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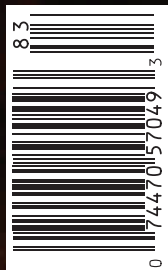
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All of us at *Dance International* love the photographs that illustrate each issue of the magazine. This time, we also showcase a lower tech approach to representing dance, with three pages devoted to the humble medium of ink drawings. We commissioned visual artist Val Nelson to provide a unique lens into Crystal Pite and Jonathon Young's masterwork *Betroffenheit*, which recently was back home in Vancouver prior to concluding the last leg of its worldwide tour. As the results show, Val has a great eye and instinct for movement, and an original way to capture on paper the dizzying moment of dance.

We also bring you another in our popular collections of memories, this time of beloved dance teachers. A variety of contributors remember great and unforgettable teachers — the ones whose presence has stayed with them over a lifetime. I hope their memories evoke wonderful ones of your own experience in the studio taking classes, either as a child or an adult, a professional or a recreational dancer.

The table of contents on the next page highlights the range of offerings inside. These include an introduction to newly promoted Royal Winnipeg Ballet second soloists Saeka Shirai (featured on the cover) and Yue Shi, as well as stories on seasoned artists Tero Saarinen, a Finnish choreographer, and Patricia Barker, an American now heading up the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

Thank you to everyone who has provided stories and images for this Fall issue of *Dance International* — I really love being able to bring your work together here in the space of our made-in-Canada magazine.

KAIJA PEPPER
editor@danceinternational.org

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Photo: Mikki Kunttu

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Saeka Shirai (Lise),
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Photo: Courtesy of
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Tero Saarinen and accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen in Saarinen's *Breath*
Photo: Mikki Kunttu

HELSINKI'S TERO SAARINEN

A choreographer
with curious DNA

Tero Saarinen calls himself a seeker, not a choreographer. "It's how I'm built," the Finnish dance artist says. "My DNA is curious." Guided by an openness to learn and by questions about the world and his place in it, Saarinen searches out his own truths in dance. His quest has led to building an international career as a performer, choreographer, educator and artistic director.

Since founding the Tero Saarinen Company in 1996, Saarinen has created more than 40 works, many for notable groups such as Batsheva Dance Company, Nederlands Dans Theater, Gothenburg Opera, National Dance Company of Korea and, in January, for a collaboration with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

In his company's own repertoire, signature works — including *Westward Ho!* (1996), *HUNT* (2002) and *Borrowed Light* (2004) — have maintained long lives, some touring more than 10 years. While based in Helsinki, Saarinen's company spends most of its time on the road, performing throughout North America, Asia and Europe. Despite Saarinen's 30-plus-year career, the 53-year-old remains eager for discovery. "I feel like I'm always at the beginning," he says.

The actual beginning for Saarinen was sports. Growing up in the small west coast city of Pori, Finland, he engaged in every athletic pursuit from ice hockey and football, to ping pong and skating. "We were sports freaks," Saarinen says of his family. He remembers having an affinity for physical endurance activities, not being afraid of training hard and sweating. It was when he began taking tumbling in gymnastics that Saarinen felt drawn to a new kind of expression. "Something was happening to me: I felt connected to the movements and to the choreographic elements." Once gymnastic club ended, his father encouraged him to try dance.

BY HILARY MAXWELL

Standing by the door of the studio before one of his first classes as a 16-year-old, Saarinen recalls being drawn to the artistry involved and to the collaboration between the movement and the music. Not aware that he could have a profession in dance, he nonetheless followed an inner drive to pursue it. At 18, he was accepted into the Finnish National Opera Ballet school, training with students who were only 12 years old and with more experience than him. "I was a fighter," says Saarinen. He joined the Finnish National Ballet in 1985, where he stayed for six years and became a soloist.

After winning first prize in the contemporary category at the Concours International de Danse in Paris in 1988, dancing a solo by Jorma Uotinen, his career as a soloist took off in Finland and internationally, and he began receiving opportunities beyond the ballet company. His artistic realm opened up as he experienced "other flavours and truths of dance," from the poetic expressions of butoh to avant-garde contemporary dance works. Ultimately, Saarinen left his tenure contract with the Finnish National Ballet to deepen his understanding of dance.

In 1992, he travelled to Nepal to study Nepalese dance, followed by a year in Tokyo, where he trained intensively in traditional kabuki theatre (at the renowned Fujima school) and in butoh, mentored by the eminent artist Kazuo Ohno. Upon his return to Finland, Saarinen worked for several years as a freelance artist, creating and performing, until establishing Company Toothpick, as his own group was initially called.

His first work, *Westward Ho!*, a trio for three men about friendship and betrayal, is considered his breakthrough piece, and set the tone for the visually striking and multilayered environments characteristic of his choreographies.

Often described as total artworks, Saarinen's creations unite strong visuals with powerful sound scores, stylized costumes and highly physical, nuanced movement. An example of this all-encompassing design is found in *Morphed* (2014), set to composer Esa-Pekka Salonen's orchestral music, with lighting by Saarinen's longtime collaborator Mikki Kunttu. Working with seven male dancers from different generations and dance backgrounds, *Morphed* explores the various layers of masculinity.

Framing the stage on three sides is a cage-like set made of numerous thick ropes that hang from the flies. The image suggests a prison barricading the men inside. Slowly, as the piece progresses, the representation shifts. The men, dressed in hooded costumes (by Finnish fashion designer Teemu Muurimäki), transition from robust assertive actions to more individualized, sensual and minimalistic choreography. They start to strip off articles of clothing and interact with the ropes, manipulating their form so the bars bend and sway like wheat in a field. The scene reveals a breaking free from literal and internal confines.

Saarinen's urge to create is sparked by the different facets of humanity. This is demonstrated in *Borrowed Light*, centred around universal themes of community and devotion. Inspired by the culture of 18th- and 19th-century American Shakers, the work brings together a large cast of dancers, both men and women, with the musical ensemble Boston Camerata. The dancers, dressed in long black garments resembling

priests' cassocks and wearing dark boots, pitch and sway, with their limbs sweeping and carving through the space to the ritualistic sounds and chanting of Shaker music.

Typically, Saarinen begins any collaboration by first working alone with a period of questioning around his point of fascination, then goes into the studio and improvises. "I start to collect the dance," he says, making a kind of "alphabetical landscape," which he later shares with the cast and creative team, who each bring their own thoughts and voices to the landscape. "Interaction with other artists is vital and provides new perspectives."

In his process, Saarinen aims to create a secure physical and mental environment, where everyone can "feel safe to take risks and let their intuition talk." Working with this mindset allows for creative flexibility and means that "pre-planned scenes and actions can take their own direction, and then something totally unexpected and exciting can happen."

Saarinen's choreographic voice draws from his experiences in ballet, contemporary and Eastern dance traditions, but is marked with his own eccentric edge. There is a fullness to his vocabulary, with an emphasis on the use of space and weight, and on sending energy out through the body's extremities. You can see a dichotomous play between movements that extend, spin, and spiral up and outwards, and those that root down into the earth, pull and widen along the ground. This negotiation can bring the body into graceful equilibrium and then suddenly throw it off-kilter into a lilted lumber.



Tero Saarinen in Carolyn Carlson's *Man in a Room*
Photo: Laurent Philippe

Layered onto his physical language is an acute presence that resonates from the performers. This quality is distinctly inherent in Saarinen himself, who, whether in the studio or onstage, maintains an unwavering attentiveness to the moment. David Mead in *Ballet-Dance Magazine* (2010) speaks of Saarinen's "magnificent presence" in *Man in a Room*, a solo choreographed by Carolyn Carlson. "His gripping performance took us right into the artist's irrational mind. He was totally haunting and engaging. That he held the attention for nigh on 25 minutes speaks volumes."

The importance of mindfulness and working with the idea of "360 degrees of presence resonating" is central to Saarinen's philosophy in both his practice and teaching. He has been building a training arm of his company to transmit his methodology to other dancers and artists. The company's educational component offers an internship and teaching program, as well as workshops and master classes in the TERO Technique. While still evolving, the technique stems from a system of being "alert and awake to the endless possibilities that lie in one's physical existence," and features a toolbox of metaphors and poetic language that go hand in hand with particular movements and exercises.

To achieve this state of awareness, Saarinen pays attention to the feet, fingers and eyes, and to having what he calls "curious skin." This heightened focus creates an expression in the body and face that can appear hyper-animated. Saarinen believes that when a dancer is conscious of all their nerve endings, they become more authentic, alert and versatile. "All this leads to a dance that is constantly alive and surprising," he says.

Audiences can witness this ever-present dance in *Breath*, Saarinen's duet with Finnish electric accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen, which premiered in March 2018 at Le Grand Théâtre de Québec in Quebec City and continues to tour. The work examines the idea of borderless thinking and themes of solitude, losing contact and the desire for human connection. At its core lies Saarinen's interest in what potential may spring from the collision of one strong voice with another.

Saarinen first collaborated with Pohjonen in an improvisation in Beijing at the Moi Helsinki (Hello Helsinki) outdoor festival in 2016. "We instantly found ourselves on the same wavelength in our onstage dialogue," wrote Saarinen in his choreographer's note for *Breath*.



Saarinen believes that when a dancer is conscious of all their nerve endings, they become more authentic, alert and versatile.

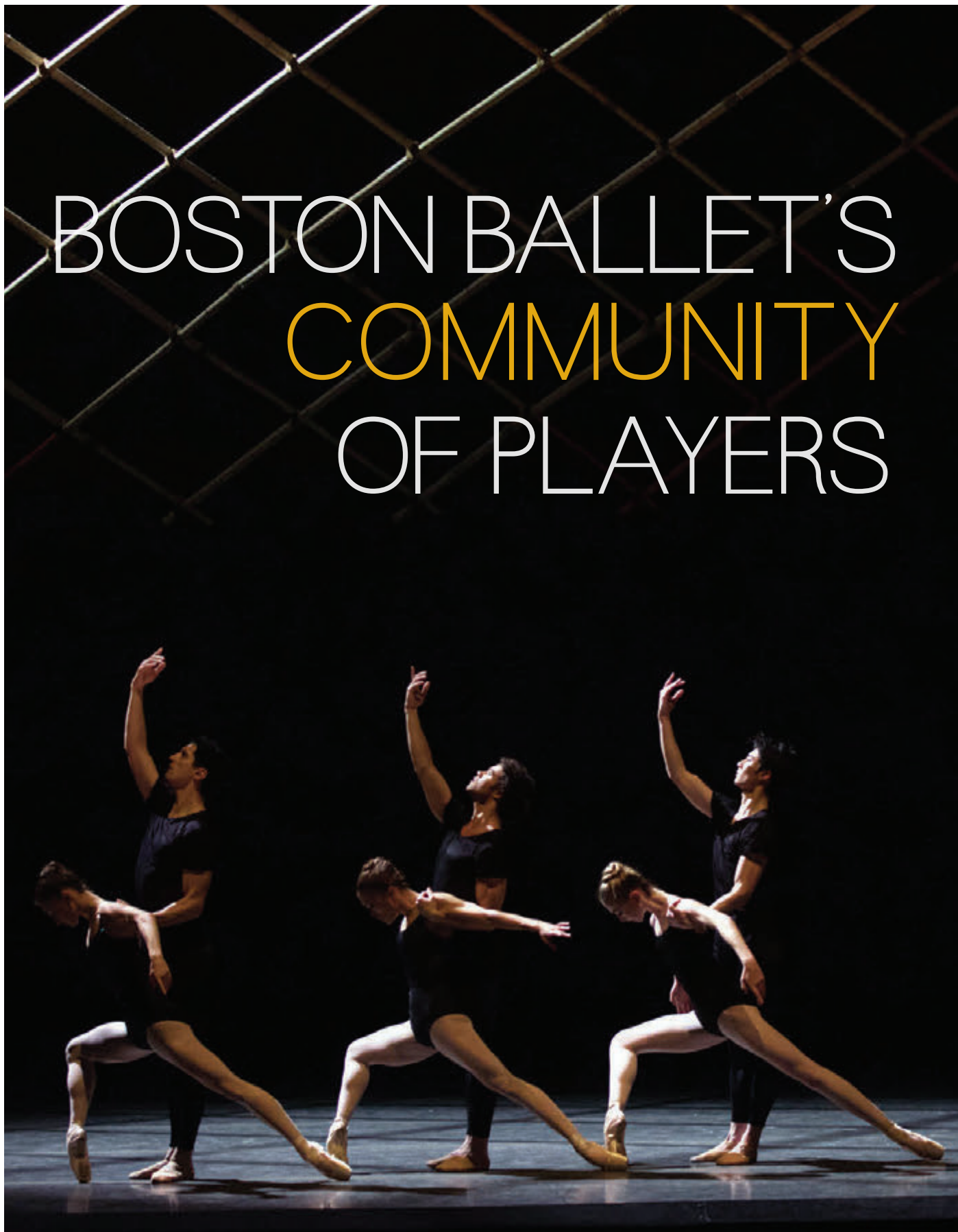
In *Breath*, Saarinen creates a post-apocalyptic world, where he and Pohjonen remain in isolation from one another throughout most of the piece. Each occupies his own raised platform, which join at one end at the back of the stage and jut out to the front in an open V-shape.

Like all his works, lighting, music and visual elements play an important role. The performers are dressed in elaborate full body costumes, designed by Muurimäki, which have removable pieces, resembling protective wear or futuristic spacesuits, and Pohjonen has his 20-pound accordion strapped to him like another appendage. Breathing, echoing wails and sounds made from the men's moving bodies picked up by microphones built into the platforms reverberate into the space and layer onto the dissonant music of the electric accordion. At various points, Saarinen and Pohjonen speak in gibberish to one another as they attempt to communicate from their silos.

The piece progresses from a desperate and foreign place to something quite human and familiar as they finally step off their platforms and meet in the open space between them, swinging, heaving, leaning and breathing together.

Breath leaves us to contemplate the curiosity that provoked Saarinen while making the work. "So often we protect our borders and do not interact," says Saarinen, "but what could happen if we came together with a handshake?" ^{DI}

BOSTON BALLET'S COMMUNITY OF PLAYERS



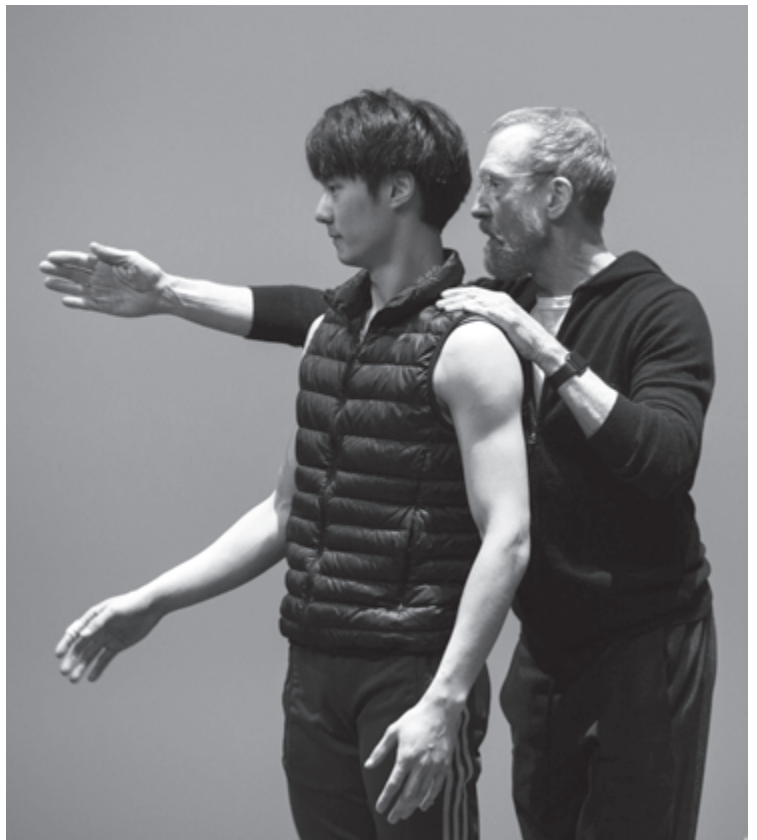
BY JANINE PARKER



Artistic director Mikko Nissinen develops relationships with Jorma Elo, William Forsythe and more



Forsythe distinctly fosters this sense of artistic freedom. “Well, I figure everyone in the room with me is some sort of expert,” so, he says, they are able to “just talk about those details that experts talk about.”



When the “regional ballet” movement began in the United States, it was about more than geography: these fledgling companies had *identities*. Indeed, in 1965, when E. Virginia Williams’ New England Civic Ballet cast off its amateur status to become the Boston Ballet, much was made about its Yankee pride, frugality and grit, while the dancers themselves, like Williams, were by and large born and bred in the area.

Today, though Boston Ballet has long shed its modest regionalism, it remains a much-loved local institution that is also one of the leading companies in the U.S. and recognized internationally. Its formidable repertoire — which includes full-length classics as well as neoclassical and contemporary ballets — is magnetic for audiences and also performers. Boston Ballet attracts dancers from around the world. Directed for the past 17 years by Finnish-born Mikko Nissinen, last year’s roster of 56 dancers, according to executive director Meredith (a.k.a. Max) Hodges, came from 17 different nations.

The dancers — as in many ballet companies today — also come from a variety of training styles. On the one hand, this range invites electric eclecticism; conversely, stylistic differences can be challenging, particularly when staging traditional works or pieces requiring seamless group phrasing.

Yet unity is an area in which Boston Ballet is hailed. According to area arts critic Jeffrey Gantz, “the corps is the best it’s been over the past 30 years.” Choreographer William Forsythe, who is entering into his third year of a five-

year contract with Boston Ballet, told me he thinks there’s a “very good feeling of ensemble; they’re very cohesive.”

Nissinen says it’s not simply a matter of exactness of timing and line; a company must “approach the movement the same way; not just try to be together,” but also to have the same “intent behind the steps.”

