who invited Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman to

mastermind an evening titled *Rooms*. Ekman, who has worked with the company on several occasions, had 11 days with the dancers — nearly the whole company was involved — to pull this large project together.

The audience loves to get up onstage, to see the backbone of a theatre, and that was what Ekman gave them with *Rooms*. The big stage of the Oslo Opera House, where it took place, is enormous, about 2,000 square metres, not including the side and backstage areas. When the audience was led through the main hall onto the stage, accompanied by a string quartet, they were not able to see all 40 rooms that had been built on the stage, since many of them were on the side stages. These rooms were on

Mikael Karlsson composed the melodic music, played lived onstage on five grand pianos; both have worked with Ekman before.

With such a short time to get the piece ready, Ekman chose to work with broad strokes, giving every dancer instructions from which they improvised their various scenarios. At one point, the dancers left the rooms and moved among us on the floor, before returning to their homes in the scaffolding. Slowly, the 40 towers were moved to the sides, opening up the revolving part of the stage.

The dancers took off their costumes, leaving their characters behind, and entered the turntable as one great homogeneous group, with the audience



scaffolding, taking them about two-and-a-half metres above floor level.

Each room was inhabited by different characters, such as: George, the murdering butcher; Roberto, the tourist; Bruce and Sandy, the weightlifter couple; Frederic, a man preparing for suicide; Gertrude, the angry old lady; and the Smiths, the perfect family having dinner.

Since there was no seating, except on the floor, audience members could mill around at their own pace, spending as much time as they wanted where they wanted. This, of course, meant that everyone had a different experience of the performance.

Well-known Danish designer Henrik Vibskov created the costumes, and

standing around them in a big circle. There they made different sculptural formations and engaged in some individual dancing.

Focused on this, it took some time before I realized that the orchestra pit had been raised up, with one woman dancing back and forth there with an animal softness in her movement. The pit was like a wall hiding the auditorium, and, when it was lowered again, the dancers were revealed sitting there, reversing the roles of the audience and performers. Slowly the "audience" stood up and left, waving goodbye to the actual audience members onstage. The only description I have for such an evening must be to say that it was just one great big happening. ⁰¹

COPENHAGEN & SMÅLAND

by Anne-Marie Elmby



Tivoli Gardens put itself on the map with several fine dance events over the summer season. At the Pantomime Theatre, Paul James Rooney brought his *Butterfly Lovers*, set to *The Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* by Chinese composers He Zhanhao and Chen Gang. Embedded in the score from 1959 is an ancient tale about a girl who unconventionally is allowed to go to school, where she meets a boy. Later, when she is forced to marry someone else, the boy dies of a broken heart and she perishes at his grave. Both are revived and united as beautiful butterflies.

Rooney's gem of a ballet perfectly suited the theatre with its peacock front curtain that opens like a fan onto a raked stage with trapdoors and original, hand-worked machinery. As a longtime dancer at the theatre, and having previously made several works for Tivoli Ballet Theatre, Rooney knows his colleagues and their acting skills and incorporated both humour and beauty into his choreography. Charlotte Østergaard's costumes were pure delight with colourful kimonos and butterfly wings of the softest, transparent material.

On another night, his *Ocean Movements* had four female and two male dancers use their long blue skirts in countless circling ways — often in a fugue — that imitated both calm and stormy waves being swept across the stage by Philip Glass' incessant stream of sound. Rooney's fine musicality prevailed in an angular and lively *Partita*

for Kathleen Videira to two movements of J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, before Tim Rushton's *Nomad* resumed the musically minimalist topic with continuous rocking pelvises to Arvo Pärt's steady camel pace pulse.

In September, for the 16th time, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater proved that the company can still bring the Tivoli auditorium to a boiling point in two mixed bills that conveyed the joy of movement. Billy Wilson's jazzy and colourful *The Winter in Lisbon* featured sensual, undulating hips, and Ronald K. Brown's *Four Corners* paid tribute to Afro-American roots, while Hope Boykin's *r-Evolution, Dream* delighted with emotional encounters. Akua Noni Parker and Jamar Roberts excelled in neoclassical beauty in Christopher Wheeldon's *After the Rain*, and Megan Jakel and Jacquelin Harris in Robert Battle's showstopper *Ella* brought the house down.

Battle's *No Longer Silent* to Erwin Schulhoff's powerful score *Ogelala* from the 1920s disclosed a new thought-provoking side of the company to the Danish audience. With its uniformly dressed and moving groups, where single dancers would deviate to *Sacre du Printemps*-like rhythms, the work seemed to address present-day world politics. Both programs closed with Ailey's iconic *Revelations*, which had the audience clapping along.

In 2008, Danish flower artist Tage Andersen acquired a manor called Gunillaberg in the Swedish county of Småland,

which is halfway between Stockholm and Copenhagen. Throughout the summer in the beautiful surrounding park, he presents art exhibitions, concerts and in July a weekend of dance performances.

Saturday had an exceptional Danish cast in Flemming Flindt's *The Lesson*, after Eugène Ionesco's play, featuring Johan Kobborg, Ida Praetorius and Vivi Flindt. It has been a long time since I saw Kobborg dance, his career for years having taken international flight. At 45, he is still technically outstanding as the wild-eyed, psychotic ballet master, with his multiple turns and fuming jumps as he chased his pupil around the stage before strangling her. Initially, Praetorius was a lively, self-confident pupil, flirting with naïve sweetness, until the turning point, when she became the epitome of panic-stricken fright.

In the role of the pianist, Flindt's strict correctness turned to rage when she was banished from the studio, and then turned to indulgence toward the cringing ballet master who wakes up from his sinister deed, and together they march the corpse out, before the next pupil rings the doorbell.

Sunday's surprise afternoon revealed the appearance of Royal Danish Ballet dancers, and Marina Sanchez Garrigós and Max Zachrisson from the Basel Opera Ballet, complemented by two opera singers.

There was also a rare visit by Alban Lendorf, who is now a principal with American Ballet Theatre. Still, he has not forgotten his Bournonville, as was evident in the

pas de deux with Praetorius from *Kermesse in Bruges*. Susanne Grinder demonstrated her versatility in the iconic *Dying Swan* solo and in Louise Midjord's *The Egg*, another solo, created around the leather chair of the same name by Danish architect Arne Jacobsen.

Sebastian Kloborg, who is now pursuing a worldwide career as a choreographer, clearly enjoyed performing again in Midjord's *When Without* and in his own hilarious *Flight Mode*, danced to a recording of a flight safety demonstration.