Longevity within the ranks is, of course, a crucial ingredient for a strong sense of ensemble; continuity of artistic staff is also valuable. Another Finn, resident choreographer Jorma Elo, has made 15 ballets at Boston Ballet over the past 13 years. When he returns to Boston, he says, it’s to “people who know me as a person and as a creator, so I’ve been able to create things here that I’ve not been able to do anywhere else.”

It’s likely no one at Boston Ballet knows Elo better than Nissinen; they grew up together as dancers in Finland. Both went to Russia as teenagers and received training in the exacting Vaganova style before going off in different directions to pursue their careers, dancing with major companies, including San Francisco Ballet (Nissinen) and Nederlands Dans Theater (Elo).

Their artistic paths crossed again early in the second phase of their professional lives. Nissinen, at the time the director of Alberta Ballet, needed another ballet to complete a program but had very little money left in his budget. Knowing Elo had begun to choreograph, he reached out to his old friend. One piece became two and then, soon after arriving in Boston, Nissinen invited Elo to come along.

William Forsythe and Boston Ballet’s Junxiong Zhao in rehearsal
Photo: Angela Sterling

“I usually don’t like working with friends,” Nissinen says, but after the success of the first pieces Elo did for Boston, “I knew he was going to go all over the world, and I thought it was much better he goes there as the resident choreographer of Boston Ballet.”

Elo’s choreography, particularly in his earlier ballets, has frequently been described as “quirky.” The movement is based in classical vocabulary, but it is often bracingly fleet, chock full of both twitchily precise subtleties and sumptuous undulations; it comes as close to reinventing the wheel as is possible in a genre centuries old. Elo’s striking style has made a marked impact, and, true to Nissinen’s predictions, his ballets are now in the repertoires of many companies.

Elo says that when he first arrived at Boston Ballet, there were fewer dancers who could “excel in contemporary work,” but now many more of them are “able to shine in all ballets.” He adds, laughing, “I mean, they’re required to,” referring to their need to not only perform a wide range of styles, but also to hop in and out of those styles during the course of a regular day of rehearsals.

Last season’s lineup painted that mixed picture clearly, with traditional productions of classics (including a Balanchine program) and two mixed bills by contemporary choreographers (Elo, Forsythe, Wayne McGregor and Justin Peck).

In March 2019, one full program will be devoted to Forsythe’s works, including a world premiere to be created on the company — a major coup so soon after Forsythe’s return to his native country after decades away, much of which he spent directing and choreographing for the

innovative Ballet Frankfurt. As well, in addition to the usual diet of story ballets, the upcoming season will pay tribute to Jerome Robbins’ birthday centenary with performances of *Fancy Free*, *Glass Pieces* and *Interplay*.

Nissinen acknowledges the low number of female choreographers presented regularly on the Boston Ballet stage, and has encouraged female dancers to participate in recent composition workshops. He’s excited about a program slated for the 2019-2020 season that will be composed of choreography, music and décor created entirely by women, including, Nissinen says with glee, one “from perhaps the finest female choreographer living today.” Details have yet to be made public.

The company’s multi-hued choreographic palette, says Larissa Ponomarenko, a beloved former principal and now a ballet master for the company, “develops you as a dancer and as an artist, and makes you very well rounded.”

Dancer Chyrstyn Mariah Fentroy agrees. One night, she says, “your body is doing every movement in contemporary form, and then you have to refine and be able to do classical ballet the next night. It makes us very strong and smart.”

When pressed to explain what he looks for in a dancer — beyond having “a strong command of technique and being very musical” — Nissinen says he wants them to be “interesting ... I have this motto in the company: I want you to be so strong that you can be vulnerable. I don’t want [the dancers] to dance to the audience, but I want them to be very present.”

Of course, this presence cannot be built, either from the audience’s perspective or from within the company, over



Jorma Elo in rehearsal with Boston Ballet
Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

the course of just one season. Principal dancer Lia Cirio, who joined the company in 2004 after a year in the junior group, Boston Ballet II, is one of a number of veterans who engenders familiarity onstage for viewers, as well as a sense of family offstage for members of the organization. Her career in Boston has fairly paralleled Elo's; indeed, she's something of a muse, having danced in all but one of his ballets for the company. "Because I've worked with [Elo] so much, I can grow with him also."

Like Cirio, Fentroy — entering her second year with Boston Ballet — praises the company's nurturing

atmosphere. Fentroy was initially hired as an artist (the rank title Boston Ballet now uses in place of corps de ballet), but was a featured soloist in many ballets, and has been officially promoted for the upcoming season. "This company is really interesting because everyone has their own strengths." Forsythe's work, meanwhile, "allows you to find you, and I think that's really beautiful."

Forsythe distinctly fosters this sense of artistic freedom. "Well, I figure everyone in the room with me is some sort of expert," so, he says, they are able to "just talk about those details that experts talk about."



Top: Boston Ballet in Justin Peck's *In Creases*
Bottom: Boston Ballet's John Lam, Misa Kuranaga and Isaac Akiba in Forsythe's *Pas/Parts* 2018
Photos: Rosalie O'Connor

Though Boston Ballet's history with Forsythe goes back as far as 1989 when it performed his *Love Songs*, he is clearly enjoying this opportunity to dig in more deeply with the company over several years. When asked how he felt about Boston Ballet's 2017 performances of his epic *Artifactual*, Forsythe was quick to say he thought the dancers were "phenomenal. I thought that the result was one of the best I've ever had with the ballet, by far, by far." (Boston Ballet was the first North American company to perform his 1984 ballet.) In April 2019, when the company makes its Paris debut, two of the three ballets will be by Forsythe.

Nissinen told me last winter that Elo's *Bach Cello Suites* would be presented in Paris, but it's since been announced that Jiri Kylian's *Wings of Wax* will complete the program instead. If there is a sense that Nissinen, Boston Ballet and Forsythe are in the honeymoon period of their relationship, I've been assured that no one's breaking up with Elo. Nissinen describes his and Elo's alliance as "organic" and "ongoing."

While Fentroy recognizes that she, too, is in a honeymoon phase with the company, she is clear-eyed about the practicality of other incentives Boston Ballet offers its dancers, such as the world-class facilities and wellness programs. The relationship that founding artistic director Williams began decades ago with orthopedic staff at Boston Children's Hospital has developed into a paradigm of health care specific to these elite athletes.

"Before class we have fitness training and we always have people — nutritionists, doctors — coming in," second soloist Isaac Akiba says. The company headquarters in Boston's South End contain seven professionally

equipped, well-lit studios, which Akiba says "can really lighten your day," acknowledging the simple but important fact of "having the sun come through the windows."

Akiba is well positioned to take the long view. Before joining Boston Ballet II and then the main company, he literally grew up in the school. He was initially recruited via the organization's CityDance program, which introduces public school students to ballet through residencies in their schools. Children who show potential and interest are invited to continue training at the South End studios. This and the other outreach programs — which include one for teenage girls and one for children with Down syndrome — are, says Akiba, "priceless, because even though 99.9 percent of those kids won't become dancers, they have a better idea of what ballet is and that will last throughout their lives."

Perhaps some of those 99.9 percent will become ardent balletomanes. As it happens, these days the company is enjoying healthy audience numbers. The 2015-2016 season broke, according to Hodges, "virtually every attendance record in the company's history."

Evoking a kind of "it takes a village" approach to their success, she cites the contributions not only of those directly related to the artistic product, but also the work of the administrative, marketing and development teams, school directors and teachers, the board of directors, the trustees and the volunteers.

"That sense of community begins with the dancers," Hodges says, "and then you have all these different groups working in support of the art they perform. That is part of the glue that holds this community together." ^{DI}



Boston Ballet in Mikko Nissinen's *The Nutcracker*
Photo: Liza Voll

Quotable



Gregory Hines
Photo: Rose Eichenbaum

As featured in
Inside the Dancer's Art
by Rose Eichenbaum
240 pages
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“What has always driven me
is the search for a new step.”
— GREGORY HINES

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INTERESTING TIMES



Patricia Barker Helms
Royal New Zealand Ballet

BY DEBORAH JONES



On her second day as artistic director of Royal New Zealand Ballet, the 12th in the company's 65-year history, Patricia Barker attended a full board meeting at the company's headquarters in Wellington. On her third day, she hopped on a plane to Timaru, a small city on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island. That was to catch a performance of *Tutus on Tour*, a regional touring program designed to fulfil RNZB's brief as the country's national ballet company.

Royal New Zealand Ballet's Marie Varlet, Linda Messina, Mayu Tanigaito and Yang Liu in Francesco Ventriglia's *Romeo and Juliet*
Photo: Stephen A'Court



Barker exudes calm, poise and steely purpose. She describes herself as settled and consistent, qualities that were sorely needed.

Only a couple of weeks earlier, Barker had been on the other side of the world in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the American former ballet star was artistic director of that city's ballet company. She was offered the job in New Zealand, said yes and, about a week later, her work visa came through. She "grabbed two suitcases and came," leaving her husband in Grand Rapids to follow later. "It was a whirlwind," she said when we spoke, only a few weeks into the job. There was more gusty weather ahead.

Barker landed in Wellington in June 2017. It was at what could be called an interesting time, if one were given to understatement. "Interesting" is certainly an adjective Barker frequently uses. "Where to start?" she says when asked how she'd describe her early months at the helm. "My time has been very interesting. When there is change in leadership, there's always anticipation. Apprehension, I think; curiosity, definitely. There's always insecurity.

"There's also always new opportunity. I don't think it's been any different here. The challenges are the same. How do you provide stability and how do you provide transition? How do you articulate expectations?

"The real challenge is putting all those pieces of the puzzle together. I'm not going to lie. The pieces have been very interesting at RNZB."

It's a tactful response from Barker, who exudes calm, poise and steely purpose. She describes herself as settled and consistent, qualities that were sorely needed. "When things get hard, I don't give up," she says, a lesson learned early in her career when she was briefly sacked from the Pacific

Northwest Ballet corps. She had moved to Seattle as a teenager to train at the PNB school and then joined the company. She was really young and, she admits, naive. "I hadn't figured out yet what it meant to be a professional in this industry."

Sage advice came from Pacific Northwest Ballet principal dancer Michael Auer, the man who would become Barker's husband. "Everything came together within a month. I started showing up to class more often and became more dedicated. Michael asked the right questions. What do you want? What do you need to do to get there? Playing all the time isn't going to get you there. It was as if the rain stopped and the sun was shining on me."

Back on track, Barker took only four years to rocket from corps to principal and stayed at the top for two decades. Frequent trips to Europe cultivated her reputation as an international star until her 2007 retirement from the stage at age 44.

There's perhaps another clue to Barker's resolve in the fact she had hoped to segue from performing to taking over as Pacific Northwest Ballet's artistic director. She really wanted the position when it came up in 2005, but didn't make the shortlist (Peter Boal got the job). "I was still the face and the name artistically of the organization. They didn't want me to leave the stage."

Nevertheless, the disappointment of not getting the job made her realize she wanted to be a leader and needed to be ready when opportunity knocked again. When she stopped dancing, Barker taught, coached and staged ballets. She was also, for a time, co-artistic adviser with Jirí Kylián at Slovak National Theatre Ballet. (Two Kylián pieces are in Royal New Zealand Ballet's 2018 program.)

When Barker came to the Royal New Zealand Ballet, dancer turnover was high and so was the rate of change at the top. Her predecessor, Francesco Ventriglia, was only two years into his contract when he announced his decision to leave. Ventriglia had succeeded former American Ballet Theatre star Ethan Stiefel, who completed one three-year term, then did not renew. And there'd been an interim director for nine months while RNZB was waiting for Stiefel to start, which he did in late 2011.

Not surprisingly, Barker was asked to sign up for five years rather than the usual three. More surprisingly, for the first year of her contract, she would continue to lead Grand

Rapids Ballet, a troubled company when she took it over in 2010. It was, in her words, “a week or two from closing its doors.” She got Grand Rapids Ballet back on track, doubling its size.

Barker managed the two companies simultaneously with the aid of different time zones, contrasting northern and southern hemisphere planning cycles, a well-established machine in place in Grand Rapids and a willingness to sacrifice sleep. (In January this year, Grand Rapids named San Francisco Ballet soloist James Sofranko as Barker’s successor.) As far as Barker was concerned, there was no conflict of interest. “My role isn’t to be within four walls. It’s to be out in the dance world,” she says.

Barker’s nerve certainly got a workout in her first six months in Wellington. The local media took an intense interest in the high level of churn in the ranks and there was lively debate about the Royal New Zealand Ballet’s responsibilities as a national company. Even Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern got involved (she is also arts minister). In a statement, Ardern said that while operational matters were the company’s province, “generally I’d expect to see talented young New Zealanders dancing on the stage for the Royal New Zealand Ballet.”

Barker became something of a lightning rod for the instability, but, when the dust settled at the beginning of this year, 22 of the complement of 36 dancers remained. She made 10 new hires immediately and kept a few contracts

up her sleeve to take account of the different southern and northern hemisphere season schedules.

She stayed above the fray and said little. By the time the first program for 2018 was underway, the conversation had turned — as she had hoped — toward what was happening onstage. It didn’t hurt that 2018 opened with *The Piano: the ballet*, Jiri Bubeníček’s adaptation of Jane Campion’s beloved 1993 film set in New Zealand.

Bubeníček’s full-length work was based on a one-act version made for Dortmund Ballet in 2014 and featured video of majestic New Zealand scenery and seascapes by the Czech choreographer’s twin brother Otto. Campion “enjoyed it tremendously,” Barker reports, and the work hit the spot with audiences, whose responses are a vital part of the jigsaw puzzle that is running a performing arts company.

Barker goes to every performance. “My dancers come to every performance; I think I can come to every performance to see them. I want to see the dancers in their first year, when they might be in the corner doing friends or a simple peasant. Do they shine? What am I grooming them for in the future? I also spend a lot of time in the audience. I want to know when they’re applauding and what excited them. I want to hear what they have to say.”

While *The Piano* was commissioned by Ventriglia (now adjunct artistic director of Ballet Nacional Sodre in Uruguay), Barker was able to have input into the rest of the

The Piano hit the spot with audiences, whose responses are a vital part of the jigsaw puzzle that is running a performing arts company.



Royal New Zealand Ballet’s Abigail Boyle and Alexandre Ferreira in Jiri Bubeníček’s *The Piano: the ballet*
Photo: Stephen A’Court



2018 season. She managed to insert an extra program of new choreography, *Strength & Grace*, for which she commissioned four women to make pieces honouring both RNZB's 65th birthday and the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand, the first country in the world to give women the vote.

The international quartet comprised New Zealander Sarah Foster-Sproull, American Penny Saunders, South African Andrea Schermoly and Australian Danielle Rowe, a former principal artist with the Australian Ballet and more recently retired from San Francisco Ballet. (The dance world can be a small place: Rowe is now associate artistic director of Sofranko's small company SFDanceworks, which he will continue to lead in tandem with the Grand Rapids job.)

"The creation of new works is very dear to me," Barker says. At Grand Rapids, she commissioned more than 50 works, more than half from women, and her MoveMedia program was a home for new choreography, something Barker wants to establish at RNZB. Except, says Barker, "I have a much larger plan for it. I'm pushing very hard to fit it into the 2019 season."

In October and November of this year, Barker brings a new *Nutcracker* to RNZB and will tour it to nine cities around the country. It will be American choreographer Val Caniparoli's fourth version — his third was made for Grand Rapids Ballet in 2014 — and will feature sets and visual design by Auer, who is also continuing his international coaching career with dancers, choreographers and designers.

As a national company well funded by its government, RNZB is not dependent on an annual *Nutcracker* for its financial health as many North American companies are.

Indeed, New Zealand audiences haven't seen it since 2010. That said, government support brings with it obligations unknown to companies reliant to a much greater degree on box office. Alongside the extensive touring commitments, the hot-button issue about employing dancers from New Zealand, introduced in last year's bruising public debate, remains.

In recent years, the proportion of New Zealand dancers in the company has hovered around one-third, with perhaps another third coming from Australia and the rest from around the world. Barker's new hires at the beginning of 2018 included three New Zealanders and three Australians.

She's talking to overseas-based New Zealand dancers about returning as guest artists and is in the process of establishing an apprenticeship program, something that has been lacking. "We're in the midst of clearing one of the biggest obstacles to young Kiwis joining Royal New Zealand Ballet," Barker says. "We want to roll it out as soon as we can." The idea is to have up to 12 young dancers who would, among other things, perform small works, engage in outreach programs and go into schools.

She laughs when asked to use three or four words to describe her first months at RNZB — "I don't know if I'm going to do that" — and clearly prefers to look at events through the most positive of lenses. Barker doesn't feel isolated, as some others have, in this country so distant from the world's great ballet centres. She and Auer have bought a house in Wellington, and Barker says the city "feels very much like home."

She is "encouraged every day" to see how much the national company, her company, means to the public. "I'm thrilled to be here." ❖

A PROMISING PAIR

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's new second soloists,
Saeka Shirai and Yue Shi



BY HOLLY HARRIS

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's Yue Shi and Saeka Shirai in Peter Quanz's *Blushing* at Varna International Ballet Competition
Photo: Victor Viktorov

Japanese dancer Saeka Shirai and Chinese-born Yue Shi, frequent partners at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, were recently promoted from the corps de ballet to second soloist positions. Shirai, 22, and Shi, 21, have been wowing audiences with their flawless technique and mature artistry, notably having been awarded a silver medal at the 27th Varna International Ballet Competition in 2016 for their program of classical and contemporary works.

Born in Osaka to a close-knit family of five, Shirai began training at age three, at the Yuki Ballet Studio. In 2009, she performed at the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) New York finals and, in 2011, at the Prix de Lausanne. There, the 16-year-old was offered a full scholarship to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School Professional Division, graduating in 2014 at the top of her class.

Ballet competitions get mixed reviews, but Shirai says her experience has only been positive, crystallizing her aspirations for a stage career.

"I started doing competitions in Japan, and wanted more and more," she says. "The YAGP was my first competition outside Japan, so that was both scary and exciting. But I could relate to everyone there because we were all dancers going through the same thing. Competitions have helped me develop my personality and made me stronger as a dancer."

After joining the RWB Aspirant Program in 2015 — essentially becoming a company apprentice — she was promoted to the corps de ballet in 2016. Last season, she debuted as Princess Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* and danced in the *Giselle Pas de Six*, as well as taking on the role of Princess Irene in Twyla Tharp's *The Princess and the Goblin*. Closest to her heart is the elfin Tinkerbell in Jordan Morris' *Peter Pan*, with her sprightly portrayal lauded in Winnipeg's French language newspaper *La Liberté* as the revelation of the evening.

"It was such a fun role," Shirai says of her tempestuous character, who was often airborne in a harness, soaring high across the stage to evoke flying through air.

The petite artist, who stands just five-foot-two (157 centimetres), has carefully honed her technique to create the compelling onstage presence of a principal dancer. "Because I'm shorter and tinier than anyone, I have to dance bigger," she reveals. "All my steps have to be one inch longer. I'm always thinking of how to do that, but it's quite difficult, too, as the balance is different."

“Yue’s training focused on expanding physical limitations, which led to his extraordinary jumps, perfection of line and an undending ability to turn.”

— Peter Quanz, choreographer



Shi is a perfect partner for her. Born in Tangshan, Shi first studied ballet at the Liaoning Ballet School at age 10, and began to enter international ballet competitions in 2010, winning awards in Osaka, Beijing, Seoul and Moscow. He joined the RWB Aspirant Program in 2015 after catching the eye of jury member and RWB artistic director André Lewis at the 2014 Jackson International Ballet Competition, where he received a Special Jury Award. He joined the RWB corps de ballet in 2016. His roles now include the Prince in *Nutcracker*, Jester in *Swan Lake* and his favourite, Prince Desire from *Sleeping Beauty*, which he also guest performed with the Sofia National Opera Ballet.

His dreams of a ballet career first took flight after seeing Daniil Simkin dancing with American Ballet Theatre in a television broadcast of *Don Quixote*. “I saw him doing all his tricks and they looked so easy,” Shi recalls. “His jumps were so high and so even. It made me excited to do ballet, and my mom told me when he was dancing, I was dancing, too.”

Both artists, who learned English after arriving in Winnipeg by studying YouTube videos and taking crash language courses — English becoming their lingua franca when rehearsing together — possess a strong work ethic fueled by a laser focus. They both aspire to become principal dancers — Shi gives himself three years — while continuing to build their partnering skills.

Astonishingly, Shi only performed his first pas de deux in May 2016, when he teamed up with Shirai for Marius Petipa’s *Don Quixote Pas de Deux* during the RWB School Professional Division’s annual On the Edge production. He says he was inspired by Simkin’s performance of the classic. This was a mere three months before the duo won silver in Varna for their electrifying performance of the duet teeming with choreographic tricks: fouettés, pirouettes, piqué turns, double sauts de basque and switch splits.

RWB ballet master Jaime Vargas, who coached the dancers for eight weeks leading up to the competition and accompanied them to Bulgaria, recalls often finding Shirai

and Shi still hard at work in the studio well past six p.m. after a nearly five-hour rehearsal day. They would be working on perfecting their three classical pas de deux (from *La Fille mal gardée*, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Don Quixote*) plus two contemporary works, by Winnipeg-based Yosuke Mino (also a company soloist) and Peter Quanz, who has created works for ballet companies around the world.

“Their physical ability and their connections with their bodies,” replies Vargas, when asked to describe the young artists’ particular strengths. “Everything just makes sense.” He also comments on their obvious passion for their art. “They have an incredible dedication to whatever they’re doing; that played a huge role during rehearsals as it sets the state of mind.”

Equally important, Shirai and Shi also possess “grit.” Upon arriving in the Baltic seaside city for the competition, they were told that their only onstage dress rehearsal would occur at two o’clock in the morning due to tight scheduling demands. Heavily jetlagged, Shirai became especially alarmed at how slippery the unfamiliar, open-air theatre stage was for performing on pointe, which not only threatened their chance at winning medals, but also potentially posed career-ending physical injury.

Vargas took her aside to quell her nerves, pointing at the flocks of seagulls gliding over the Black Sea, and telling her that she, too, could soar. The avian imagery did the trick — as did his invaluable technical advice to always be straight on top of her leg.

“Jaime helped a lot,” Shirai says. “He gave me courage and made me feel like it was possible — and that I had to trust myself. We had worked so hard and there was no turning back.” Any last-minute jitters quickly settled as soon as she took the stage with Shi. “When the music starts, it just carries you,” she says.

The pair was exhilarated to discover a large photograph mounted on the wall in one of the rehearsal studios showing prima ballerina assoluta Evelyn Hart and the late David Peregrine performing Norbert Vesak's *Belong* in 1980, further emboldening them on their path. The RWB's two former principal dancers received the gold medal at Varna that year for their searing interpretation of *Belong*, which put the company on the international map.

"I had watched Evelyn Hart on YouTube, and wanted to be just like her," Shirai says, who met Hart last year during the ballerina's guest appearance in the RWB's premiere of James Kudelka's *Vespers*.

Shi (who earned a gold medal in Varna's junior category in 2014) knows how important Varna has been to the RWB, and, when he saw that photo, he felt "so proud to be there and to represent Canada."

In November 2017, when they performed *Belong* back home in Winnipeg in the RWB's mixed bill, Our Story, Lewis, who had performed the pas de deux many times during his years as a company dancer, personally coached them. "They hit all of the great moments in perfect unison. Saeka and Yue added a spirit reminiscent of Evelyn Hart and David Peregrine's iconic *Belong* performance in Varna," he adds — the highest compliment of all.

For Shi, watching the other international competitors at Varna was inspiring. "When I saw those amazing dancers onstage, it gave me the feeling to push even more."

Did he experience stage fright during the high stakes competition, live streamed around the world? "I didn't feel pressure at all, because I'm a dancer," Shi states matter-of-factly. "Dancers have to show they're not afraid to do anything, I just feel excited when I'm onstage."

Both artists are equally at home with classical and contemporary repertoire. Mino choreographed *Numa* especially for them for Varna to showcase their artistic versatility. It meant Shirai had to morph from innocent village girl Lise in *La Fille mal gardée* to a passionate woman for the Mino work. Quanz's sparkling duet *Blushing*, set to an electric violin score, was created in 2014 for his company, Q Dance.

"Saeka and Yue come from very different perspectives," says Quanz. "Saeka is a stylist and wants each movement to have the correct shape and historical value. Yue's training focused on expanding physical limitations, which led to his extraordinary jumps, perfection of line and an unending ability to turn. It is in part because of these opposing approaches that they make a great partnership. Saeka contributes a liquid-like way of connecting movements, while Yue offers a thrilling variety of tone. It is clear that both love to dance. They seek to find the heart of the choreography and go deeper to find the spirit within the work."

He also crafted several exquisite moments evoking the cherry blossoms Shirai adores from her home in Japan. "I tried to give Saeka many images of walking through a grove of flowering trees. That shaped her movement and gave it a sort of perfume: an elegance, a softness," Quanz says.

"Working with Peter is fun, because he pushes us," Shi states. "When I did a double tour, he'd say, 'Can you do six?' There are some hard tricks in *Blushing*. But we worked very hard every day in rehearsals and it now feels easy for us. Saeka is a really good partner. You have to trust each other and be very, very connected and feel each other's body."

As they continue to put their roots down into Prairie soil — both are currently on work permits, with Shi having applied for permanent residency — the two artists look forward to honing their artistry as individual dance artists and as partners.

Shi, who likes to draw, listen to music and works out daily at the gym to build muscle that will "protect his body and bones," says of their partnership: "After being onstage together, it feels like, 'OK, we did it.' That is the most important feeling of all."

Shirai, who plays piano, enjoys Sudoku and poring through YouTube videos of ballet dancers, says, "I want people to feel something, to share something with me when I dance. My goal is for people to see me onstage and say, 'I want to see her dance again.'" ^{DI}



"When the music starts, it just carries you."

— Saeka Shirai

TEACHERS WE LOVE TO REMEMBER

A roundup of stories



Eleanor Moore Ashton is widely recognized for her development of a program of classical ballet for “the average Canadian child.” She trained teachers all over Montreal and beyond to service their needs long before dance was on the radar of park boards and other community organizations. She also produced professional quality dancers who performed in Ludmilla Chiriaeff’s early CBC/Radio Canada television productions and for Alan Lund’s Canadian National Exhibition shows in Toronto.

Trained in Canada by mostly Russian teachers, she held to a high standard of technique, but also believed dance needed to be enjoyable and expressive. She incorporated the strengths of three major systems of classical ballet training (Vaganova, Cecchetti and Royal Academy of Dance) into a system she called the Ashton Method, along with ideas from Isadora Duncan’s free movement. Eleanor realized her core premise, that “dance is music you can see,” through a lifelong partnership with classical pianist Rita Ebner Aronso; she or another pianist played for every class. By studying slow motion films of dancers, Ashton realized the importance of the “in betweens” of movement phrasing and developed this sensitivity in her advanced classes.

It was my privilege to be one of her students and to be mentored by her as a teacher. The life skills and method I learned led me to found a nonprofit program, now more than 30 years old, currently housed in the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga, Ontario. Eleanor Moore Ashton, who died in 2005 at the age of 88, took a shy violet and gave me the skills to bloom.

— SUZANNE PROULX STAPELLES, RETIRED DANCE TEACHER, WASAGA BEACH, ONTARIO

In 1989, I was a seven-year-old ballet student at the Bat-Dor studios in Tel Aviv. For the first half of the year, we had substitute teachers, as I waited impatiently for our permanent teacher to arrive from Lima, Peru. When she finally did, Oriana Franco turned out to be everything I could wish for. Always exquisitely dressed in colourful leotards and ballet skirts, her hair in an elegant bun, Oriana — we called her by her first name, as is common in Israel — was young and petite, gliding across the studio demonstrating long lines, crisp turns and light jumps. Most importantly, she was knowledgeable, kind and gracious as she taught the fundamentals of ballet and instilled confidence in her young students.

For our year-end production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, I was cast as one of the bunnies; upon realizing I wasn’t a strong jumper, Oriana recast me as a bird. Her strategy was tactful: instead of drawing attention to my weakness as a dancer, she highlighted my strength, commenting on my graceful port de bras, while motivating me to practise jumps.

Oriana Franco was instrumental in my decision to resume dancing upon arriving in Canada a year later. Days before departure, she took my mother and me aside and gently persuaded me to do so, explaining that she could see my genuine passion for movement and music, which it would be a shame to give up. Her words inspired me to continue to do what I love, even with the challenges I faced arriving in a new country with a new language to learn and a new culture to adapt to, much as I imagine she faced arriving in Israel.

— GDALIT NEUMAN, DANCE TEACHER
AND WRITER, TORONTO

Irish dance in the late 1980s in Ireland was largely the domain of the girls. But my mum sent me to classes at age four after the doctor suggested learning a form of dance to help with my turned-in feet.

Classes were at the town hall of Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny in the South East of Ireland. The hall smelled of old ham sandwiches and a certain mustiness that every church-run town hall smelled of in those days. The teacher, Miss Wise, was a young woman in her 20s as far as I can remember. She was accompanied on occasion by her mother, a formidable presence who sat and observed, and occasionally taught.

My brother took classes, too, for a short time, and once Miss Wise said she wished she could put his feet on me; alas turnout, something that is just as important for line in Irish dance as it is in ballet, has always been a struggle. Miss Wise persevered; I remember her stern look as her piercing eyes scanned my legs and feet for the correct posture and alignment.

The love of movement and dance she gave has stuck with me all these years later, but perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned from Miss Wise was to never give up. I did work hard and, in my first competition, I beat all the girls!

— DAVID WALLACE, MUSICIAN, LONDON

Above: Eleanor Moore Ashton
Photo: Johnnie Brown



Fujima Yūko led a life devoted to nihon buyoh (Japanese classical dance). She began studying at the age of six, and passed away the day after a performance at the National Theatre in Tokyo, in 2003, at the age of 73.

We met through a mutual colleague when I was living in Tokyo. He brought me to her apartment, which had been renovated to accommodate a small dance floor made of Japanese cedar. This small kimono-clad woman welcomed me — a tall, blonde, Canadian theatre artist — into her world. Yūko-sensei (“sensei” is an honorific for “master” or “teacher”) gave me a gift of dance and a family of anedeshi (sister students). After six years of training, she also gave me a name — Fujima Sayū — a professional designation that makes me a member of the Fujima dance lineage and indicates my relationship to her.

Nihon buyoh is learned through bodily transmission. In a private lesson, Yūko-sensei would stand to my left and dance as I copied her. Eventually she would watch me — giving only the slightest of choreographic cues — and correct my every movement. In this way I learned not only the intricate dances, but also her particular style.

Yūko-sensei was remarkable in her emphasis on the eyes. She would say that a dancer with dead eyes was a bad dancer, and made sure her

students would not only know where to place their gaze in a choreography, but also what they were looking at, and often how they were feeling about what they were “seeing.” Nihon buyoh is story-based and every dance embodies a character; Fujima Yūko’s acting ability, along with her physical grace, made her a superb dancer and teacher.

— COLLEEN LANKI, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, TOMOEARTS, VANCOUVER

In 1957, two Czechoslovakian sisters, Magda and Gertrud Hanova, moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, and established the city’s first modern dance school. Their Hanova School of Modern Physical Culture and Dancing offered a unique blend of movement that stemmed from the masters they had studied with in Europe and India. These included modern dance pioneers Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban, and bharata natyam artist Menaka.

The Hanova system blended Dalcroze eurhythmic exercises, yoga, Indian classical dance, ballet and European modern dance. The sisters focused on accessing and addressing their students’ yearning to discover themselves, believing that dance was a holistic experience that fed the soul. The Hanova sisters incorporated the core philosophy at the heart of Laban’s teaching that dance is for everyone and can revolutionize society. In their classes, it was the meaning and emotion of the dancing for the individual that mattered most, not the perfection of a performance.

I began classes with them in 1964 at age 10 and immediately felt I had found my home away from home. Although their classes were led with strict discipline and both women had an intimidating presence, this was balanced by their obvious joy in sharing dance with us. We curtsied formally to the sisters at the beginning of each class, and then Gertrud would lead a warmup with Wigman type stretches and yoga exercises. Next, Magda led us through a ballet barre. The sisters then might share European modern dance movements that could include walks, jumps or leaps across the floor. As a class, we would then work on the choreography of our current piece choreographed by the Hanovas and then to end, my favourite part, a teacher-led improvisation.

In the late ’60s and early ’70s, a small group of us performed quite often at places such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, various women’s organizations and the Unitarian Church. The Hanovas also mounted an annual production in which all the students performed, held at local theatres.

I moved away from Vancouver in the mid-’70s and was happy when I returned in the early ’90s to resume classes with the Hanovas. During these years, Magda and Gertrud became more than mentors and teachers: they were also friends. I enjoyed many more years dancing with them until Magda died in 1992 and Gertrud in 2002.

— KAREN KURNAEDY, DANCER AND EDUCATOR, VANCOUVER



Above left: Fujima Yūko in *Yamamba*, 1992
Photo: Fujiwara Atsuko

Above right: Gertrud and Magda Hanova in Bombay, 1936, in traditional Czechoslovakian costume
Photo: Courtesy of Karen Kurnaedy

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During my student years at a private Natal ballet school and later as a fledgling member of PACT Ballet in Johannesburg, we studied with a plethora of great dancer/teachers. After the Russian revolution and later after the demise of the Ballets Russes, many had dispersed to all parts of the globe, taking their impressive traditions with them. A few had settled in South Africa, some came out to examine and to give courses, and others came to work with PACT Ballet for periods of time.

Fine as all these teachers were, two stood out head and shoulders above the rest and they couldn't have been more different in character: cool, aloof Eileen Keegan and fiery, passionate Vera Volkova. Both lived for ballet and, most importantly, communicated this love to their students.

Growing up in Kloof, Natal, it was natural that, when I expressed a desire to dance, my parents should look for a ballet teacher close by; with great good fortune, though we weren't aware of it then, that teacher happened to be Eileen Keegan, one of those who settled here.

Miss Keegan (as she would always remain for me) had studied with the great Margaret Craske (a favourite pupil of Enrico Cecchetti) and subsequently danced with Pavlova and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. In her small studio set in a beautiful garden in the grounds of her home, she drew dancers from around the world to take class. It was her deep knowledge of "the Method" as she called Cecchetti technique, her serene manner of passing on the intrinsic artistry and musicality, the feeling for line and the variety of the work that made every day and every class special. However, she didn't believe in treating us like hothouse flowers; to Miss Keegan, a ballet career was comprised of 10 percent talent and 90 percent hard work.

Madame Volkova, who spent several months working with PACT Ballet, was one of the great Agrippina Vaganova's guinea pigs when the latter was experimenting with ballet technique in St. Petersburg. Volkova was a rebel and a genius. Her eclectic background (she performed in cabarets and nightclubs when she defected from Soviet Russia), her intelligence, marvellous personality and unique manner of expression made her a spellbinding teacher and coach.

We learned more than just ballet from these two wonderful women: they taught us to be open-minded, inquisitive, resilient and passionate — invaluable lessons for life.

— JUDITH DELMÉ, DANCE JOURNALIST,
BELGIUM

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EXQUISITE CORPSE IV

World Premiere

Young Choreographers of Staatstheater Nürnberg Ballett
15 June 2019, Schauspielhaus

REVIVALS:

POWERHOUSE

Choreographies by Alexander Ekman, Hofesh Shechter and
Goyo Montero
12 October 2018, Opera

DÜRER'S DOG

Dance Piece by Goyo Montero
09 February 2019, Opera

BALLET
SEASON 2018/2019
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NUERNBERG.DE

General Manager: Jens-Daniel Herzog
Ballet Director: Goyo Montero

Dance notes



One-time-only Michael J. Fox Award

France Geoffroy, a dancer and educator who campaigns for the recognition of integrated dance, received the Canada Council for the Arts' Michael J. Fox Award in June. This one-time award of \$25,000, given to a pioneer of integrated dance in Quebec, is thanks to actor Michael J. Fox. After receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards in 2017, Fox generously chose to give back to the Canada Council his accompanying cheque.