Character dancer Morten Eggert gave two soulful improvisations with his Argentinean tango partner Jessica Naeser. The Basel duo offered two exciting modern works with close encounters in Jorge García Pérez's *Distorted Seasons* and Johan Inger's *Rain Dogs*.

Both performances took place in the manor's Orangerie surrounded by Andersen's extraordinary collection of camellias, so it was apt that Sunday's final piece was the white pas de deux from Neumeier's *Lady of the Camellias*. Grinder and Lendorf's interpretation of Marguerite Gautier and her young lover, Armand, before their love is crushed, made one forget time and place.

The weather favoured the 10-year anniversary of Verdensballetten's (World Ballet) open-air tour around Denmark and North Germany. The group forms every summer mainly with dancers from London's Royal Ballet. At a performance in a park just north of Copenhagen, Marcelino Sambé confirmed his recent promotion to first soloist of London's Royal Ballet in the solo *Catch me if you can*, created for him by Kristen McNally, who joined him in her own duet *Côte à côte* to a blend of Fauré and a poem by Denmark's Prince Consort Henrik.

Lauren Cuthbertson and Federico Bonelli gave the bedroom scene from Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* a true ambience of candid love. Iana Salenko, a frequent guest dancer in London, and her husband Marian Walter from Berlin State Ballet provided a lyrical touch with *Thaïs* from Roland Petit's *Ma Pavlova*, and Salenko followed up with a mournful *Dying Swan*.

Artistic director Steven McRae competed in virtuosity and speed in a fun tap solo *Czárdás* with Niklas Walentin (violin) and Alexander McKenzie (piano), who accompanied several of the pieces. McRae's fiery *Don Quixote* pas de deux with Salenko rounded off a splendid evening. ⁰¹



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Left: Olivier Dubois' *7PourRien*
Photo: F. Iovino

Below: Marina Mascarell's *Three Times Rebel*
Photo: Andrea Macchia



ITALY

by Silvia Poletti

The formula “... and Friends” for ballet stars producing their own mixed bills, which was started in the 1970s by Rudolf Nureyev, has now become a strong strategy for those dancers whose popularity rivals that of pop stars.

Every summer, Roberto Bolle and Friends tours in arenas and open-air venues, drawing an incredible number of spectators — at the Verona Arena, he was able to achieve two sold-out shows with more than 12,000 people at each one. Because of this success, renowned festivals have invited him to present his show, getting great results at the box office without the effort of mounting a full-length production or of presenting a big company. Spoleto Two World Festival (once celebrated for its dance program, but now without direction or focus) presented Roberto Bolle and

Friends to great success in July 2017.

Another ballet star popular in Italy is Svetlana Zakharova, whose Zakharova and Friends gala revitalized the Ravenna Festival dance section, also in July 2017, with a performance that attracted more than 2,000 audience members at the De André Arena.

Not every popular ballet dancer gets the same result, as was the case for Eleonora Abbagnato, current Paris Opera étoile and director of Rome Opera Ballet. Abbagnato's popularity has been growing for years thanks to her presence as a judge in reality television talent shows and her red carpet glamour (she models in advertisements for the Dolce and Gabbana fashion house), yet her own gala did not gather nearly as many people and the choreographic program dissatisfied the audiences of Spoleto and Civitanova Danza festivals.

Apart from two pieces by Angelin

Preljocaj — the strong mystic duet *Annonciation* and the kiss duet from *Le Parc* — the weak first part of her show was based upon *Stabat Mater* by her former Paris Opera colleague Benjamin Pech, a bizarre Tosca by Julien Lestel, an emerging name from France, and her own first attempt at choreography, a neoclassical duet with expressive touch based upon Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* aria, *Un bel dì vedremo*.

This pop star phenomenon mastered by Bolle risks making ballet into something that is widely considered as entertainment rather than art, shaped on acrobatic tricks and athletic bravura. On the other hand, many contemporary dance shows seem more and more conceptual and out of touch with general audiences, as they are too often based upon scientific postulates and intellectual references that often lose their way in the choreography.

In July in Bolzano, at the foot of the wonderful Dolomite Mountains, the lively Bolzano Danza festival confirmed once again the dangers of this latter trend. If an artist does choose to take a position on social, ethical or political themes, it is absolutely necessary they master perfectly both the medium (i.e., the dance) and the subject. If they do so, whatever ideas the artist can sustain within the theatrical experience will be appreciated as fruit of a coherent inner analysis. Otherwise, the work can seem superficial.

This was the case with the recent show by Marina Mascarell, a young Spanish dancemaker who is currently on the rise thanks in part to the endorsement of her mentor Jirí Kylián. Central to her work is the development of social or anthropological themes. In *Three Times Rebel*, the theme is the female condition and the pornographic exploitation of body and gender. Mascarell has studied the literature and analyzed theories, but, in her stage work, she only occasionally manages to get academic concepts to flow together with the choreographic material.

The idea of forcing the five dancers (four women and one man) into a semi-mobile changing structure that paralyzes them and forces them to claustrophobically find their own space is a good one. Also interesting is the way she shapes the anxious bodies by taking apart their oppressed movements, manipulated by each other. However, the juxtaposition of quotes from Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath that the dancers recite while standing still in front of the audience, stopping the flow of movement, appeared didactic, an effect worsened by the trivial allusion to some of American President Trump's sexist comments. The dull contrast between physically hard dance and less dynamic speech made the show flat and predictable.

The same happens, in a similar way, in the latest piece by Olivier Dubois, *7PourRien* (*7forNothing*), which seemed just sketched in though it was apparently a premiere. The French choreographer focuses on the theme of the seven deadly sins (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride) in a show for young audiences conceived to teach

the concept of free will. A very challenging task, but not too surprising considering Dubois' reputation as the latest bad boy of the French conceptual new wave of dance: he is accustomed to risk-taking.

Unfortunately, *7PourRien* was an assembly of technical wrinkles, theatrical winks and very poor dance. Dressed and surrounded by metres of tin foil shaped into strange giant creatures and hanging all around the stage, three performers — two women and a man — portray in a very cryptic way the deadly sins. Slow, never-ending twirls recall sloth; a woman in high heels and a sparkling sheath dress who winks and sways her hips is obviously intended to represent lust. To evoke gluttony, two dancers eat pink cotton candy and suck their fingers, the sounds amplified

through speakers; the sequence seems a banal reference to Pina Bausch, who would have performers repeat ordinary gestures while sending ironic glances to the audience.