Left: Joanne Douville
and France Geoffroy
Photo: Mikael Theimer

Tragically Hip Ballet

Alberta Ballet premiered *All of Us*, a contemporary ballet featuring the music of the Tragically Hip, in May in Calgary and Edmonton. The ballet tells the story of two warring clans who battle to inherit the earth in order to redesign its future. Alberta Ballet artistic director and choreographer Jean Grand-Maitre found inspiration in both current events and films such as *Mad Max* and *Blade Runner*.

All of Us is the latest of Grand-Maitre's series of ballets featuring music from chart-topping pop musicians: k.d. lang (*Balletlujah*), Sarah McLachlan (*Fumbling Towards Ecstasy*), Joni Mitchell (*The Fiddle and the Drum*), Elton John (*Love Lies Bleeding*) and Gordon Lightfoot (*Our Canada*).



Alberta Ballet's Luna Sasaki and John Canfield in Jean Grand-Maitre's *All of Us*
Photo: Paul McGrath



Tara Birtwhistle
Photo: Ian McCausland

Birtwhistle Steps Up

Tara Birtwhistle has been appointed associate artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and will work closely with André Lewis, RWB artistic director and CEO, to manage artistic operations. A graduate of the RWB School Professional Division, Birtwhistle danced with the company for 20 years, the last 12 as a principal dancer. Notably, she collaborated with choreographer Mark Godden to create the role of Lucy in *Dracula*, performing the role across North America and internationally. In 2011, she retired from dance to become ballet master with the RWB.



Michael Novak
Photo: Bill Wadman

Michael Novak AD Designate

Paul Taylor has appointed company dancer Michael Novak as artistic director designate at the Paul Taylor Dance Foundation. While preparing Novak to be the future artistic director, Taylor, who is 88 years old, will continue as the Foundation artistic director and to choreograph new dances on his New York-based company, which was established in 1954 by the American modern dance pioneer. Novak has a background in classical, jazz, tap and contemporary dance forms. His passion for modern dance began during his studies at Columbia University, where he earned a bachelor of arts in dance. He joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company in 2010.

Mao's Last Dancer

Melbourne's Immigration Museum hosts *Mao's Last Dancer, the Exhibition: A Portrait of Li Cunxin*, running to October 7. Visitors will gain insight into Li Cunxin's impoverished childhood in rural China, his journey to become an internationally renowned dancer and his current life in Brisbane, where he is artistic director of Queensland Ballet. His story is well known thanks to his popular 2003 autobiography, *Mao's Last Dancer*, and its 2009 feature film adaptation.



Li Cunxin, 1977
Photo: Courtesy of the Immigration Museum



Alanis Morissette Musical

Inspired by the themes and emotions in Alanis Morissette's 1995 album of the same name, *Jagged Little Pill* premiered in May in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The American Repertory Theater production is about pain, healing and empowerment as a family chooses to maintain the status quo or face harsh truths about themselves, their community and the world. The musical incorporates selections from Morissette's catalogue and new material written for this musical directed by Diane Paulus, with choreography by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui.

Obituary

Ivor Guest
1920-2018

English dance historian Ivor Guest, well known for his many books on French and British ballet, died on March 30 at age 97. Guest also wrote extensively for magazines, journals and program notes, and was an editorial advisor to London's *Dancing Times* magazine from 1963 until his death. He contributed invaluable research assistance to choreographer Frederick Ashton for the Royal Ballet's 1960 remount of the 18th-century comic gem *La Fille mal gardée*. Guest, who was also a solicitor, had his *Adventures of a Ballet Historian: An Unfinished Memoir* published in London by Dance Books, in 1982. He is survived by his wife, Ann Hutchinson Guest, a noted expert in dance notation.



MICHAEL CRABB'S

Notebook

times and refashioned the story to focus on the plight of a sensitive, emotionally repressed young prince hemmed in by royal protocol who finds love in the embrace of a male swan.

Quite apart from its satirical allusions to a very famous real-life royal family, it was having men dance the swans that most irked the traditionalists. Bourne was even accused — glorified by some — for “queering” *Swan Lake* although, as he has often explained, the homosexual undercurrents were not what he intended to stir up. His original inspiration was Tchaikovsky's music and his own reading of its violently tormented lakeside acts.

Watching traditional productions, Bourne began to wonder how it might look with a flock of physically powerful male swans rather than delicate, willowy women and decided to give it a try. He had trouble raising the money to do it, but Bourne's *Swan Lake* became a huge commercial success on London's West End, New York's Broadway and in cities around the globe.

And then there's Irish writer, director, choreographer and all round theatre maverick Michael Keegan-Dolan's *Swan Lake / Loch na hEala*. The 2016 work, performed by members of Teac Damsa, the successor to Keegan-Dolan's earlier Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre, stunned Toronto audiences during its Canadian debut at the 2018 Luminato Festival.

Gone is even a whisper of Tchaikovsky, replaced by an onstage trio playing mostly Irish-Nordic folk music. The allusions to the familiar story emerge slowly in Keegan-Dolan's very Irish and contemporary working-class tale of a seriously depressed 30-something man living with his wheelchair-bound widowed mother. She wants to demolish the ancient home in which he feels secure in favour of a new home with all the modern conveniences. She also wants to marry him off, invites a bevy of local girls (played by

George Balanchine liked to joke that every ballet should be called *Swan Lake* because that way people would come.

Every ballet company eager to sell tickets knows what Balanchine was getting at. For better or (mostly) worse, *Swan Lake* has become the popular emblem of a whole art form. It's a fairy tale romance with, in most versions, a pass-the-Kleenex tragic ending. It comes complete with a woebegone bachelor Prince, a bossy Queen eager for a dynastic marriage, an evil sorcerer and a bewitched swan-maiden plus retinue on pointe wearing feathery tutus. All this is supported by Tchaikovsky's emotionally stirring score with its delightful quasi-vaudevillian number for four adorable syncopated cygnets. No wonder Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo have such a marvellous time, as do their knowing audiences, sending it up.

Various director-choreographers have imposed their own revisionist concepts on the 1895 Petipa-Ivanov St. Petersburg *Swan Lake* on which most of today's versions are based. But, unless they're European companies with massive public subsidies, they dare not stray too far for fear of alienating audiences.

Erik Bruhn in his 1967 *Swan Lake* for the National Ballet of Canada ruffled feathers by assigning the demonic Von Rothbart to a female dancer and by

obliquely floating the idea that there might be some warped Freudian goings on between the Prince, his mom and his beloved Odette. Even the revisions James Kudelka made in 1999 when, as National Ballet artistic director, he replaced Bruhn's version with his own, were far less radical than its detractors claim. And, controversial or not, when a season with risky programming needs to be balanced by a reliable seller, out comes Kudelka's *Swan Lake* with its male-dominated Act I gang rape and disturbing meat-market of objectified princesses in Act III.

In Britain, there was much speculation about how 32-year-old choreographer Liam Scarlett might tinker with tradition when commissioned by the Royal Ballet to replace Anthony Dowell's 1987 production. By all accounts — Scarlett's new version had its premiere in London last May — his changes are more akin to tweaks and shifts of dramatic emphasis than the stuff of a major rethinking. Even Frederick Ashton's Act III Neapolitan was retained.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most provocative attempts to rethink *Swan Lake* have come from outside the ballet world, famously in the 1995 version Matthew Bourne made for his first contemporary dance theatre company, Adventures in Motion Pictures. Created in an era of British Royal family scandals, Bourne set his production in modern

Continued from page 31

men en travesti) to a raucous party and gives him his dead father's shotgun, its sexual symbolism as unmistakable as the arrows of Prince Siegfried's crossbow.

He flees to a local lake where he encounters four swans, the transformed victims of a priest-rapist. He is drawn to one in particular, but as Keegan-Dolan's blend of spoken word and dance unfolds, the swans' white wings turn black and the man falls victim to the corruption of local politicians and police.

It's a dark saga relieved only with faint glimmers of romance and twisted humour that mashes the traditional tale with local Irish mythology and the dysfunctions of church and state.

It would be foolish to suggest that ballet companies should be embracing such seismic upheavals of tradition. The likely outcome would render Balanchine's joke utterly null and void. That said, you have to admire an artist who can take a hallowed fairy tale, pull it up by the roots, give it a good shake and configure a contemporary meeting of reality, fantasy and myth. *DI*



DVD Review

The Dumb Girl of Portici
 Starring Anna Pavlova
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Years ago, I finally saw the legendary Anna Pavlova on film, performing *The Dying Swan*. Even in the jerky silent film, even just a snippet, it was very moving to see the iconic Russian ballerina lose herself in Fokine's choreography of sad, yearning arms and pretty broken twirls.

Now, at last, her starring role in the silent 1916 movie, *The Dumb Girl of Portici*, is back in distribution on this recent double DVD release.

The Dumb Girl of Portici is about a mute peasant girl, Fenella, during the Spanish occupation of Naples in the 17th century; she is described in an intertitle as "the lightest-hearted slip of thistledown girlhood in the world." It's another ideal role for Pavlova, who we see dancing on the beach, tambourine in hand, dipping and skipping, arms joyously lifted, a scene that ends with a heart-stopping swoon into the arms of her nobleman seducer.

Bonus material includes 1920s newsreels and home movies, as well as a 1935 documentary, *The Immortal Swan*, made after her death. They provide a glimpse into a whole different era, when dancers were revered as "artists." Pavlova was put on an even higher level; as a contemporary newspaper put it, "she is a direct manifestation of the divine."

In the excerpts — including *Dying Swan* — her ecstatic abandon never loses consciousness of form. Anna Pavlova danced with her audience in mind and, as she travelled the world, was much loved for it.

— KAIJA PEPPER

Drawing *Betroffenheit*

Dance International first covered *Betroffenheit* at its Banff Centre avant-premiere in our Fall 2015 issue. Since then, the emotionally profound work about a mind in crisis by Crystal Pite (choreographer and director) and Jonathon Young (writer and performer) has gone on to tour across four continents, receiving both popular and critical acclaim.

To celebrate *Betroffenheit's* success, we commissioned visual artist Val Nelson — who began her career as a member of the corps of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet — to pay a working visit to the studio as the piece was remounted for the Vancouver stage. That day, original cast members Young, David Raymond, Cindy Salgado, Jermaine Spivey and Tiffany Tregarthen were joined by newcomer Christopher Hernandez. Also present were understudy Yiannis Logothetis and company apprentice Renée Sigouin. — DI

Behind the scenes of the award-winning work from Crystal Pite and Jonathon Young



ILLUSTRATIONS BY VAL NELSON

This caught-on-the-fly sketch is of Crystal Pite giving direction in the rehearsal studio. — VN

ARTIST STATEMENT

Ink drawings suggest a thinking process, and are traditionally considered a stepping-stone toward something more complete, such as a finished painting. The aim of drawing dancers in rehearsal in the form of gesture drawing is to capture the dynamism and energy of the rehearsal process in its raw form, echoing the incomplete state of a dance piece before it is performance-ready. The emotional resonance of gesture drawing is vastly different from photographic realism — inherent in the drawing is the extension of the body of the maker (the artist) in the artwork, through the calligraphic action of her hand, which could also be seen as a kind of choreography.

— VAL NELSON





Left: This ensemble drawing shows Crystal Pite's talent for creating dynamic compositions. It depicts the cast members helping the understudy, Yiannis Logothetis (second from left), and company apprentice Renée Sigouin (second from right) run a scene where Jonathon Young's character is resuscitated from an apparent overdose.

It was one of many moments I photographed during the rehearsal. A few days later, at my own studio, the photo provided a reference point when I began to draw. – VN

Above: Christopher Hernandez, the new cast member, and Cindy Salgado are seen here in a Latin ballroom dance routine. The rehearsal that day was his first run-through with full makeup, costume, set and props. The other cast members, who had performed the piece many times before, were not in full costume and were able to be more relaxed. A humorous moment is captured in the figure in the background at right, which shows Jermaine Spivey wearing a pair of shorts on his head instead of his feather headdress! – VN



SARA CALERO'S ELEGANT EXPERIMENTATION

The Spanish soloist tells a story of immigration

BY JUSTINE BAYOD ESPOZ

P*etisa Loca*, which loosely translates to “crazy shorty,” is dancer and choreographer Sara Calero’s homage to her grandfather, who affectionately called her by that nickname. The title gives the impression that Calero’s piece will be a lighthearted affair, and while there are moments of joy and humour, *Petisa Loca* is a work of tremendous intricacy.

The show, which premiered in 2017 in Alcalá de Henares, just outside of her native Madrid, is Calero’s sixth production in a solo career that has established her as a thoughtful and daring artist, unafraid to be experimental in her presentations while still maintaining a classical line in her dance technique. Her elegant, stylized dance is no doubt a remnant of her history dancing for the Spanish dance companies of Antonio Márquez and José Greco, and especially for the National Ballet of Spain, where she worked for four years, wrangling several solo and lead roles.

Calero joined the ballet company at the age of 23, while it was under the directorship of José Antonio. “I was lucky enough to join at a time when we’d do an exclusively flamenco program and after that an exclusively escuela bolera [classical dance from the 17th- and 18th-century Spanish court] program — when I wouldn’t take off the soft shoes all year — and then we’d do an exclusively classical Spanish dance year. It was very enriching and an opportunity I couldn’t have found with any other company,” says Calero.

She left the ballet to begin her own company and put her exceptional training to work on creating a personal style. Calero admits that she’d grown tired of playing characters and being told how to dance by directors. She was ready to work on her artistic vision, which often marries the classical with the contemporary, and fuses flamenco and classical styles of Spanish dance, giving her a unique choreographic approach and stage presence.

“I create conceptual shows with a theatrical narrative,” says Calero. “I don’t know whether I am modern or if I break with tradition. I just try to make each production completely different from the one that came before it. I always want the theme to be different so that I don’t repeat myself in any way.”

For *Petisa Loca*, Calero found inspiration in the stories her grandfather told her about being an immigrant. Born in Spain, Calero’s grandfather emigrated to Argentina with his family in his youth to escape the Spanish Civil War that took place between 1936 and 1939. In revisiting her grandfather’s experience, Calero found herself delving into the commonalities shared by all immigrants and ultimately piecing together a story told in three acts by a plucky female protagonist.

The show’s opening takes us back to the onset of the Spanish Civil War, as flamenco singer Gema Caballero, the production’s musical director, sings excerpts of Chilean

Sara Calero in her work *Petisa Loca*
Photo: Fernando Marcos

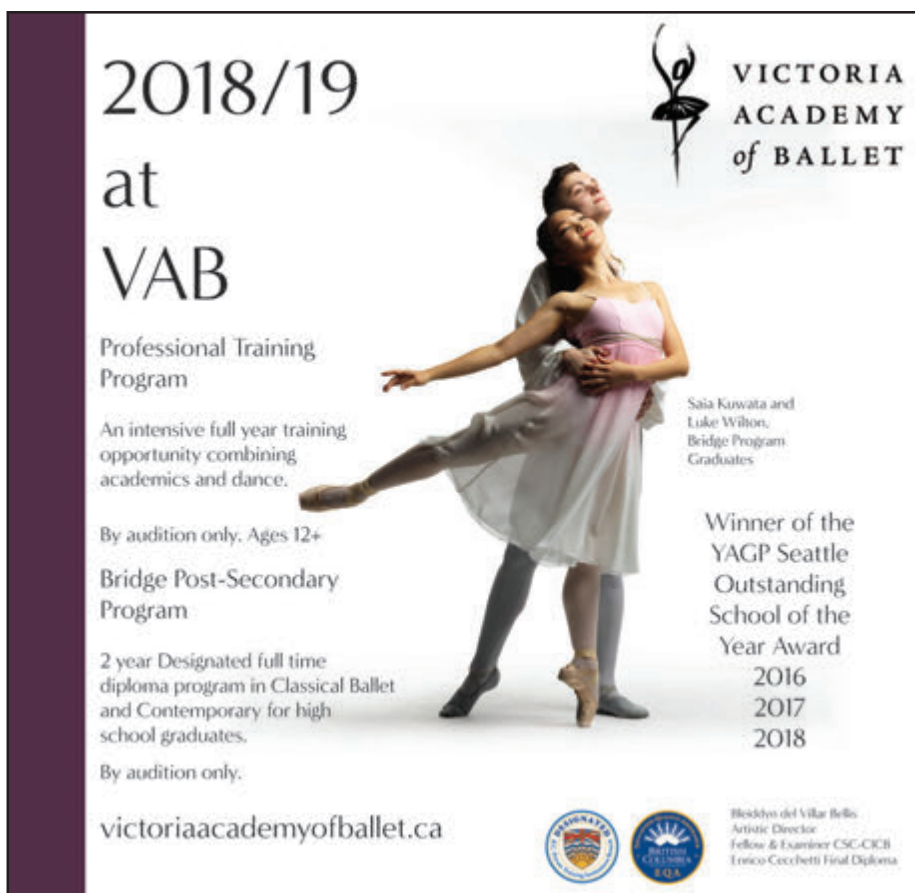
poet Pablo Neruda's poem *I Explain a Few Things*. Not only is he Calero's grandfather's favourite poet, but Neruda lived and worked in Madrid from 1934 to 1936 as a cultural attaché to the Chilean Embassy in Spain. In *I Explain a Few Things*, Neruda describes the bombing of Madrid at the outbreak of the war, which Calero's grandfather had told her about.

In one of the production's most memorable scenes, Calero cuts a Carmen Miranda-like figure as she dances a guajira (a flamenco style linked to colonial Cuba) with maracas in hand and fruit on head. "This moment is a reflection of what the immigrant dreams of finding, the idealization of the place where she is going. The people crossing into Spain on rafts right now probably dream of being on the beach, eating paella and listening to flamenco, but the reality has nothing to do with that. So I can imagine travelling to South America and thinking I'd be drinking daiquiris and dancing with maracas," explains Calero.