The deeper meaning of Dubois' overt symbolism is hard to read, no doubt also for the young people for whom the work is intended; the allusions are lost in the patchwork of pantomime, a little dance and poems declaimed in a chaotic mix of languages (English, Italian, German, French). Hard rock music (a mix including Billy Idol) pounds as the three dancers run up and down the stage, while the tin foil flies flashing all around. Where is the focus of *7PourRien*? What does Dubois really have to say? In this inconclusive piece, there is no deeper meaning beyond the obvious. ▯

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Photo: RACHID OURAMDANE, PATRICK HARRETT

As an independent dance artist in Singapore, Eng Kai Er found that ambiguous intentions and unstated assumptions often hampered the experience of collaborating with other dancer-choreographers. To cope with these obstacles and rein in her own nature to be bossy, Eng says, she came up with a framework for the creative process in which each collaborator takes turns leading rehearsals and developing material, with no single person controlling the proceedings or making decisions on the final product. This egalitarian approach resulted in the birth of *The Roundest Circle*, which Eng devised and performed with Faye Lim and Felicia Lim (who are not related). It was recently presented by local arts group TheatreWorks, where Eng has been an associate artist, at the revamped rice warehouse called 72-13.

As viewers took their seats on three sides of the white-walled performance space, the trio could be seen warming up in matching grey sweat suits. The uniform costuming was the only sedate part of the hour-long show, whose eclectic format reflected the diverse personalities and interests of its creators. After a jointly recited prologue about three witches who try to lure an evil king into a pit of three-headed snakes to avenge their sister's death, the women made separate forays across the bare stage before they fell into a heap. Then, long hair curtaining their faces, they transformed into a shaggy, three-headed monster that lumbered around waving a comb and swaying to Ella Fitzgerald.

Were they playing the witches as conjoined triplets? This image was soon dismantled as the performers huffed and strained to pile themselves into a series of human pyramids and increasingly complex lifts, their bodies cantilevering at precarious angles. Such sweaty effort was also evident in the four-round wrestling match later in the show, where they kicked and jostled to be the last one standing within a rectangle projected on the floor. These scenes bookended a conversation in which the

dancers meandered from the topic of Faye Lim raising her toddler to discussing child abuse. What could all this mean? Perhaps *The Roundest Circle* was the trio's way of expressing life as a constant tussle for balance and purpose, regardless of having kids.

Weird creatures also appeared in *Le Syndrome Ian*, which had its Asia-Pacific premiere in August at the Singapore International Festival of Arts. In this 2016 production — the closing chapter of French choreographer Christian Rizzo's trilogy based on anonymous dances — nightclub dancing was uprooted to the stage and rejigged for a cast of nine in short-sleeved white tops and navy pants.

Clustering upstage at the start, the dancers broke away to slowly gather in twos and threes, trading partners with offhand intimacy. When the music by Pénélope Michel and Nicolas Devos hit its groove, they loosened up and burst into a disco-styled step-touch, gradually adding jumps, turns and other details. At several points, a shadowy figure emerged to watch the performers from afar. Seven such creatures eventually

Singapore

by Malcolm Tay



took over the School of the Arts Drama Theatre stage, like a silent threat that had been allowed to grow until it became unstoppable. By the end just one remained, peeling off its fuzzy suit to reveal a woman: her tense, quivering solo felt like a defiance against the odds.

Edwaard Liang's newest commission for Singapore Dance Theatre finished, too, with the spotlight on a lone dancer, but in this case it was for a more disquieting effect. *13th Heaven*, the Taiwanese-American choreographer's fifth work for the troupe, premiered at the Esplanade Theatre in July on a triple bill that also featured the company premiere of *The Four Temperaments*. The dancers gave a modest account of Balanchine's spiky inversions of classical technique, but looked more confident tackling Liang's liquid shapes and intricate duets. Set to a mix of string pieces by English composer Oliver Davis, *13th Heaven*

depicted a community in flux against a large amber moon, with principal artist Chihiro Uchida first to venture away from the ensemble of 16. Was this why she was expelled from the group and left sprawling on the ground as the piece concluded?

Meanwhile, Frontier Danceland shook up its programming by staging a performance in a non-theatre venue. In *Improv-tu*, company member Joy Wang led six other dancers in improvising individual and collective journeys through the showroom of Swedish furniture brand Möbler. The space itself was interesting, with vintage chairs, dressers and homeware stacked around a main pillar; table and floor lamps cosily enhanced the afternoon light from high grilled windows.

To a live soundscape by a local musician named sullen, the performers explored and navigated this craggy terrain of old furniture that suggested the emotional clutter of nostalgia. Ultimately, they arranged a pathway of chairs, stepping over and through it until they reached the exit. *DI*

Singapore Dance Theatre's Chihiro Uchida and Kenya Nakamura in Edwaard Liang's *13th Heaven*
Photo: Bernie Ng

There is a kind of cycle through which emerging Australian choreographers move to establish their careers. Programs and festivals, including Next Wave and Dance Massive, and company initiatives, including Next Move (at Chunky Move) and New Breed (at Sydney Dance Company), offer opportunities to create full-length works. But with only a handful of these opportunities and a tightening funding environment for the performing arts, carving out a choreographic career in Australia's contemporary dance scene demands tenacity. Significant movement across companies from artists in search of opportunities is common, and watching individuals rise to prominence through this unofficial system is interesting and further complicated by the tendency of many to moonlight as performers.

Kyle Page is one such artist, having stepped from being a dancer with Adelaide's Australian Dance Theatre into a role as artistic director with Townsville's Dancenorth. Besides creating new works for Dancenorth, he performs for the company, most recently in Melbourne in a work by Lucy Guerin and Gideon Obarzanek.

Stephanie Lake is another example, moving over the years through performing with Balletlab, Chunky Move and Lucy Guerin Inc., to directing her own Stephanie Lake Company. Recently, she danced in Lucy Guerin Inc.'s *The Dark Chorus*, and is now working on choreography for

an opera. In her latest premiere, *Pile of Bones*, Lake looks at the complexity of relationships. This is not a narrative work, but rather tells a story of human interaction by disrupting the flow of movement dialogues between people. This abstract interpretation of the human condition takes the four performers from stillness, in intricate gestural patterns, all the way to an outrageous dance party. Despite the nod to physical theatre, Lake never ventures too far from dance. Her movements are challenging and dynamic, prizing movement control and virtuosic skill even amidst the chaos.

Daniel Riley seems to be moving through a similar career trajectory, balancing choreographic exploration with a busy performing schedule. Riley has previously created work for New Breed and for Bangarra Dance Theatre, where he is still a company member. In Bangarra's most recent, historically based and culturally responsive work, *Bennelong*, Riley takes on the role of Governor Arthur Phillip, the first governor of New South Wales.

In this piece, Riley, a tall and lean dancer, struts across the stage in a colonial waistcoat. His character is pitted against Woollawarre Bennelong (Beau Dean Riley Smith), an Eora man who was captured and later befriended by Phillip in the 18th century. (Riley and Riley Smith are real-life cousins, as well as creative collaborators, who previously co-choreographed *Miyagan*, a 2016 work that explored their shared Wiradjuri heritage.)

Established choreographer and Bangarra artistic director Stephen Page frames the story of Bennelong's life around interactions with Phillip, depicting moments of meeting and interchange. The tragedy of Bennelong's life, as captured here, is that he was eventually unable to find a place with either the colonists or his own people. The work ends with Bennelong hemmed in as a structure is built up around him, yelling at his own reflection amid the rising walls, drunk and increasingly incoherent in his yelling and movements, rejected by his community.

This is not the first time Page has taken on an historical theme. In *Patyegarang* and *Mathinna*, he explored individual Aboriginals whose lives were utterly changed by their relationship with English colonists. In these three works, Page explores the problems that the introduction of alcohol, disease and suppressive and racist colonial structures created for Aboriginal people. For instance, in *Bennelong*, we see the Eora people struck down with smallpox. This section is particularly difficult to watch, as the dancers writhe and twist, pulling at the overcoats that obscure bare skin. The overcoats represent the meeting of communities, as well as the illnesses that were shared through fabric. Costume is used as a significant tool, with colonial jackets and deconstructed ball gowns bringing to life the era's British and Australian high society.

Mid-way through, the work shifts, in part through Jennifer Irwin's costumes, into a contemporary landscape as formal 18th century dress gives way to blue jeans. Page is reminding us that the impact of Phillip and his comrades has not been resolved, and the challenges that Bennelong himself faced trying to fit into two worlds is still a challenge for young Aboriginal men and women today. Here, Steve Francis' sound score even features chanting voices: "I am Bennelong."

Bennelong features the elegant stage designs of longtime Bangarra collaborator Jacob Nash. His designs skate between organic and industrial, depicting large geometric shapes that breathe smoke, and create doorways and pathways for the dancers onstage.

Bennelong is a beautiful, difficult work, one Page waited years before developing. It will be interesting to see the impact strong social statements like this will have on emerging choreographers such as Riley. ▀

Melbourne



by Jordan Beth Vincent

Bangarra Dance Theatre's Tara Robertson, Kaine Sultan-Babij and Beau Dean Riley Smith in Stephen Page's *Bennelong*
Photo: Daniel Boud

Teatro dell'Opera
di Roma

Roland Petit / Triple Bill

French choreographer Roland Petit (1924-2011) is famed for changing the face of ballet. He turned the ethereal sylphs and willies of the classical tradition into flesh-and-blood femmes fatales, told strong stories in realistic settings, and fused ballet with dance elements from musicals and revues. Besides creating ballets, in the 1950s Petit choreographed for Hollywood musicals, and when he owned and operated the Casino de Paris in the 1970s, he renewed the revue stage with his wife and lifelong partner, Zizi Jeanmaire, as star.

In September, the ballet company at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome dedicated an evening, *Soirée Roland Petit*, to three of his ballets, *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* (1946), *Carmen* (1949) and *L'Arlésienne* (1974), which together demonstrated the wide spectrum of his style.

Le Jeune Homme et la Mort was Petit's first international hit, set to Bach's *Pasacaglia and Fugue in C Minor*, with costumes by avant-garde French artists Jean Cocteau and Christian Bérard. It begins with a young man in a garret, who impatiently smokes a cigarette, looks at his wristwatch, and dances on the floor, a chair and a table. A woman arrives and they engage in a sexually loaded duet, where she, in the dominant role, draws him close for a kiss or a caress, only to push him to the floor or kick him with her pointe shoe. He follows her every whim. Before leaving, she points to a rope in the rafters and, still following

her commands, he hangs himself. The woman returns, revealed as Death.

Eleonora Abbagnato, director of the Rome company and étoile at Paris Opera Ballet, was irresistible as Death, her movements soft and seductive, or sharp and hard as a razor's edge. Stéphane Bullion as the young man strongly portrayed the character's physical and mental disintegration.

The story behind *Carmen* goes that Jeanmaire was upset about Petit's love affair with British ballerina Margot Fonteyn, who had briefly danced in his company, Les Ballets de Paris. Jeanmaire demanded he create a big role for her, threatening that otherwise she would leave him and the company. He gave her *Carmen* to Bizet's music of the same name, the ballet that made him famous around the world.

Petit's *Carmen* is still a firework of colour — costumes and sets are by Spanish artist Antoni Clavé — and movement. The corps dancers do ballet steps, but the choreography makes them look as if they are performing in a musical: they throw cigarettes in the air and use chairs as props; they sing and stamp the rhythms of the music on the floor.

Don José (Claudio Cocino) sees the gypsy, Carmen (Rebecca Bianchi), fighting another girl in the street and is instantly attracted to her. Later, in a tavern, she flirts with him and willingly lets herself be carried to her room, where their duet clearly indicates intercourse followed by a post-coital cigarette, the erotic frankness new and provocative in European ballet at the time *Carmen*

premiered. Bianchi was appropriately seductive and wild, while Cocino had a certain physical up-rightness that underlined his character's macho behaviour.

A trio of gypsies (Susanna Salvi, Antonello Mastrangelo and Giovanni Castelli) were exceptional, their vivacity adding excitement to the fast-paced action. High-jumping Mastrangelo played a street urchin full of funny ideas; Salvi, Carmen's counterpart, provocatively caught men's eyes; Castelli was their devoted companion.

Petit created *L'Arlésienne* to Bizet's music of the same name two years after he was appointed director of Ballet National de Marseille, a position he held for 26 years. It's like a contemporary version of Bournonville's *La Sylphide*, but stripped of supernatural elements. The story begins on the day when Frederi is to be wed to Vivette, and finds himself haunted by his longing for the Arlésienne, a woman from Arles whom he once knew. The character never appears onstage, as Petit puts the focus on the tormented feelings of the man, who searches for her among the wedding guests.