In the final act — the beginning of a new life in a new home — Calero dances to the Argentinian tango *Galleguita*, originally performed by actress and singer Libertad Lamarque. The song is about a destitute young woman, and the choreography is Calero's unique Spanish take on the traditional Argentine dance. Although initially portraying the downtrodden solitude described in the song's lyrics, Calero's choreography flips the script — as she does throughout the show — employing strong footwork and bold posturing to set a tone of defiance and self-assurance. This is followed by a festive flamenco tango (which may share a name with the Argentinian dance, but is in no way related, each being representative of different musical traditions from different continents and time periods), introducing a bright spot that alludes to leaving your homeland but never forgetting it.

Although Calero's grandfather made a life for himself in Argentina, it's clear the desire to return to his native home was never lost, as his Argentine-born son — Calero's father — emigrated to Spain. After Calero's birth, her grandparents followed suit. ^{DI}

Petisa Loca makes its Canadian debut at the Vancouver International Flamenco Festival in September.



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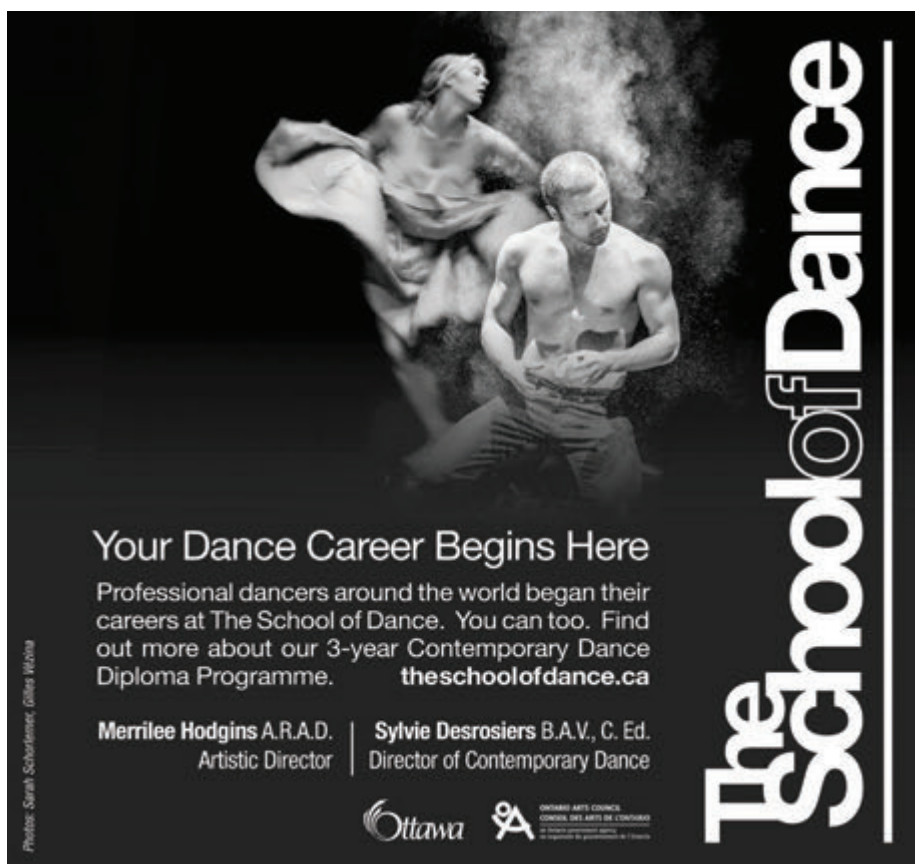
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INSIDE ED

The artistry of port de bras

BY CHAN HON GOH

The significance of port de bras, or carriage of the arms, is key to all aspects of ballet performance. For example, how we use our arms connects intimately to the way we place our shoulders (épaulement) and the focus of our eyes. Broadly speaking, port de bras must connect to a dancer's overall co-ordination to complement their execution of technical brilliance and support their dramatic presence.

In an era where audiences and dancers are increasingly used to athletic feats, the importance of artistry mustn't be forgotten. It is a dancer's ability to express or evoke emotions through their movement that essentially transforms them into an artist and turns dance into an art form.

Specific methodologies and styles aside, a dancer's use of port de bras should be as distinctive as the tonalities of their voice, so that the way they use their arms is a mesmerizing and immediately recognizable signature, one that is vitally important to creating a distinctive performance. Yet, in young students, and sometimes even young professionals in companies, there can be a lack of attention to and a disconnect between intent and execution.

Intent is about what a dancer is trying to say with a particular gesture or step. What are the relationships that need to be established between him or her and the other dancers, as well as with the music? Execution refers to the external physical actions that support intention. In terms of port de bras, it is important to breathe through the elbow, wrist and fingers in order to evoke internal nuances. This, along with the active use of the eyes, and the placement of the head and shoulders, adds value to each step. These physical and interpretive layers bring life to the choreographic vocabulary used to tell a story or suggest

a character, and help to pronounce musical accents and styles in abstract pieces.

Too often, tension can obstruct the movement. Tension can be evident in the way the arm moves woodenly, like a block, rather than with a flow happening through the elbow joint. It can be seen in locked wrists or the gripping of fingers. Or energy can be held in the neck and shoulders instead of throughout the core, spine and legs. Assisting dancers with ideas on how to gain strength and stability in the core and legs can help to alleviate tension from the upper body, enabling them to find their expressive port de bras more securely.

Another important element is co-ordination, which is more a matter of identifying why something is not co-ordinated and then finding out what needs to be done to bring it all together. The co-ordination of a dancer's port de bras can either disturb or assist the execution of a step. The timing of port de bras in pirouettes, allegro, adagio and balances are crucial to successful completion of the move.

Far from being mere decoration, the movement of the arm, with blood flowing to the tips of the fingers, is a vital part of what differentiates a dancer from an artist and interpreter, and is what will convey the most lasting impression to audiences.

We might learn something from the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who described the rich communication possible through the use of nuanced gesture: "Behold the hands, how they promise, conjure, appeal, menace, pray, supplicate, refuse, beckon, interrogate, admire, confess, cringe, instruct, command, mock and what not besides, with a variation and multiplication of variation which makes the tongue envious."

Let us always strive to speak eloquently with our port de bras, expressing our deepest thoughts and feelings with artistry that touches the soul. ▮

Chan Hon Goh is the director of the Goh Ballet Academy and Youth Company Canada, in Vancouver, B.C. She is a former principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada.

GLOBAL REPORTS

Emily Molnar's *when you left* tantalized at its premiere during Ballet BC's season finale at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, bookended with the reprise of Cayetano Soto's *Beginning After* (created for Ballet BC in 2016) and Sharon Eyal and Gai Behar's *Bill* (created for Batsheva in 2010, performed by Ballet BC in 2016). All three were danced with the commitment, enthusiasm and technical expertise for which the company of 16 dancers (bolstered with four apprentices) is known.

When you left was accompanied by Phoenix Chamber Choir performing Pēteris Vasks' meditative *Plainscapes*; the title refers to the plains of the Latvian composer's country, evoked by violin, cello and vocalise (wordless melody for voice).

Molnar filled the dark stage with eight men and eight women, darkly clad but thankfully with bare arms that caught some light. Their moves were filled with tension as they ran across the stage — upright like city joggers, or long and loping like wolves. A repeated motif featured the dancers standing hunched over their open hands, which beat toward and away from each other, the space in between stretching and shrinking as if something was there and then not there.

Through no fault of its own, the piece suffered from following Soto's equally darkly lit and costumed *Beginning After*, set to arias by Handel, and with a similar muscular grace.

Eyal and Behar's *Bill*, on its part, benefited by introducing a fresh tone to close the evening, bursting onto a brightly lit stage. Dancers clad in flesh-coloured body suits — every detail of face and body visible — grooved with zany disco-robot moves in what seemed to be a cool ironic mood.

Gloomy dance stages were all over Vancouver this quarter, including a presentation by Australia's eminent Circa, a contemporary circus troupe. Their 2013 *Opus*, directed by Yaron Lifschitz, is a collaboration with the Debussy String Quartet, who played Shostakovich onstage with the 15 circus performers tumbling through hoops and making human pyramids around them. When black silks dropped down from the flies, the atmosphere was

almost funereal in its austere beauty.

Without the cheerful showmanship and brash sense of fun common even to circus with theatrical scope, the acrobatics and modern dance-style movement of *Opus* appeared cold and, in the large auditorium of the Chan Centre, distant, at least for this viewer, seated toward the back.

Che Malambo's dark stage, lighting and costumes (tight pants, shirts and boots) was shot through with light — not just from spots, but also from the enthusiasm and personality of the 12 men showcasing the South American gaucho dance called the malambo.

Artistic director Julia Taffe, who received the Isadora Award for Excellence in Dance from the Vancouver Dance Centre in May, presented her aerial dance company, Aeriosa, indoors for a change, in the Faris studio-theatre. In *Second Nature*, the six dancers cavorted easily on their ropes, sometimes stretching out on bamboo poles that also hung from the flies, seeming as relaxed and lithe as napping forest creatures. There was beauty in watching the human curves of feet and buttocks, of legs and arms, next to the rigid bamboo structures (created by Dan Law), which were jointed in the middle

BY KAIJA PEPPER



Traditionally danced by men, the malambo has roots in the 17th century, in competitive duels challenging agility, strength and dexterity. This company of contemporary Argentinians, founded and directed by French choreographer Gilles Brinas, presented a warm and wonderful spectacle.

These men in black really work their material, including the malambo's signature stamp, in which the foot in its black boot curves in so that the outward edge strikes the ground. The dance is also done barefoot, adding vulnerability — and quiet — to the same striking footwork.

At times, the men stormed the stage with the percussive power of their dancing and/or drumming, bringing the audience to a roar.

to allow for shape-shifting.

The program announced an International Vertical Dance Summit to take place in Vancouver in June 2019; details at aeriosa.com.

Finally, to celebrate its 40th anniversary, Goh Ballet Academy premiered *Cinderella* downtown at the Centre for Performing Arts. Set to Prokofiev's haunting melodies, it was choreographed by Maina Gielgud, a distinguished former dancer and artistic director in Europe and Australia. In the title role, Venus Villa, a principal from Washington Ballet, invested even the simplest steps with warm intention. With her prince, Rolando Sarabia (also a principal guesting from Washington), she led the young supporting cast through the dreamy fairy tale dance. *DI*

Peter Quanz's "experimental dance laboratory" Q Dance marked its triumphant return to the stage after a two-year hiatus doing what it has always done best: performing intimate contemporary ballets in bite-sized venues that allow viewers to experience classical dance up close and personal.

The mixed bill — performed by Yosuke Mino, Liam Caines, Alanna McAdie and Philippe-Alexandre Jacques (the first three are company members with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet) — featured four diverse works, including two premieres, all choreographed by Quanz. The internationally renowned artistic director continues to work extensively in China, creating new work for Beijing Dance Academy and Guangzhou Ballet, as well as Wuxi Song

suspended port de bras. Her presence suggests a watchful angel as she subsequently leads a bare-chested Mino onstage for his own introspective solo, performed against Mravnik's undulating lighting effects that evoke the shifting sands of time.

The program, performed entirely in soft ballet slippers, included Quanz's *1490*, a joyous combustion of contemporary movement that premiered two years ago and is set to three Renaissance works composed circa 1490.

The show's second pas de deux, *241* — its numerical title a play on "two-dancers-for-one" — performed by Caines and Jacques, enthralled with its celebration of pure athleticism. It proved fascinating to see this piece, another 2016 premiere, when it was danced by two women,

covered in shards of mirror-ball glass. The full company dancers, wearing streetwise "shades," muscle shirts and cargo pants, take turns leaping on and offstage, their twirling arms and multiple body isolations at times resembling scuttling crabs' limbs, performed to a pounding re-mix of Steve Reich's iconic *Drumming*.

Q Dance's eclectic offerings, fuelled by entertainment value and grounded in solid artistry, has always been one of its hallmarks. By making ballet accessible to those who might not otherwise see a *Swan Lake* or *Giselle* — which follows on the populist spirit of Quanz's late mentor Arnold Spohr — the company's return to the local stage with this program of varied "numbers" succeeded in spades.

Gearshifting Performance Works, now in its 18th season, presented the premiere of *Phase Wash*, choreographed by founding artistic director Jolene Bailie and held at the University of Winnipeg's Asper Centre for Theatre and Film at the end of April. Bailie effectively creates a sense of haunting time and space, with the eight-dancer ensemble seemingly caught in private moments of self-revelation; her choreography relies on gestural movement vocabulary to add layering and nuance.

Several sections stood out, including Helene Le Moullec Mancini's undulating solo, her hips rocking to and fro as she is showered with cascading rose petals. In another, she stands on tiptoes with her head twitching as Jillian Groening and Sam Penner press their own bodies into and against each other as ballasts. Other moments evoke prior Bailie works, such as her visually arresting signature solo from 2006, *Switchback*. In her latest creation, the performers' fingers once more curl into gnarled knuckles, creating the bestial effect of dancers with paws — before later slamming into each other's chests like rutting bucks in Bailie's no-holds-barred, visceral choreography.

The 55-minute show could easily be whittled to 45, with its nearly continuous pastiche electronic score of buzzing tones and rumbling drones demanding a certain fortitude. However, its fundamentally abstract nature focused on movement itself, as opposed to more recent Bailie creations driven by the absurd, effectively leaves ample room for interpretation and is one of her stronger productions to date. *DI*



BY HOLLY HARRIS

and Dance Theatre, which toured his full-length ballet *The Red-Crowned Crane* across Canada and to New York in 2016.

The 45-minute production at the 232-seat Gas Station Arts Centre, the company's original stomping grounds, also featured lighting by Robert Mravnik with costumes culled from past QD shows.

The first premiere, *2.2*, showcased McAdie and Mino, their stage chemistry enhanced by their real-life partnership. The highly imagistic pas de deux, set to Marjan Mozetich's *Postcards from the Sky*, evokes the rapture of Quanz's 2010 ballet, *Luminous* — also set to the Canadian composer's soaring music — with each dancer spotlighted in distinct sections.

During the first movement, McAdie sweeps across the floor, her pixie cut infusing her section with an elfin quality, juxtaposed with stylized pirouettes and a

performed this time by two men, which introduced a new dynamic. The visually jaw-dropping work, set to New York-based composer Brad Crane's *Nightlight*, begins as each dancer is caught leaping mid-air by flashing strobe lights, thus ostensibly a dance in negative space as their movement momentarily continues in blackout. Its fiercely physical choreography also includes Caines throwing Jacques to the floor, who later climbs on top of his counterpart's back; the equally matched dancers' dizzying speed makes this version of the gender-flexible piece about male power and aggression.

The show was capped off with the evening's second premiere, π (the Greek mathematical symbol for pi), a madcap ride through a disco-lover's fantasy complete with local artist June Derksen's revolving sculpture of inverted cowboy boots

Philippe-Alexandre Jacques in Peter Quanz's π
Photo: Daniel Crump



Toronto

BY MICHAEL CRABB

Despite welcome past appearances by such illustrious troupes as the Mark Morris Dance Group, Nederlands Dans Theater and Akram Khan, dance has never truly been a headline priority for Luminato, Toronto's annual international arts festival. This June marked Luminato's 12th edition and although there were no troupes with instant name recognition on the roster, the festival was not without its rewards for dance aficionados.

Cuba's Malpaso Dance Company with Arturo O'Farrill and the Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble made its second Luminato appearance with an exciting mixed bill of works by the troupe's artistic director Osnel Delgado, Canadian Azure Barton and Ohad Naharin, whose Tel Aviv-based Batsheva Dance Company was a hit of the 2012 festival.

Since its first presentation at Montreal's Festival TransAmériques in 2009, the concept behind Sylvain Émard's popular, community-oriented *Le Grand Continental* has travelled far and spawned varied iterations. It reached truly gigantic proportions during Montreal's 375th anniversary celebrations when some 375 amateur dancers of all ages and backgrounds took part in *Le Super Méga Continental*.

The version Émard produced for Luminato 2018 may not have achieved quite the same expansiveness, but from April on hundreds of local volunteer performers worked long hours — many of those doubtless in the privacy of their own homes — to perfect the moves required to execute the choreographer's extraordinary blend of line dancing and contemporary dance. The finished extravaganza was given four performances in Toronto's central Nathan Phillips Square as the culmination of Luminato, with two additional "relaxed" events at which virtually anyone could join the fun.

Two Irish productions, both with strong socio-political undercurrents, had much to offer fans of dance/physical theatre. RIOT, a collaborative enterprise first presented at the 2016 Dublin Fringe where it won the award for best production, is a clever mash-up of dance, cabaret, circus arts, song and poetry anchored in performance by Rory O'Neill, a drag artist/activist best known by the stage name Panti Bliss, Queen of Ireland.

RIOT is filled with glittery fun and hilarious physical antics, but these are merely the surface gloss on a show that takes direct and telling shots at such hot-button topics as gender

equality, misogyny, women's rights, corporate venality, social media's corrosive effects and, of course, this coming as it does from the Emerald Isle, the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that shortly before Luminato began Irish voters had expressed their wish to rescind the nation's infamous abortion ban did little to dull the sting of RIOT's flagrantly anti-religious barbs.

RIOT even included a short spoof of *Swan Lake*. There was, however, nothing funny about another Irish production at Luminato 2018 (discussed more fully in this edition's Notebook column), which was a grim contemporary retelling of *Swan Lake's* underlying myth.

Luminato 2018 ran longer than earlier festivals, 19 days in all. Apart from the defiant National Ballet of Canada whose season ran parallel with Luminato, most local groups perhaps wisely chose to avoid any overlap. Thus, by the time Luminato began, Toronto had already seen the end of the regular seasons of Ballet Creole, Canadian Contemporary Dance Theatre, Esmeralda Enrique Spanish Dance Company and Gadfly.

One contemporary artist who also defied Luminato's competitive pull was Danny Grossman. In late June, the veteran choreographer presented an intimate program of new works and revivals

in a show titled *Labour of Love*. It was also the name of a duet with Eddie Kasrau, in which the 75-year-old Grossman made what he claims to have been his swan-song stage appearance.