This ballet has none of the overt sexuality found in the earlier ones. Society, indicated by lines of women and men never mingling, are costumed (by Christine Laurent) in plain attire, the women wearing big white collars; the men, trousers and white shirts. Vivette (Sara Loro) was frail and innocent, her lightness a contrast to the strong, earthbound Frederi (Alessio Rezza). His outbursts of anguish bordered on insanity as he fled the restraints of his wife-to-be and the wedding guests to finally commit suicide.

Petit is not a genius choreographer, but he is a fabulous storyteller. His roles demand strong characterization, which the company aptly fulfilled. *L'Arlésienne* seemed dated to me, but the two earlier ballets were as fresh as ever. Perhaps it is due to the fact that Petit's themes — love, hatred, jealousy, longing and sex — are easy to identify with because they are part of the human condition.

— JEANNETTE ANDERSEN

Kenneth MacMillan / *Mayerling*

The cemetery at Heiligenkreuz before dawn: this is where Kenneth MacMillan's narrative masterwork, *Mayerling*, begins and ends. A coffin lies upstage, rain pours down, and Bratfisch, a popular entertainer and cab driver for Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria-Hungary, droops in grief. The coffin is for Baroness Mary Vetsera, the young mistress of Rudolf, the caddish anti-hero who shot her and then himself in a double suicide pact at the hunting lodge at Mayerling. Theirs is a sordid but compelling tale, scripted by the late British choreographer in vivid anguished hues. Especially brilliant are a series of pas de deux between Rudolf and the several women in his unhappy life, danced by Houston Ballet with thrilling, often chilling, acrobatic abandon and emotional detail.

Houston Ballet's September performances of *Mayerling*, which London's Royal Ballet premiered in 1978, marks the first time the work has been danced by a North American company. MacMillan's *Gloria* and *Manon* are already in the Houston repertoire; with the addition of *Mayerling*, artistic director Stanton Welch has given the men a meaty leading role to test their technical and interpretive mettle. There are also plenty of rich supporting roles.

The first cast's Connor Walsh, the company's stalwart male principal, etched his portrayal of Rudolf across the three-act evening with deep, incisive and convincing despair, arrogance and, at times, brutality. This Rudolf is drawn to his mother, Empress Elisabeth (Jessica Collado), with disturbing intensity, and is decidedly not interested in his bride, Princess Stephanie (Melody Mennite). The young woman's terror during their wedding night pas de deux — when Rudolf sadistically brandishes the pistol and skull he keeps lying about — carried in every move of Mennite's heartbreaking portrayal, finely tuned throughout every scene she is in. If their bedroom scenario sounds over the top, the ballet's libretto is based on historical research.

Collado was fascinating as Empress Elisabeth. Her warm face drew us into her character, a vibrant mature woman negotiating difficult territory with a weirdly needy adult son. During their act one pas de deux, his ardour and her restraint tell a fascinating story of emotional damage. In the act two duet with her gentle lover (Ian Casady), Collado found the fullness of every musical phrase, as if wanting each romantic moment to last forever. Eerily, Rudolf watched and, at its end, his crabbed and stuttering solo was a disturbing portrayal of a tormented soul in a brave artistic rendering from Walsh.

As Mary Vetsera, Karina Gonzalez was liquid steel in the airborne lifts, and handled Rudolf's pistol as if it were erotic foreplay. In the second cast, Mennite was softer, silkier, fascinated by Rudolf (elegant Charles-Louis Yoshiyama), but needing to find a way to join him in his torment.

A call-out must go to Sara Webb as Rudolf's sophisticated ex-mistress, Marie Larisch, a manipulator finding ways into his life, if not his bed. Another goes to Yuriko Kajiya, as the high-class prostitute Mitzi Caspar. Kajiya's Mitzi was a strong match for the four male soldiers with whom she shares an ensemble dance, as much a player as the played, at times with

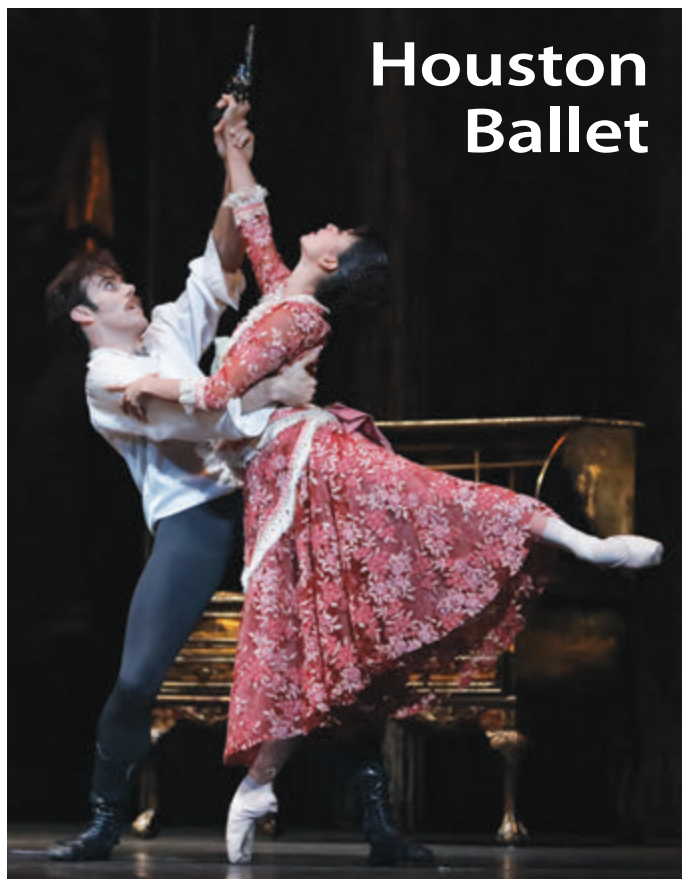
them step by step in refreshingly gender-free choreography, a welcome note of empowerment in this ballet of 19th-century royalty and whores.

John Lanchbery's smooth arrangement of Franz Liszt compositions, played live by Houston Ballet Orchestra, added notes that ranged from sweet to epic. Set and costume design by Pablo Nuñez, created for the 2013 Chilean premiere by Ballet de Santiago, created an intimate sense of period ballrooms, boudoirs, taverns and streets.

Adding to the tension of the Houston premiere was having to move from home base at the Wortham Theater Center, due to damage from flooding during the recent catastrophic Hurricane Harvey that battered the city, to the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, where only two of the planned three casts performed, and in only two performances each. Hopefully, the ballet will have a long life in the company's repertoire. The narrative arc driving not just the whole piece, but also individual dances, demands every move carry a dramatic beat, and teasing out details of character and plot could keep dancers and audience members happy for years. The Hungarian separatist subplot, for instance, is obscure, though visible once you track it.

Finally, let's return to Bratfisch, the sad-shouldered man who begins and ends the ballet, performed in both casts by soloist Christopher Gray. In his act two solo — during a tavern scene shared with a dozen prostitutes wearing garters and torn stockings — Gray is decked out in top hat, vest and burgundy tights, his nimble airborne configurations a delightful interlude from the evening's heavy drama. Later, when Bratfisch brings Mary to Rudolf at Mayerling and trots out the same steps just for them, they have other things on their minds, and his lively dance carries a sycophantic, needy edge. Gray's turn as the entertainer is as complex as every other role in this dark, very adult ballet.

— KAIJA PEPPER



Houston Ballet's Connor Walsh (Rudolf) and Karina Gonzalez (Mary Vetsera) in Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*
Photo: Amitava Sarkar

Breandán de Gallaí / Aon

Breandán de Gallaí's *Aon* premiered in August at the Firkin Crane theatre — a medium-sized venue that presents only dance — in Cork, Ireland. It was performed by de Gallaí's Dublin-based Ériu Dance Company, founded as a vehicle for his choreography in 2010. Since then, the company has premiered three significant works, including *The Rite of Spring* to the well-known Stravinsky score.

De Gallaí is a world champion Irish dancer who made his name in the lead role in the original production of *Riverdance*. He also has a background in ballet, contemporary, jazz and tap. As a choreographer, he aims to create works that connect Irish dance with contemporary dance and themes, as he does in the two-part, 70-minute *Aon*.

Perhaps realizing the shortcomings of the Irish dance tradition in terms of emotional communication in what is an emotionally charged theme, de Gallaí attempts a fusion not just of different styles of dance, but he also uses text to highlight the core of the story, which, in the program notes, he says “is about identifying who we really are — the me that longs to be seen.” Each half of *Aon* — which means alone or one in Irish — had a number of sections under various headings: Love me, please love me;

Remember Me; Breaking Free; Liberation, etc., which served as emotional signposting for the viewer.

The company's 12 dancers, dressed in contemporary street clothes, were strong, committed and highly skilled. They switched from dance sneakers, for the soft shoe choreography, to Irish hard shoes, for batterie and more rhythmic material, changing back and forth, their steps creating a counterpoint with the music.

The movement came from the Irish tradition but with more contemporary inflections, especially with the freedom in the upper body and arms that is reminiscent of Pina Bausch, Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham, and even some circus in the form of tightrope walking. How well these were fused together is up for debate. At times the work looked awkward, with angst-ridden head-in-hand moments, while in other places the wide use of space and sense of fluidity in the upper body and arms created an expressive foil to the more traditionally stoic lower body material.

De Gallaí's use of the ensemble was impressive throughout, with the movement taking the dancers across the stage like groups of geese in flight — organized, powerful and a joy to watch. However, he seemed to turn away from the work's emotional core by indulging

in some incongruous *Riverdance*-esque flanking. The end of the work was baffling, too, for having spent much of his time avoiding hard-hitting emotion, de Gallaí blatantly indulges in an orgy of smiles and lines of beating dancers.

The inventive set, designed by Declan English, begins as a stack of chairs intertwined with cords from which hang autumn leaves. At the beginning, each performer frantically takes and rearranges the leaves while pre-recorded text of their online dating profiles points us toward the idea that this action represents their personal traits being rearranged as they search for love.

Meanwhile, the chairs are taken apart and moved to a line against the back of the stage where they remain. The performers take to a tightrope on the left-hand side, now reciting their dating profiles, only to lose balance and fall off. At one point, a small group of three dancers recited sections of a gritty and emotionally charged poem, *Bluebird*, by maverick American underground writer Charles Bukowski. These sections create an atmosphere that begins to explore the isolation felt while dating in this tech-heavy world.

Toward the end of the first half, the dancing stops, time stands still and we are transported to what feels like the heart of the work. A lone dancer takes the lead and, in the evening's most remarkable moment, Sarah Fennel sang Dido's Lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* in a traditional unaccompanied style of Irish singing called sean-nós, characterized by mellifluous melodic decoration and a certain nasal tone. The rest of the music, a pre-recorded soundtrack, was a mixture of Irish, classical and contemporary beautifully mixed and arranged by Paddy Mulcahy, an Irish composer and musician.

Aon was an audience-pleaser and reportedly received standing ovations at every performance. However, the dramatic potential for a deeper work that really hits home with the isolation and desperation as well as the elation and highs of dating using the new field of apps and websites was left unexplored.

— DAVID WALLACE

Ériu Dance Company



Ériu Dance Company in Breandán de Gallaí's *Aon*
Photo: Declan English

Peck, Graham, Millepied / Mixed Bill

Excitement filled the big tent at the Festival des arts de Saint-Sauveur for the Quebec premiere of L.A. Dance Project on August 2. As the festival's executive director Étienne Lavigne told the crowd in his opening remarks, "This is the 'It' company of the moment."

Founded in 2012, the company has an undeniable "certain something," particularly with charismatic dancer, choreographer and filmmaker Benjamin Millepied at its helm. By all accounts, choreographers, designers, composers and dancers are flocking to the former New York City Ballet principal dancer's well-funded venture in the motion picture capital. Local dance companies haven't flourished in Los Angeles, but, over the last five years, L.A. Dance Project has apparently been drawing a young audience hungry for culture.

The evening opener was *Murder Ballades*, by one of the great new hopes of American dance, Justin Peck, a former NYCB dancing colleague of Millepied's. American composer Bryce Dessner took instrumental murder ballads from the 1930s and 1940s, adapting the distinctive tunes (without the lyrics) for a chamber group called Eighth Blackbird. There's a bright optimistic sound and look to the piece that is very American, in the best sense, in terms of energy and expansive possibility.

The piece, in seven sections, feels adventurous, elaborate in its construction, and Peck knows how to highlight his cast's strengths. Peck works with line, pacing, poetic fluid movement and rounded configurations; while there's lots of fast and frenetic activity, the solid partnering is easy to appreciate. Watching the six dancers, dressed in T-shirts, spandex shorts and sneakers, their alert, playful sensibility gives a real sense of an ensemble. Some darker tones surface in quick sequences involving inert, prone bodies, but where's the crime in the dance? Overall, *Murder Ballades* sustains itself as an energetic, pleasurable program opener, though Peck's reliance on blackouts to move the work forward cuts the cohesion in the piece.