Since his once world-travelled and popular company folded in 2008 following a long decline, Grossman has largely slipped from the public consciousness, but has continued to be active as a teacher and creator of new works for dance academies. *Labour of Love*, with its focus on personal sexual freedom, one of Grossman's many unapologetically left-leaning, progressive social and political passions, was a reminder of what a powerful and unique voice he was and remains in the ecology of Canadian dance.

Luminato is far from the lone purveyor of international attractions. In mid-May, as part of its annual Dance Collection, the 3,200-seat Sony Centre brought prolific Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's famous 2008 production *Sutra* — more than 200 performances given internationally since its London premiere — for a rather belated Toronto debut.

Sutra is an extraordinary experience in which Cherkaoui and his collaborators, artist Antony Gormley and composer Szymon Brzóska, give theatrical heft and resonance to the already impressive physical feats of a company of monks from China's Shaolin Temple. For the monks, their martial arts practices are part of their spiritual discipline, an aspect that could easily have been marginalized had Cherkaoui not approached the project with due respect.

The result is a work that, thanks to the unaffected intensity of the monks' performance, is suffused with a genuine sense of ritual, while still offering enormous theatrical excitement as they negotiate the coffin-like plywood boxes that populate Gormley's simple yet stunning set design. Through their various configurations, these boxes are more than mere props. They are potent visual metaphors. At one point, they form a Cubist representation of a lotus flower. At another, stood on end like a line of dominos, they do what dominos do and collapse under the weight of their preceding neighbour.

Cherkaoui nowadays rarely performs in *Sutra*, but his replacement Ali Thabet

does a convincing job as the unknowing Westerner intent on probing the mysteries of Shaolin practices and the spiritual lessons they offer. However, some theatrical rules never change. If you put a child or animal onstage, they will invariably steal the limelight, as happens in *Sutra* with every appearance of a 10-year-old novice monk whose physical agility is matched only by his effortless charm.

As for the National Ballet, the high-point of its 2017-2018 season was the premiere of *Frame by Frame*, its much-hyped collaboration with star director Robert Lepage and his Quebec City-based production company of high-tech theatrical wizards, Ex Machina. Lepage chose the subject, an homage to the legendary Scottish-Canadian film animation innovator Norman McLaren. The good news is that *Frame by Frame* turns out to be a thoroughly worthwhile and, in many ways, remarkable \$1.4 million production. It contains moments of eye-popping inventiveness and breath-catching beauty. It exemplifies how best dance and film can meet and meld. *Frame by Frame* is biographical only so far as to provide context for Lepage's central concern, McLaren's imaginative genius. This he probes in seemingly harmonious company with National Ballet choreographic associate Guillaume Côté as the pair explore ways to represent and riff off several of McLaren's most noteworthy films.

Even so, despite the over-the-top effusions of some probably little-read bloggers, the ballet is far from perfect. At 130 minutes with no intermission, it places an unwarranted strain on its audiences' bladders. It is overpopulated with supporting characters from McLaren's career. There are too many scenes that tend to confuse rather than focus Lepage's theme. The lame finale looks hastily thrown together and must surely be revised.

Frame by Frame is already slated to travel to London's co-producing Sadler's Wells Theatre, by which time you can be almost certain Lepage and Côté will have agreed on a healthy and advantageous pruning. *DI*

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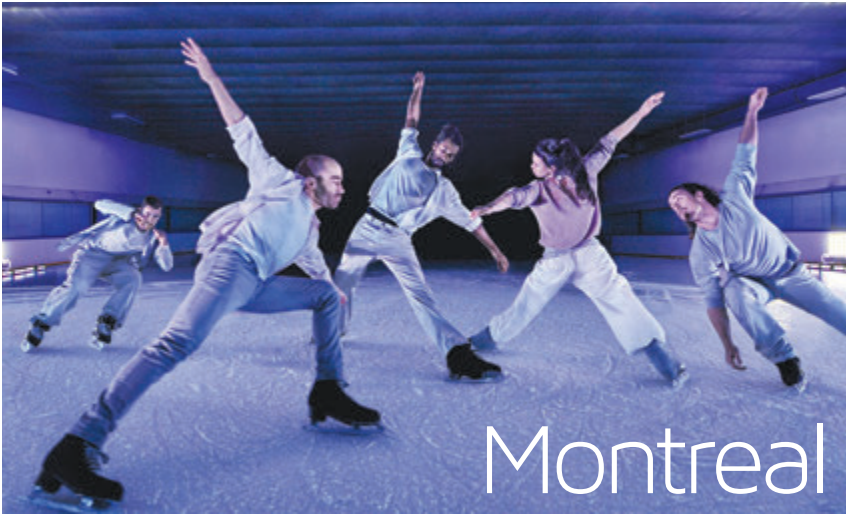
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BY VICTOR SWOBODA

Some of the most accomplished choreography in Montreal's spring season occurred in forums not normally associated with dance.

Montreal-based avant-garde ice-dance troupe Le Patin Libre has achieved the status of high art in Europe, where it regularly tours. Bravo, therefore, to Montreal producer Pierre Desmarais for putting Le Patin Libre in his prestigious Danse Danse series. Desmarais hung elegant black curtains and added sophisticated lighting and sound to give a bland local hockey arena the feel of a real theatre.

Le Patin Libre's shows over the years have grown in artistic conception and execution, and its latest, *Threshold*, reached new heights, thanks in part to dramaturg Ruth Little and lighting designer Lucy Carter, who have worked with Wayne McGregor and Akram Khan. The interweaving of skaters in ensemble patterns unfolded in complex, unexpected entrances and exits. Changes of rhythm were markedly exciting. In one mesmerizing sequence, skaters standing in a staggered line moved slowly backward or forward with only a slight tilt of their torsos, making a delightful illusion of people moving on air. If dance is, in part, an exploration of time and space, *Threshold* was a constant voyage of discovery.

Elsewhere, juggler Philippe Dupuis performed a masterfully choreographed solo, launching and catching plastic balls in handheld metal pails with unbelievable dexterity, pirouetting even as multiple

balls fell from the air. At one point, he mounted an incline at the back of Tohu's stage in the round, threw a bucketful of balls into the air, and a cohort of buckets popped up behind the incline and caught the balls in a wide swoop. It was marvellous theatre. Dupuis appeared in *Sapience*, a show directed by Anthony Venisse for new graduates of Montreal's National Circus School. Venisse received his early training at l'école Rudra-Béjart Lausanne. The National Circus School's director of creation, choreographer Howard Richard, has introduced strong elements of dance into the curriculum.

Equally delightful was the multiple hula-hoop twirling of William Jutras from a fledgling Montreal circus troupe called Le Monastère. Presenting an image of a peeved snob impatient with the world, Jutras twirled golden hoops around his body with astonishing rapidity, maintaining his stage character even while executing complex moves with aplomb.

Those who question whether acts like Le Patin Libre, Dupuis and Jutras can be categorized and judged seriously as dance should only recall the example of Fred Astaire. For years, Astaire was considered a mere entertainer until George Balanchine publicly declared his admiration for Astaire as one of the great artists of the 20th century. Montreal audiences have been generously receptive toward extending the parameters of what is considered dance.

Undoubtedly a highlight of the season came in the 2018 Festival Trans-Amériques with *Betroffenheit*, a 2015

collaboration between choreographer Crystal Pite for her Kidd Pivot company and actor Jonathon Young of Electric Company Theatre. In previous works, Pite has explored grief and mourning with impressive depth and feeling. With sustained brilliance over a 100-minute work in two acts, *Betroffenheit* looked at the complex therapeutic process involved in recovering from grief and loss.

As the central protagonist, Young entered into verbal dialogues in a terse Samuel-Beckett-like style, or danced with several figures who toiled diligently to keep him in a mourning state, represented visually by the walls of a room and by a wooden box large enough for Young to enter.

Pite and Young had the great insight to show how seductive the mourning state can be. Some people in mourning find perverse pleasure in prolonging their grief or in returning to it the moment they begin to recover. In *Betroffenheit*, this perverse pleasure was flamboyantly represented by "the show," in which the protagonist acted as a garishly dressed master of ceremonies who introduced captivating tap and salsa dance numbers. In this context, the undeniably entertaining popular-dance rhythms took on a dark side, enticing the protagonist back into mourning.

The work ended with the astonishingly fluid Jermaine Spivey performing a long solo in which arms and legs struggled to find a co-ordinated harmony. Throughout *Betroffenheit*, Spivey had served as Young's alter ego. As lights dimmed, Spivey walked slowly off largely in control of his limbs, which suggested hope of recovery. Pite does not tolerate trite solutions to the choreographic problems that she sets up, which is why she is among Canada's most profound choreographers.

Danse Danse also presented the 11-year-old Quebec City-based troupe, Alan Lake Factori(e) in Lake's *Le cri des méduses*, inspired by *Raft of the Medusa*, Théodore Géricault's famous 1819 painting of shipwreck survivors. The set, lighting and mass formations of the nine dancers did indeed at times evoke visions of Géricault's horrible scene. Visually, the scenes certainly had punch. Choreographically, however, the symbolic drama remained undeveloped, implying little more than that people are sufferers lost at sea. ▯



San Francisco

BY ALLAN ULRICH

By May 6, when the season's final performance concluded, nobody who works for the San Francisco Ballet, as well as many members of its audience, doubted the company had just made history. *Unbound, A Festival of New Works*, unveiled 12 world premieres in a seven-day period, then played them in repertory for two weeks.

Three years in the planning, the festival's choreographers (five of them San Francisco Ballet debutants), created their works on an ingeniously complex schedule devised by artistic director Helgi Tomasson, who wound up his 33 years running the company on a note of administrative and artistic triumph.

Tomasson had conceived a similar but more modest festival in 2008, which gave us memorable pieces by Mark Morris and Christopher Wheeldon. Even so, *Unbound* had seemed an act of hubris. San Francisco Ballet shares the War Memorial Opera House with the San Francisco Opera, so Tomasson used a period in summer and fall 2017, to schedule rehearsal time for 12 choreographers, only one of whom, Myles Thatcher, dances with the company. Each visitor was allotted three weeks of rehearsal,

plus a final couple of weeks in the spring, when they all assembled in the rehearsal studios. To entertain the subscription audience during that period, Tomasson imported the National Ballet of Canada, which brought its terrific staging of John Neumeier's still provocative *Nijinsky*.

But the most brilliant stroke in the making of *Unbound* was the division of the 78-member company into three mini-companies, each with its own proportion of principals, soloists and corps members. Each of the choreographers, whose sojourns were staggered, was (with some variations) assigned one of those groups. It all worked smoothly and something wonderful happened; because the pool of dancers for all the choreographers was limited, members of the corps and soloists were cast more prominently than they would be normally and many emerged from *Unbound* with career-making performances. Revelations abounded in multiple appearances by Canadian Benjamin Freemantle, elegant Lonnie Weeks, fiery Solomon Golding, buoyant Esteban Hernandez and versatile Jahna Frantziskonis. This is the new generation at San Francisco Ballet and this springboard was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Tomasson has said that he staged the

festival to see what was going on in classical dance in the second decade of the 21st century, and the evidence was there onstage. He encouraged modest experimentation from the participants, who were limited to 30-minute durations, and all made use of the brilliant lighting director James F. Ingalls. We were regaled with a wide variety of themes and approaches. Tomasson went out of his way to choose the participants with diversity in mind. The contributions of Alonzo King and Dwight Rhoden suggested that African American classicists have a role to play in this company, while the arrival of Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and Cathy Marston slightly compensated for Tomasson's relative neglect of dance-making women over three decades.

Although *Unbound* was not intended as a competition, the Brits, collectively, left the most winning impression. Perhaps Wheeldon, who, like fellow choreographer Stanton Welch, has worked here for well over a decade, had an advantage. He knows the company dancers' styles and temperaments intimately and made *Bound To*, a gorgeously appointed homage to performers he loves.

Wheeldon may have risked sentimentality in this condemnation of smart

phones and other electronic paraphernalia that isolate us from each other. The curtain opens on the lights from phones flickering in the dark. The dizzying solos for Weeks and the incandescent Angelo Greco seem rooted in the despair of solitude. Wheeldon banished pointe shoes for this ballet; even in soft footwear, Yuan Yuan Tan, bereft of her cell phone, was never more captivating than in her final duet with Carlo Di Lanno.

Virtually unknown in the U.S., Marston made a smashing company bow with *Snowblind*, the only pure narrative of the festival, a distillation of Edith Wharton's bleak 1911 novella, *Ethan Frome*, which proved consistently gripping. The choreographer was eminently wise in physically characterizing her central trio of tortured protagonists locked together for all eternity and she inspired three of the festival's great performances from Sarah Van Patten (the needy Zeena), Ulrik Birkjaer (the despairing Ethan) and Mathilde Froustey (the sensual Mattie).

The same evening concluded with *Anima Animus* by the final debutant, David Dawson, hitherto unknown in the Bay Area. This festival's finest neoclassical essay, it was a technically demanding work that sent Maria Kochetkova and Sofiane Sylve catapulting through a silvery landscape. This was the most involving of the festival's pure abstractions, though good words should be spared for Welch's *Bespoke* for its musicality (Bach) and its sleek ensemble contribution. Edwaard Liang's portentous *The Infinite Ocean* was watchable for its Tan-Tiit Helimets duet.

Two choreographers displayed familiar fingerprints. Although King's San Francisco-based Lines Ballet is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, it seems his stretched classicism does not adapt with total success to other companies. True, his commissioned *The Collective Agreement* did boast a gorgeous new score by jazz great Jason Moran, but King's constant testing of the extremities challenged these dancers in an uncomfortable way. The performance had great vitality, but, of the three duet pairs, only Sylve and Helimets proved adaptable, and all of King's unison ensembles connoted little but busyness.

That same quality oddly enhanced Justin Peck's *Hurry Up, We're Dreaming*, a cleverly and congenially constructed

romp that suggests a summer of love explosion on a New York subway platform, set to recordings by the band, M83. Peck put his 14 dancers in sneakers (which disconcerted many in the audience) and moved them in and out of dazzling patterns (of the great moments, I relished a human jelly roll sequence).

Two pieces stood out for their maverick quality. Nothing else arrived with the sheer originality of Trey McIntyre's wholly adorable *Your Flesh Shall Be a Great Poem*, set to the wistful and bouncy pop recordings of Chris Garneau. This is a

quasi-autobiographical number, mingling memories of the choreographer's eccentric grandfather with a meditation on a solar eclipse. The vocabulary shuns traditional ballet and favours an arm-rolling, floor-hugging style that bespeaks great tenderness. It all flows like a dream and it made a star of Freemantle, who encountered the women in his past (Sasha De Sola, Jennifer Stahl) but settled for a duet with a four-legged stool, which might represent any number of things.

Unbound did not lack for outrageousness. It descended in the guise of Arthur Pita's *Björk Ballet*. Arranged to music by the Icelandic composer and pop diva, this is an inconsequential, bespangled tranche of dancing dada. Seen at the end of the four programs, the work seemed both over the edge and a bit refreshing. Pita boasts a flair for knowing excess. The movement here often captured the combination of sweetness and sophistication that goes to the heart of this composer. A fisherman in white face shared stage space with a legion from a PG-rated Roman orgy. Sometimes, the movement even connected with the song lyrics. At least the work had pizzazz.

San Francisco Ballet will reprise selections from Unbound during its visit to Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center in October and at London's Sadler's Wells in May 2019. ^{DI}



Top: San Francisco Ballet's Yuan Yuan Tan and Carlo Di Lanno in Christopher Wheeldon's *Bound To*

Bottom: San Francisco Ballet's Carlo Di Lanno, Sofiane Sylve and Luke Ingham in David Dawson's *Anima Animus*

American Ballet Theatre's new two-act production by Alexei Ratmansky of Marius Petipa's *Harlequinade* — known at its 1900 premiere in St. Petersburg as *Les Millions d'Arlequin*, and soon thereafter as *Arlekinada* — has so far met with a wide range of reactions. Following its world premiere, the *New York Times* headlined Brian Seibert's review: "Harlequinade' Has Charming Baubles, but Why Do It?"

My own reaction was awe for the effectiveness of the 118-year-old ballet, which offered varied theatrics and challenging showcases for American Ballet Theatre's dancers, as well as for students from its Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School of ballet. In short, this *Harlequinade* presented a fitting and fresh homage to a legendary balletmaster, whose bicentenary is being marked this year by dances and dancing that give renewed lustre to a dance-maker whose reputation is based at times nowadays on dubious remakes of ballets that bear his name. Meanwhile, taking casual measure of my fellow theatregoers, their laughter-laced responses to the dances and narrative plot points, not to mention rounds of applause for the dancers' more expert performing, suggested their enthusiasm.

Ratmansky has staged the approximately 100-minute production, including intermission, with care for its Russian roots. Its subject concerns a foursome of central commedia dell'arte characters as seen through Petersburg's then-Francophile sensibilities: Harlequin, a prankish servant; Columbine, his strong-willed ladylove with an overbearing father; Pierrot, an ineffective but loyal servant of Columbine's father; and Pierrette, wife of Pierrot, sympathetic to Columbine's plight.

The narrative's delicately tangled arc evolves as a sometimes slapstick affair, literally so when Harlequin, as mercurial trickster, works with the traditional hinged wood-snapping slapstick that is transformed by a good fairy into a magic wand. With melodious support from Riccardo Drigo's score, the action of *Harlequinade* presents a felicitous mix of vivid pantomime, full-bodied and geometrically arranged character dancing, as well as clear,



BY ROBERT GRESKOVIC

seemingly simple classical dancing. With the choreography's inclusion of various dances for children — at times 32-strong for a suite of miniature commedia characters — *Harlequinade* entertains and engages.

As with any number of Petipa ballets, including the grander and more familiar *Nutcracker*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Raymonda*, *Harlequinade* concludes its narrative plot at the start of its final act. Here, once the business of approving the marriage of a couple of lovers who had to overcome obstacles to their union, the theatrics can blossom into an extended suite of fine dancing. In this case, that means a polonaise, a harlequinade (here in the form of a carnival-like quartet of dances for classically schooled children), an allegorical classical divertissement representing a hunt for fluttering larks, all capped by a galop of grand proportions.