Right afterward, I overheard the fellow

sitting next to me say, "Jerome Robbins is alive and well." That man is on to something. The key in dancing his work was to express joy in being yourself, and many of his works register because of that clarity, but Robbins' dancers also hold back a just a bit and draw audiences in. So do Peck's dancers.

Next was a series of short duets by modern dance giant Martha Graham, followed by two of Millepied's own creations. That range is certainly one way to start conversations about dance.

Graham's dances (without sets), lasting all of eight minutes, anchored the



evening. The first, White Duet, performed by Rachele Rafeiledes and Nathan Makolandra, was inspired by the duet from *Diversion of Angels* (1948), and is a light, lyrical work about maturing young love. The second and third duets, titled Star and Moon (with Stephanie Amurao and Aaron Carr, and Julia Eichten and Robbie Moore, respectively), are from *Canticle for Innocent Comedians* (1952), Graham's ode to the cycle of life and the elements.

In these lesser-known duets, the dancers — in loose black T-shirts for the men, and white loose top and shorts for the women, designed for L.A. Dance Project by company dancer (and former NYCB principal) Janie Taylor — perform with a sense of exaltation in Star and a serene

wonderment in Moon. Removed from their original context, it's difficult to understand Graham's intentions, but there's plenty to imagine. None of the severe, wrenching force or the weighted lunges associated with her archetypal work are on view. Nor do the dancers appear to be steeped in the famous technique, but that's not a slight, per se; there's clarity in their bodies, and it's easy to see how these well-structured pieces, set to arrangements of Cameron McCosh's music, are relevant in the present.

Millepied, a protégé of Robbins, develops group dynamics in his own two works.

In Silence We Speak (2017) was a 15-minute duet performed by Rachele Rafeiledes and Taylor, both with long, blond hair. The piece is quiet and enigmatic, with slow, unfolding movement, and captivating music by David Lang. There are suggestions of intimacy, where one reins in the other, but more often the work is detached, and the suggestion of acceptance at the end unconvincing.

Hearts & Arrows (2014), set to Philip Glass, is the second part of a trilogy, *Gems* (perhaps a nod to NYCB's Balanchine three-act *Jewels*). As a dancer in many Balanchine ballets, Millepied knows something about Mr. B's work, and he's picked up on the master's sophisticated approach to partnering, the attention to lightness of feet, transi-

tions from one foot to the other, the way the woman is held and a delicate off-balance approach.

Hearts & Arrows relies on intricate, interlacing group patterns, and again the dancers (once more in sneakers) move beautifully, but little is memorable in the choreography. It all felt random, and the blackouts don't help. The score's complexity and control, with its emotional richness, is simply not echoed in Millepied's dance.

L.A. Dance Project features 10 superlative dancers, gorgeously trained and solidly rehearsed, with a deep understanding of rhythm, musicality and attack. If only the choreography would deliver.

— PHILIP SZPORER



Franzén and Flomin / *Meeting You* Jessica Nupen / *Romeo and Juliet* / *Rebellion and Johannesburg*

The Kalamata International Dance Festival proved that it has no fear of experimentation with its fine selection of choices. Greek and international artists were invited to participate, and contemporary dancers across a range of styles enriched the event for an audience that grows larger every year.

Performances, workshops and film showings occurred during the 10-day festival and changed the scenery of the city centre of Kalamata, located in the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Taking place in the heart of the summer season, the July 2017 program included Ballet de Lorraine in works by Trisha Brown and Merce Cunningham, and CCN2-Centre chorégraphique national de Grenoble in *Tordre* by Rachid Ouramdane. Greek companies performed the modern dance works of Greek choreographers Antigone Gyra, Iris Karayan, Polina Kremasta and Ioannis Mandafounis.

The two evening performances reviewed here both featured a theme of relationships. First, *Meeting You*, by Sweden's Helena Franzén and New Yorker Ori Flomin, was a collaboration between the two long-time friends, choreographers and teachers. They performed delicately on the stage of Kalamata Municipal Cultural Centre, conveying their theme of friendship and intimacy accompanied by the mysterious siren-like music of Finnish composer Jukka Rintamäki.

The synchronized movement and confident vibration between the artists was obvious as they tried to reach, communicate and even fight each other. If one dancer went down, so did the other. If one trembled, so did the other. Eye contact was almost constant and their facial expressions intense as they tried to find a balance in their relationship, one way or another. At one point, a video projected on the background wall showed them spending time with each other in everyday life, walking and talking. *Meeting You* was vibrantly performed throughout its 50-minute running time, with solid contemporary technique, fluid movement and powerful standing poses.

Later the same evening, Moving into Dance Mophatong presented *Romeo and Juliet/Rebellion and Johannesburg* by Jessica Nupen at the Kalamata Dance Megaron, a spacious modern dance theatre. Choreographer and director Nupen is a South-African born, Germany-based artist trained at the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in London. She has been influenced by memories of Johannesburg's racism and poverty; it's the city she was born and grew up in, and also the home of Moving into Dance Mophatong. As she said during our brief interview, she was attracted to Shakespeare because there is paradox in his characters and complexity in his stories, similar to the Johannesburg she knows.

For *Romeo and Juliet*, a dance-theatre piece that premiered in Germany in 2015, Nupen credits choreographic assistance to Sunnyboy Motau and Oscar Buthelezi from Moving into Dance Mophatong. The

classic story is told with a modern point of view, with Shakespeare's centuries-old romance transferred into the urban street culture of Johannesburg.

The background setting was a projected image of the South African city's skyline, alternating with scenes of daily life. The costumes, designed by Anmari Honiball, are vibrant, colourful street clothes, and the original score of experimental electronic music is by Soweto-born Spook Mathambo.

Throughout, the performers' presence was vivid and powerful in choreography that was a fascinating mixture of contemporary dance, street dance and African traditional dance. They bonded together harmonically as a group, as in the scene when the eight dancers squeezed together on a small table, forming a taxi. The driver began to talk about Romeo, who, he says, came to Joburg with big dreams, but lost them all during his stay. Another character, a larger-than-life sangoma, a traditional South African shaman who replaces Shakespeare's kindly priest, walked offstage to chat among the audience.

Motau as Romeo and Thenjiwe Soxokoshe as Juliet were a dynamic couple. Their magnetism was obvious as Motau held Soxokoshe, lifted her and turned her around, and again held her close, one of the extended lifts between them. The two often kept a small distance from the others, by walking away or else by being very close to each other.

Every scene was executed quickly over the 60-minute show, and the ensemble harmonized and synchronized well with each other, their strong expressive bodies completing exacting acrobatic combinations.

As the evening came to an end, Romeo and Juliet both died, as expected, lying on the ground in a red light that covered part of their bodies and also filled the upstage screen, symbolizing the poison that killed them. In stark contrast to the sorrowful classic ending, the rest of the cast kept dancing. Joburg is a city that never sleep, its inhabitants resilient.

Both Moving into Dance Mophatong and Franzén and Flomin were being presented for the first time in Greece. It was exciting to see work from their different cultures and at the same time to feel so close to the human relationships explored by both.

— ANASTASIA GEORGOULI

John Neumeier / *Anna Karenina*

It is thanks to Svetlana Zakharova that John Neumeier decided to tackle Tolstoy's supreme novel *Anna Karenina*. The Russian star had expressed her desire to dance his 2014 ballet *Tatiana* — inspired by another celebrated Russian novel, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* — but Neumeier thought she would be better as Anna. Hamburg Ballet, which the choreographer heads, premiered his *Anna Karenina* in July, a co-production with the Bolshoi Ballet and the National Ballet of Canada.

For a choreographer, there were a lot of traps in Tolstoy's epic novel with its complicated weaving of emotional connections and its careful descriptions of their psychological effects on the characters — not only the neurotic Anna torn between her affectless husband and the passionate Vronsky, but also the subdued Dolly with her womanizer husband Stiva, and the innocent and spiritual couple Kitty and Levin.

Indeed, at first Neumeier had thought about a two-evening production, which would have been a titanic job. Luckily, he decided instead on a two-act ballet, whose almost three-hour length, with one intermission, allowed for the multi-level storytelling. Above all, it allowed time to go deep into the characters' intimate feelings and outward behaviour. This is what makes Neumeier a master: his skill in taking the spectator inside the character's thoughts, feelings and life. Like Antony Tudor, he can in the same moment give us a perfect idea of the social and private conditions of his creatures and reveal to us their secret thoughts.

He chose to set the story in modern times, and the reference to the political campaign of Karenin and his way of using his family as ideological propaganda recalled recent presidential campaigns in the United States and Europe. A modern setting seems, above all, a way to underline that this story is timeless, as timeless as the emotions.

Thanks to an elegant moving set with panels and videos that capture details of the live performance, Neumeier is able to present a cinematographic view of his choreography, as if he directed the action through wide shots and close-ups, cutting events together so they cross and loom over each other, as in the first meeting of Anna and Vronsky during the party where he is expected to get engaged with Kitty.

The characters come and go onstage through doors quickly opening and closing, exchanging glances and increasingly realizing what is happening: the courting develops not with Kitty, but with Anna, through the seductive way she crosses her legs and his lighting of her cigarettes, their feverish looks and flirting embraces. The scene is perfectly timed, following the beguiling crescendo of Tchaikovsky's *Suite No.1 Intermezzo*, and the love affair develops in front of the powerless Kitty.

Neumeier focuses on the women's different conditions and seems particularly sympathetic toward Dolly and Kitty. The two scenes where he presents their heartache, which gradually opens to new solace and hopes of love for both, are truly moving. Kitty comes out from her collapse thanks to the calm and steadfast Levin, whose embraces cradle her like a father's. The exhausted Dolly, mortified by her husband's betrayals, calms her desperate desire to escape thanks to the innocent presence of her children, who show how much they need their mother by involving her in their games. These two might seem minor scenes, but they are the fulcrum of Neumeier's artistry here, with minimal gestures that reveal the depths of different ways of loving.

Through choreographic detail, Neumeier makes you feel the characters' inner turmoil. The lovers' duet of Anna and Vronsky should tell the fulfillment of their passion, but there is also some

agitation. The long table on which Vronsky skips and whirls to catch Anna's attention shows how far apart the two are in their souls. Though the duet's predominant tone is lyrical and ecstatic, Neumeier suggests their fears and gives a premonition of the unhappy ending of their story with the appearance of a dark figure: the ghost of a man Anna saw dying at the station during her first meeting with Vronsky.

The musical choice of the lyrical and passionate Tchaikovsky and the dark Schnittke was perfect, but the use of British folk singer Cat Stevens' ballads to suggest the bucolic peace of the country where Levin and Kitty will live jarred.

Hamburg Ballet was, as usual, outstanding, and Anna Laudere, as Anna, was feminine and intriguing. She fulfilled the peculiar aloofness of her high society role, ready to explode in passion when Vronsky (bold and handsome Edvin Revazov) enters her life. Also outstanding were Ivan Urban as the cold and authoritarian Karenin, Alexis Martinez as the naive and spontaneous Levin, the tender Emilie Mazon as Kitty and the dramatic Patricia Friza as Dolly.

It will be so interesting to see how Zakharova tackles the role made with her in mind when the Bolshoi dance it in March 2018. The National Ballet of Canada dates are to be announced.

— SILVIA POLETTI



Hamburg Ballet's Ivan Urban and Anna Laudere in John Neumeier's *Anna Karenina*
Photo: Kiran West

Entering the Stage

A bharata natyam tradition



Students of the South Asian dance form bharata natyam are first presented to the public — to their peers, family and friends — through an arangetram, also known as a ranga pravesh, which both mean “entering the stage.” The two-hour solo performance, when the dancer crosses the threshold from student to artist, celebrates the years of dedication of both student and teacher to the art form.

The evening is composed of eight to 10 choreographies based on a repertoire established by the legendary Thanjavur Quartet (four brothers with royal patronage) at the end of the 19th century. It is intended to show off the dancer’s flexibility of limbs, dexterity of hands, knowledge of mythology and music, sense of rhythm, skill in acting, sensitivity to poetry, stamina and spirit of devotion.

The elaborate costumes, jewellery and make-up are all part of beautifying oneself as an offering to the gods, as bharata natyam was originally performed in the temples of India. Bells around the feet accentuate the complex footwork, following the intricate rhythms of Carnatic, or southern Indian, classical music.

— JAI GOVINDA, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
MANDALA ARTS AND CULTURE
www.mandalarts.ca



Grihalakshmi Soundarapandian (top) and Kiruthika Rathanaswami (bottom) are former students of Jai Govinda Dance Academy, with whom they had their arangetrams.

Photos: Ron Sangha

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Feb. 2 - 4

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Feb. 25 - 27

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March 2 - 4

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Elizabeth Beyer, YAGP 2017 Makarova Award recipient. Photo by Hideaki Tanioka