None of this means to say that the plot is without theatrical dimensions. Ratmansky's faith in careful arrangement of pantomime stocks his ballet with compelling visual details and fun-loving action. Delighted laughter consistently arose during the five performances I attended at the sight of a dummy Harlequin being thrown as a dismembered mannequin from a balcony, only to be tossed into an alcove like so many logs on a fire and ultimately made miraculously whole and brought back to life by the good fairy's intercession.

When the dancing flows forth in earnest, further dance delights and dancer

showcasing can rule the day. Space does not permit a detailed description of the marvellous textures and tones ballet dancing can produce from Petipa's hand (many made of simpler means than those of the tricked-out, ramped up efforts of 20th-century remakes). The range provided by Ratmansky's "reading" of this Petipa work, lovingly based on historic notations of *Harlequinade* held in the Harvard Theatre Collection, goes from incrementally configured, grounded group dances to finely gauged ballet dances, especially those for the 12-strong female ensemble of Larks and, portraying a central lark, Columbine.

Robert Perdziola's scenery and costumes, based on the original scheme by Orest Allegri and Ivan Vsevolozhsky respectively, deserve an essay all their own detailing the many fine points and fanciful effects.

The original Columbine was Mathilda Kshessinskaya, sometimes recollected as wielding undue influence over the imperial ballet due to her liaisons with the heir to the throne. Looking at what Ratmansky has divined of the dancing she did here, her reputation as a formidable technician seems more noteworthy than any historical gossip. In the often-demanding challenges of this role's choreography, Isabella Boylston made the most effective showing in the current production, sustaining the extended work that is asked of Columbine from a single point of balance. At times, such moments involved pulsing hops while working geometric accents with her extended leg. Cassandra Trenary mostly matched Boylston's aplomb in another cast.

Of the four men performing Harlequin, James Whiteside turned in the most confident portrayal. His scampish persona, athletic, aerial dancing and secure partnering shone. Daniil Simkin had some impressive moments with Harlequin's bounding jumps. The characters of Pierrot and Pierrette have less demanding dancing, but both Thomas Forster and Gillian Murphy, respectively, filled out this sleepy husband and headstrong wife duo with wit and ease. Roman Zhurbin was memorable as Cassandre, Columbine's blustering father, and Duncan Lyle made subtle work of the foppish suitor Léandre. ▯

American Ballet Theatre's Isabella Boylston (Columbine) and James Whiteside (Harlequin) in Alexei Ratmansky's *Harlequinade*
Photo: Marty Sohl

Benjamin Millepied may have prematurely thrown in the towel as the director of the Paris Opera Ballet, but for many Parisians he still retains the image of a good guy with the right intentions. Despite having gone back to the United States and his L.A. Dance Project, he can present a triple bill at the prestigious Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, sell out the house on his name alone, and be acclaimed at curtain call. None of the pieces on offer — including one by him — were, however, terribly exciting.

The first piece, *Second Quartet*, by young French choreographer Noé Soulier and commissioned for the Los Angeles company, was uneventfully experimental for such a soirée. It required the dancers to do little else other than dodging or playing with invisible objects. A pity, as the true asset of the evening was the overall quality of the dancers, including the excellent Axel Ibot, who left Paris Opera to join Millepied's company.

The fabulous dancers were given free rein in Millepied's *Bach Studies (Part 1)*, whose well-crafted, stylish and sometimes spectacular choreography strangely veers to semi-naked drama à la Béjart to the *Overture from St. Matthew Passion*. Millepied's neoclassicism has brains and brawn, yet still lacks a true identity. He lost himself halfway with this mélange of the pagan and the religious.

Ohad Naharin's 1996 *Yag* also erred on the side of convoluted intentions. Much talk about death and identity is uttered by the dancers amidst piecemeal dancing to a musical medley.

At the Paris Opera, Millepied's successor Aurélie Dupont is these days the subject of myriad recriminations from the dancers. Indeed, a satisfaction survey initiated by the CEA (Commission for artistic expression) and containing 130 questions — which 108 out of 154 dancers answered anonymously — was leaked to *Le Figaro*, France's main conservative daily newspaper.

The journalist relating the facts refers to the "affair" as an "atomic crisis" before revealing the dancers' main grievances about Dupont's management; she is generally maligned as an abrupt, insensitive, unsympathetic director. Her

detractors say she is often missing, quipping that she is either shopping on Avenue Montaigne or taking Gaga classes in Tel Aviv.

In truth, she does continue to dance here and there. Indeed, she went straight from being an étoile to becoming the director of people who were only recently her peers, which cannot be a very comfortable position to hold. Though Dupont enjoys a great reputation both with the dancers as well as the public as one of the last international stars at the Paris Opera, she may lack experience in management. She was never a ballet master; in fact, she turned down an offer to replace Laurent Hilaire following her retirement. The question then is why she accepted to take on the more burdensome if prestigious dance director job.

What she is thinking right now is anyone's guess as she has not made any public comments. Only Stéphane Lissner, director of the Paris Opera, spoke

briefly to reaffirm his unconditional support for the woman he chose as Millepied's successor.

No other comments were forthcoming, especially concerning the allegations of moral harassment apparently undergone or witnessed by 77 percent of the dancers who answered the survey. Another 26 percent declared themselves victims or witnesses of sexual harassment.

Once upon a time, Rudolf Nureyev would famously throw his cup of tea at dancers and no one dared protest. What's more, dancers of that generation often speak fondly of those days and the Tatar tyrant. When I interviewed Brigitte Lefevre at the beginning of her tenure as director in 1995, I remember she said the dancers tended to complain a lot and that she wished they were just happier.

Étoile emeritus Ghislaine Thesmar, now 75, went one step further as she spoke out about the current situation on French radio where she had been invited to talk about her new biography. The Paris Opera is no longer a theatre, she said, it's a spa. "It was much more Spartan in my time and a rap on the fingers made you learn quicker." Well, it takes all kinds.

Thesmar's autobiography is titled *Une vie en pointes*. A life in pointe shoes is something that some ballerinas at the Paris Opera can apparently only dream of these days. Despite Dupont's announcement to accentuate ballet, the season has been dedicated to contemporary creations or reprises mostly, and some ballerinas complain that they only get to put on pointe shoes for the yearly promotion exam, le concours. *DI*

Paris



BY FRANÇOIS FARGUE

Paris Opera Ballet artistic director
Aurélie Dupont
Photo: Sophie Delaporte

Farewells — of a kind — by three long-established men loomed large on the London spring season. Lin Hwai-min, who founded Taiwan's landmark Cloud Gate Dance Theatre in 1973, announced his retirement as artistic director and presented his final company work, *Formosa*, as part of a world tour. Final works are often written about as eulogies for a whole career, but let me instead focus on the piece, which was among Cloud Gate's best.

Portuguese explorers in the 16th century called Taiwan "Ilha Formosa" (beautiful island), and both words are apt for Lin's creation, which was not only beautiful, but felt curiously like a kind of island itself. Beginning and ending with projections of the sea, Lin populated his choreographic terrain with nine distinct scenes, each as contained and as numinous as the poems that accompanied them. Initially pastoral — a rustic line dance, a hushed image of a watcher (as portrayed by a poised, passing soloist) transfixed by a white egret — the scenes became more turbulent, with ragged rushes evoking the nervous energy of cities; with factions at war; and with catastrophe, as thuds like falling bombs scattered the dancers into panicked patterns. Behind them, stunning animations showed Chinese typography scrolling, drifting and exploding. Indeed, Lin's exquisite choreography seemed as distilled, as elegant and as dense with imagery as the Chinese script itself, and even at its most violent was never less than beautiful — *Formosa*.

A different kind of poetry came in the shape of *Life is a Dream*, by Danish choreographer Kim Brandstrup for Rambert — the farewell company commission by retiring artistic director Mark Baldwin. Though billed as a narrative drama — and indeed based on one (a 17th-century Spanish play by Pedro Calderón de la Barca) — Brandstrup had buried any semblance of plot to give free rein to imagery, mood and symbolism.

The premise is that a slumbering theatre director is dreaming of a play rehearsal, but the feel was more cinematic than theatrical. The set by the Quay Brothers (best known for their work in film and animation) showed a studio with windows that became screens for projections of trees, skies, fields — imaginary worlds beyond the stage. The studio itself — a metaphor

for the creative imagination, but also a kind of chamber of existential doubt — was populated by doppelgangers and alter egos. Shadowy figures of actors swirled moth-like around a sinewy central duo, played by three different couples in succession, and two figures (Liam Francis and Miguel Altunaga) playing the role of the stage director. Who was acting, who directing? Who was real and who imagined? As in a dream, sequences looped, images bloomed and faded, everything felt charged with significance and yet nothing was understood.

For the second half, the stage was stripped of its illusory walls and windows, and though the choreography was no less poetic or beautifully composed, the lack of narrative anchors became an obstacle. Out of the twilight zone, we needed something more solid.

itself faltered. After a gripping opening in which Khan played a shell-shocked soldier reliving the torments of war, it slowly lost contact with its character and succumbed to more generic images of suffering, swollen by musical crescendos that — like the show's own publicity — repeatedly raised false expectations of endings.

Northern Ballet's *Jane Eyre* by British choreographer Cathy Marston (like the above works, also at Sadler's Wells) began with a lone woman struggling to cross the stage while being lifted, surrounded and blocked by a male chorus. It's an apt image for the character of Jane Eyre, but also resonant for Marston herself, as a classical choreographer in a male-dominated field. Over 20 years, Marston has developed her own economical style of ballet storytelling, and though *Jane Eyre's* novelistic sweep sometimes sprawls, her production

BY SANJOY ROY



London

What kind of farewell was Akram Khan's *Xenos*? Billed, accurately, as Khan's last full-length solo performance, many inferred that it somehow marked his departure from the stage altogether. Not at all true — but it did no harm to publicity and encouraged eulogies. Like his last full-length solo *Desh*, *Xenos* sets Khan as a small figure within a large history — here, an Indian soldier in the First World War. The production was grand: a huge rampart screeed with soil; musicians up high on a platform, like gods; lighting that shadowed, searched and flushed the stage. The performance hit home, too: Khan, as ever, commanded the stage even against this imposing backdrop. Yet the piece

for Northern Ballet kept connected to the story of her heroine. Neither princess nor siren, she is a woman who marshals her resources to forge a life for herself against the odds in circumstances not of her making.

In contrast to the men making their various farewells, Marston seems at last to be moving further into the limelight. Northern Ballet recently announced a new work from her about Queen Victoria — though I, for one, would love also to see what she might make of more marginalised characters such as *Jane Eyre's* demonised Bertha — the "madwoman in the attic" rather than the upstanding or inspiring heroine. *DI*

Oddly enough, La Scala Ballet in Milan and Rome Opera Ballet in the capital sometimes seem to follow the same artistic paths, proposing the same programs in the same period — as happened in their spring triple bills. Both presented Jirí Kylián's *La Petite Mort* and choreography set to Ravel's *Boléro* — Béjart's iconic *Boléro* in Milan and Johan Inger's *Walking Mad* in Rome. Yet the two companies have less in common than one can imagine.

The Scala dancers' current artistic condition still benefits from former director Makhar Vaziev's strong approach to the daily work and care of artistry. The younger dancers that Vaziev helped bloom are now the pillars on which the company's present director Frédéric Olivieri can build.

Béjart's celebrated *Boléro* is a sensual and mystic Dionysiac liturgy, led by a soloist dancing on a red table, surrounded by men who will, in the end, orgiastically "destroy" him or her. Created on a woman (Duska Sifnios), the main role is also performed by a man; for both, it is a big challenge to embody the necessary peak of physical magnetism.

This season, superstar Roberto Bolle reclaimed the role for himself, exerting a spell over the huge audience of fans who idolize him. His performance was manneristic and self-indulgent, with an ostentation of his lines and torso.

On the contrary, the younger generation of talents surprised with the intensity and awareness with which they tackled the role. The greatest pleasure came from two recently named principal dancers, both in their 20s: blonde Virna Toppi and brunette Martina Arduino. Their different approach — the more dramatic and wild Toppi; the more iconic and unreachable Arduino — clearly showed these dancers' personalities and their potential to mature as artists.

The problem is this: talented dancers need more opportunities to perform in more and different programs each season. How can a dancer improve just performing a role three or four times a year? It is the old problem of the Italian ballet companies in opera houses: they are just given the last few places left in the schedule after opera productions and concerts have been accommodated.

Milan & Rome



BY SILVIA POLETTI

The new classic ballet produced in La Scala this year — the lovely and technically demanding *Le Corsaire* in the production by Anna-Marie Holmes — is a good showcase for the young dancers, who generally showed a bright and correct style. They gave the impression that they very much enjoyed dancing this never-ending pinwheel of grand pas, variations and character dances conceived by Petipa in his glory days.

Arduino was a lively Medora, outstanding for her technical skills and also her stage presence, with joyful communicativeness. Toppi, as her friend, Gulnare, showed a sure and bold attack in the beautiful pas de deux de l'esclave, which is the second bravura offering of the ballet after the world-renowned pas de deux for Medora and Ali.

In the role of Ali, with the tour de force of the spinning and saut de basques, a new talent emerged. Taking the place of the injured principal Claudio Coviello, Mattia Semperboni, a corps de ballet member, truly stole the show with his clean airy jumps and whirling pirouettes.

Rome Opera Ballet is also improving under the direction of Paris Opera Ballet étoile Eleonora Abbagnato and her deputy director, and former colleague in Paris, Benjamin Pech. But Abbagnato is compelled to audition each season to increase

the basic number of company members. New members come in for some productions, then are let go, their number always oscillating due to budget. As a result, it could happen that the coming revival of *Sleeping Beauty* — produced last year with 70 dancers — will have only 50 dancers.

Swedish choreographer Johan Inger's *Walking Mad* is a surrealistic piece about the failing hopes of life in which the Roman dancers gave their own personal colours to loneliness and madness. Also presented was William Forsythe's amazing cathedral of classic idiom, *Artifact Suite*, which has been regularly shown with the 35-member cast intensely involved in the rigorous dance patterns of this masterpiece.

Later, we saw the Rome premiere of Kenneth McMillan's *Manon*. Incredibly, this renowned classic was almost unknown by the Roman audience, who loved it at first sight. The dramatic aspect of the story was well covered by the whole company. *Manon* was performed by Abbagnato herself and Des Grieux by guest German star Friedemann Vogel. Above all, *Manon* gave opportunity to a new dancer to be under the spotlight. Dark-haired Giacomo Castellana, elegant and bold, may be a too gentle Lescaut, but he showed interesting potential and seems to be another talent in the making. ^{DI}



Copenhagen

BY ANNE-MARIE ELMBY

April 14 saw a world premiere by the Royal Danish Ballet of Liam Scarlett's *Queen of Spades* (*Spar Dame* in Danish) based on Alexander Pushkin's short story. Every movement served the dramatic story of young Hermann, who becomes obsessed over learning an old Countess' secret of her legendary three winning cards. To do this, he exploits the love of her trusting protégée. Martin Yates, together with Scarlett, arranged a score selected from several Tchaikovsky works, which closely interplayed with the memorable choreography.

A prologue showed how the young Countess learned the mystery of the cards. With a leap in time, we switched to the officers' quarters, where Hermann (Andreas Kaas) sees the legend enacted by Tomskij, the Countess' grandson.

Kizzy Matiakis' Countess was steadfast in her stately aloofness. Only when Kaas assailed her in her bedroom in a breakneck pas de deux did cracks in her façade appear. He beseeched her to reveal her secret, then almost forced himself onto her, before in desperation he threatened the elderly Countess with a pistol, causing her to die of fear. This tour de force of emotional turmoil left the audience breathless, with a welcome interval to recover. After his last performance in the role, Kaas was not surprisingly appointed principal onstage.

As the Countess' ward, Lisa, Ida Praetorius was young and confident. Jón Axel Fransson's Tomskij seemed honestly disappointed at her infatuation with Hermann, but later consoled the devastated girl.

In the second cast, Alexander Bozinoff's Hermann was more lyrical and less

calculated than Kaas, until the demon of gambling caught him in his net and made him forsake all others, including Alexandra Lo Sardo's innocent Lisa. When all was lost and J'aime Crandall's ghostlike Countess crept up behind him, he was extremely moving in his anguish.

In the third cast, 22-year-old corps dancer Tobias Praetorius rendered a full-grown interpretation of Hermann. Lena-Maria Gruber's big-eyed Lisa was dazzled by his attention, and their pas de deux suggested that love could have been an option had he not been incurably magnetized by the secret of the cards, a secret that Ji Min Hong's powerful Countess never intended to disclose.

The poster for the ballet showing Matiakis' white-powdered face was used as a stage-high panel to designate the Countess' bedroom, together with a high-backed chair and table. Clever staging turned tables into beds for the officers, and the Countess' sarcophagus opened into the large, green card table, where Hermann would meet his destiny. Within his sparse scenography, Jon Morrell used rococo style costumes in black and white with a flash of red for the Countess' opulent ballroom dress.

On June 1, Royal Danish Ballet artistic director Nikolaj Hübbe opened the Ballet Festival in Copenhagen in blazing sun outside the Royal Theatre. His motto for the festival was to "make Denmark dance," and a large group of young and old gathered to do just that, joining in a dance he had previously uploaded on the internet for the public to learn. Shorter pieces choreographed by company dancers were shown on an outdoor stage.

The festival was not dedicated to August

Bournonville, as in 1979, 1992 and 2005, because the company can do so much more, said Hübbe in his opening speech, but he also stated that Bournonville still has his place at the heart of the Royal Danish Ballet.

In the evening, Bournonville's *Napoli*, in Hübbe and Sorella Englund's staging from 2009, was performed on the Old Stage, with an outdoor screening shown as well. Ulrik Birkkjær, now doubling as a principal with San Francisco Ballet, still has Bournonville in his blood and danced the enamoured Gennaro with zest and true spirit, with Amy Watson as his beloved Teresina.

Next evening's Bournonvilleana mixed bill presented excerpts from *La Sylphide* and a bouquet of solos and pas de deux, including the rarely seen *Pas de la Vestale*, where the male and female dancer do the same steps, a characteristic Bournonville feature.

The title New Sound covered an evening of three new works created in collaboration with current musicians, who performed live onstage. To music from the pop group Øya's debut album *Dreams Rewind*, Oliver Starpov created an otherworldly scenario, where Eukene Sagües' supple body surrendered to the manipulations of Kaas and Liam Redhead, while Starpov, suspended high over them like a guardian angel, slowly glided across a backdrop video of a disaster.

Faroese musician Teitur Lassen sang and played his own songs to Alessandro Sousa Pereira's *Individual*, while five dancers explored physical expressions of loss. Choreographer Sebastian Kloborg's curious mind unfolded in a duet, *Melopoeia*, sprinkled with witty details for Watson and singing multi-musician Lydmor (Danish Jenny Rossander) in red velour and neon-painted bodies. The performance closed with Akram Khan's inciting *Vertical Road* from the repertoire, with Redhead as the wandering loner confronted by a pulsating group.

At the splendid gala on June 9, international guests paired up with Royal Danish Ballet dancers in five significant pas de deux. Among them, perfection ruled in Dorothee Gilbert's superb partnership with Marcin Kupański in Gsovsky's *Grand Pas Classique*, and Ida Praetorius and Semyon Chudin delighted with their *Sleeping Beauty* pas de deux. ^{DI}

The Royal Danish Ballet's Andreas Kaas (Hermann)
in Liam Scarlett's *Queen of Spades*
Photo: Henrik Stenberg

The Norwegian National Ballet premiered a tough triple bill in April, *An Evening with the Masters*. Tough because each of the works — by Jirí Kylián, William Forsythe and Alan Lucien Øyen — asked something from the audience, especially the Kylián and Øyen pieces.

The evening opened with Kylián's *Tiger Lily*, a ballet seldom danced. The Oslo company is the first in Norway to have been given the chance since its premiere in Holland in 1994. The ballet was a commission for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of artist Piet Mondrian's death; the title refers to his beautiful charcoal work of a tiger lily flower.

Later, the painter became known as the father of abstract geometric art, working with primary colours. His paintings from this abstract period feature straight lines, both horizontal and vertical, with primary colours on the surfaces that occur in between.

Kylián's aim in *Tiger Lily* is to have the dancers create straight lines, which is nearly impossible for the human body. It is hard to come to grips with Kylián's thinking in this piece, which is chaotic and features some very abrupt moments. Mondrian's geometric shapes are suggested when long white floor mats are lifted up off the floor and, as they hang partly suspended over the stage, for a moment one can see the beginning of a Mondrian work of art.

The dancers never managed to copy his play with geometric shapes, however. On the side of the stage, a quartet played music from such different composers as Webern, Cage, Kurtág and Bach, which added to the chaos.

Also new to the Norwegian audience was Forsythe's *In the middle, somewhat elevated*, a 1987 ballet that starts with a bang and continues at full speed. The way the first part is constructed is much like street dance battles. One or a group of dancers enters the centre of the stage and show off what they can do. Everything happens fast and they stop when they have done their "tricks," leaving the space to somebody else.

We got some great dancing for sure from the Cuban dancers Yolanda Correa and Yoel Carreño, using their highly developed technique for all it is worth. Whitney Jensen and Riccardo Ambrogi also made a deep impression doing the same.

The third work, *Timelapse* from Norwegian choreographer Øyen, is completely different. Øyen has taken words about time from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, which he speaks aloud throughout the whole dance. Time can be so many things — time lapse, time out, overtime, lifetime and quality time — all creating different feelings and moods, which Øyen puts into the dancing. Poetic and sad, or happy and joyful — every aspect of human reactions can be found, and he uses many different languages of dance in solos, duets and trios and, by the end, close to a full ensemble.

The contrast between the three pieces is enormous, but, in different ways, they each leave one with many thoughts.

At the end of May, Norwegian National Ballet brought back *Swan Lake* to the stage. This time it was not the Alexander Ekman version, which was recently added to the repertoire. Instead, it was the version Anna-Marie Holmes staged for the company in 1997. Her version is very true to the original from Petipa, Ivanov and Sergeyev, with some personal touches. For instance, at the very end, Rothbart turns into stone when the sun hits him, becoming a part of the rock he has climbed.

As *Odette/Odile*, Correa took her stage appearance a big step forward. She has always had a strong technique, but now she understands the importance of acting, and has nearly transformed as an artist.

As *Odette*, she was poetic, with her long never-ending lines. She kept the movements going without a stop, however slow they were. As *Odile*, she was playful, with a strong flirtatious look in her eyes, and it was not difficult to understand why Siegfried was taken in by her charm. She danced the third act's technical challenges without any problems.

As Siegfried, Carreño was a little restrained when it came to acting, but he was solid as a rock with his partnering. The contemplative solo in the first act was beautifully danced, and his jumps and turns were spot on. The whole company joined in with joyful, energetic dancing, both in the first and third act, and the corps de ballet in the white acts did exactly what they are supposed to do, dancing together as one.

This was an evening to sit back and enjoy without having to twist one's brain with mysterious questions. Holmes oversaw the rehearsals herself, and her imprint on the performance was easy to see in the quality onstage.

Also, the orchestra had an extremely good evening under the baton of Vello Pähn. It helped that the acoustics in the opera house are excellent, so that every instrument can be heard, but that means they have to be dead on, or the audience will hear every misplayed tone. *DI*

BY FREDRIK RÜTTER



Norwegian National Ballet's Silas Henriksen with Alan Lucien Øyen (on right) in rehearsal for Øyen's *Timelapse*
Photo: Erik Berg

Each year Sydney's winter is warmed by the appearance of Bangarra Dance Theatre, almost always with a new work at the Sydney Opera House, where it's a resident company.

Thirty years old in 2019, Bangarra has spent its existence opening doors to Australia's ancient past, one that stretches back, unbroken, for more than 60,000 years. On every occasion, the audience's knowledge of the country's First Nations history and culture is enlarged.

Like the most successful works in the company's rich repertoire, *Dark Emu* offered fresh, welcome insights. As designed by Jacob Nash (set), Jennifer Irwin (costumes) and Sian James-Holland (lights), the production looked gorgeous. The impact, however, was blunted by too much sameness in the dance language and a structure that gave everything the same weight.

The reason was undoubtedly that *Dark Emu*'s choreography was credited to artistic director Stephen Page, company member Daniel Riley, former member Yolande Brown and the Bangarra dancers. That's a lot of cooks. It was also noticeable that, with a significant amount of new, young blood in the ranks, Bangarra's ensemble wasn't quite as sharp as it can be.

Dark Emu was based on Bruce Pascoe's book of the same name, which challenges the widely accepted image of the Indigenous roving hunter-gatherer. Underpinned by Steve Francis' intense, multi-layered

score, scenes gave abstracted depictions of fishing, burning to revitalise the soil and fending off pests, among other tasks.

Dark Emu also made the point, as Bangarra always does, that the spiritual practices so poetically evoked were inextricably linked with daily activities. Then, inevitably, the colonizers came and trampled on this delicately poised existence. It was a lot to cover in not much more than an hour and not always entirely clear in purpose.

A dance in traditional style near the end put the spotlight on a single performer — charismatic Beau Dean Riley Smith — and pointed up the lack of big individual moments earlier. Time and again, the deliberate concentration on swirling, tumbling groups flattened and distanced *Dark Emu*. Just as something started to grab the imagination, there was a brisk trot on to the next idea. Concepts of great moment and emotional possibility were short-changed.

That said, *Dark Emu* was a masterpiece compared with Carlos Acosta's one-act *Carmen*, seen at Brisbane's Queensland Ballet. A co-production with the Royal Ballet and Texas Ballet Theater, *Carmen* was, without exaggeration, the worst ballet from a major company I've seen in more than 40 years.

The incoherent storytelling said only one thing about Carmen's character, making her a sex-mad cipher. Don José was similarly superficial, just weaker. Escamillo was there to toss off a whole lot of ballet tricks. There was no Micaëla, no Frasquita, no Mercedes, no context.

There was also no compelling relationship between the music (chiefly bits from Bizet's opera) and the choreography, but most problematic was the depiction of desire. The ballet was all about sex, but Carmen's overwhelming need is to be free. She dies for her courage and independence, not that you'd know from this ghastly ballet.

Happily, on the same bill, Liam Scarlett's *The Firebird* offered a starkly different view of women's power. While working entirely within the classical idiom, Scarlett gave his Firebird — the Princess, too — qualities of independence and authority so often missing on the classical stage. Made for Norwegian National Ballet in 2013, the work brilliantly interpreted Stravinsky's glittering, gleaming, intoxicating score. Scarlett has had patchy success with narrative ballets, but Stravinsky's music and the original libretto gave him the best of roadmaps. *The Firebird* looked wonderful, too, with a monumental set by Jon Bausor, bathed in James Farncombe's painterly light.

The choreographer's youthful, contemporary sensibility gave *The Firebird* a modern edge while drawing on the mythic elements of Fokine's 1910 original for the Ballets Russes. In the shadow of a vast tree with claw-like roots, the magical Firebird (Lucy Green at the performance I attended) and wicked sorcerer Koschei (Jack Lister) battled for supremacy, equal in force of will and with a palpable erotic charge between them. She tempted him with a golden apple and stroked his face; he embraced her with ardour.

When the wandering Prince Ivan (Camilo Ramos) appeared, the Firebird danced with him, too, but not as a frightened captive. She dazzled and teased, whispering in his ear as she gave him one of her precious feathers.

Scarlett effectively contrasted the Firebird's strength and exoticism with the innocence and playfulness of the women enslaved by Koschei, among them a tender, curious and alert Princess (Lina Kim). Kim and Ramos glowed in their romantic, silken pas de deux and — how delightful! — the Princess, not Ivan, got to destroy the egg containing Koschei's soul.

Performances were vividly realized all round, and Green's mesmerizing Firebird was deservedly greeted with a huge ovation. *DI*



BY DEBORAH JONES



Singapore

BY MALCOLM TAY

Local group Frontier Dance-land continued to challenge its performers and audiences, delving into facets of the human experience on a triple bill presented mid-way through its season. At the School of the Arts Studio Theatre, six company members performed in the first of two premieres, *The colour of there seen from here*, created by fellow dancer Faye Tan and British choreographer Richard Chappell. The piece explored, according to the program notes, “how varying degrees of proximity to others in space affect us emotionally, physically and mentally.”

It began quietly with the dancers plotting their paths across the space, as they shifted their bodies using their palms and feet or slid along the ground on their thighs and shins, their grey costumes almost blending into the shadows of Gabriel Chan’s lighting design. A string of meetings and partings helped boost their appetite for closeness, giving way to sustained excursions as a whole and in smaller units. But, by the end, their bonds were stretched thin, and the ensemble unravelled into a chain of loosely linked arms, each performer pulling away gradually until Joy Wang remained alone, dancing slowly and looking bereft.

Israeli dance artist Shahar Binyamini, too, examined closeness but in a distinctly different setting. In *PARADISO*, his premier work for the troupe, tube lights lined the stage to suggest a cold laboratory for seven androids; white circles marked the dancers’ flesh-toned leotards like medical electrodes. They

strode straight-legged on demi-pointe, their rigid gait interrupted occasionally by physical tics. Counting aloud from one to four, alternating between English and Mandarin, added a thrusting force to their movements. Ultimately, Adele Goh placed Keigo Nozaki’s head on her shoulder, this sole instant of contact between them freezing Nozaki on the spot, as if his heart was about to thaw.

The evening concluded in the theatre foyer with *Dead Bodies*, a restaged excerpt from a 2006 show by French choreographers Annie Vigier and Franck Apertet. Each of the seven performers lay slumped on a square platform, hemmed in by viewers standing around them. Then, in sync with a regular rhythm pricking the air, the dancers moved through a series of gnarled positions. This sequence grew in speed and intensity as they went on to fling themselves onto the wooden platforms, only to rise and repeat. Was this a blunt metaphor for a dancer’s short and painful career? Or an amplified reflection of the body’s last reflexive revolt against death?

The aged charm of the People’s Park area in Chinatown was set in stark contrast against the vigour of six dancers in *Invitation to Intervene*, a guided performance walk organized by a local collective of independent dance artists called Dance in Situ. Choreographed by Chiew Peishan, it brought participants through a once popular but now fading district — which includes sleepy shops under neglected apartment blocks — with guides carrying portable speakers that played Ng Jing’s ambient sound design. Dressed in shades of brick and

mortar, the dancers rolled on pavements and snaked through a stairwell. They bounced off benches, railings and walls. In a pensive moment, they observed mutely as elderly apartment residents dozed on public seats. Though the space was loaded with the audience’s personal memories of the past, these episodes seemed to frame the environment from another perspective and render it unfamiliar again.

At the Esplanade Theatre, a joint production by two local groups drew inspiration from the music of Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, for whom nature was a frequent muse. In *garden. uprooted*, the Arts Fission Company dancers led an intergenerational cast in performing alongside musicians of the Philharmonic Orchestra playing four of Takemitsu’s works: *Between Tides* (1993), *Nostalgia* (1987), *Rain Tree* (1981) and *Tree Line* (1988). Arts Fission artistic director Angela Liong developed a non-linear narrative in response to the music, conceiving the garden as an imagined sanctuary amid the turmoil of migration. With the musicians occupying most of the space in the centre, the action was dispersed among raised areas upstage and along the sides. This resulted in a stage picture reflective of Takemitsu’s fragmented melodies, but unfortunately made the choreography and dancers appear like fleeting afterthoughts, not as integral elements of the performance.

Music and dance were certainly vital partners in kuchipudi performer Amrita Lahiri’s solo concert at the Esplanade Theatre Studio. Kuchipudi originated in the southeastern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, which shares its border with Odisha (formerly Orissa) in the east, where odissi started, and Tamil Nadu in the south, where bharatanatyam was born. This might explain why Lahiri’s dancing embraced features from the two traditions, lyrically mingling the geometry of bharatanatyam with the sinuous poses of odissi.

It was engaging to watch her expressive portrayals of a princess discovering love for the first time and a woman pondering her lover’s faithlessness. In the final section, Lahiri displayed nerve and verve in virtuoso footwork on the rim of a brass plate: a dynamic tribute to Durga, the Hindu goddess of war. ▯

Reviews



Tanec Praha Festival

The 30th anniversary of the Tanec Praha (Prague Dance) festival in June marked a historic milestone in Czech contemporary dance. The longevity is a result of the efforts of founder/director Yvona Kreuzmannová and her colleagues, who started the annual event in the late 1980s when there were few local contemporary dancers and no venues. Czech-born Jirí Kylián made the first festival noteworthy by presenting his Nederlands Dans Theater, and early festivals featured mainly foreign performers. Kreuzmannová struggled to pay for theatre spaces and technicians while dancers performed virtually for free. The local audience harboured conservative notions of dance and people walked out of avant-garde shows.

In 1998, Kreuzmannová received government money

to transform Ponec, a former cinema, into a contemporary dance venue. As a Montrealer, I felt at home in the 170-seat black box theatre — its design was inspired by Montreal's Tangente, whose director, Dena Davida, advised Kreuzmannová. (In a recent presentation to the culture ministry, Kreuzmannová offered Montreal's new Wilder Building dance centre as another example for Prague.)

Tanec Praha in 2018 presented a far-flung international cast that audiences — generally with many youth — loudly cheered.

Growing up in Burkina Faso, Ladjí Kone danced hip hop and studied jazz and classical dance before moving to study in France. In *Màa Labyrinth*, the first of two solos with French musician Erwann Bouvier, Kone passed

under successive cones of light while smoothly co-ordinating his flexible gestures to Bouvier's jaw harp twanging, at times to funny effect.

In the second solo, *Lego de l'égo*, Kone rolled slowly along a white line, an image of subjugation, before rising into a brightly lit space where his strong arm thrusts were reminiscent of Watusi warriors dancing with spears. Otherwise nothing overtly African distinguished him from a well-trained European contemporary dancer, which was regrettable because the piece evoked European imperialism in Africa. It ended with Kone and Bouvier puffing out their chests like competing apes in a comic yet touching scene of a black and a white man acknowledging their primordial common ancestry.

Mexico's Foco alAire presented *Idea de una pasión*, a dance-theatre piece that illustrated how Mexicans cope

with daily threats of violence from drug lords, kidnapers and housebreakers. In an outdoor party setting with dim light and an accompaniment of vintage lounge music, eight men and women partied as violence reigned. Two men fought. A woman committed suicide. In a macabre absurdist scene, a man expressed love to a woman lying dead. The dancers wore frightening masks to illustrate how Mexicans put on a brave face. They also stood in poses that recalled famous paintings like the *Mona Lisa* and Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. One might regard these poses as society's masks on a collective scale. Co-creators Octávio Zeivy and Marcela Sánchez Mota adopted a highly stylized look rather than a realistic one, which they considered would be inappropriately melodramatic in a work about very real danger.

Jirí Pokorný, a former dancer for NDT and Crystal Pite, collaborated with fellow Czech Radim Vizváry, a mime, in *Sunday Neurosis*, about a man's discovery of hidden parts of his character. From a suitcase — a common theatrical symbol of hidden treasures — Pokorný withdrew a female mannequin's head and a dress. While taking selfies, Pokorný was joined by Vizváry, a shadow ego who asserted his place by commandeering the camera and taking selfies of them together. Pokorný eventually put on the dress and a woman's wig, acknowledging this part of his character. Nonetheless, Pokorný was unable to live with his shadow and finally left Vizváry lying dead in the open suitcase. The dancers' command of gesture and subtle characterization gave life to an oft-seen contemporary theme.

Same Same, a duet for two Czech dancers by the French-born Belgian-based choreographer Karine Ponties, tried to create absurdist humour in the vein of silent film comics like Buster Keaton. In a series of unrelated skits, a tall girl tussled with a shorter girl. Their one-upmanship at a service counter had universal comic appeal, but often they pressed too hard for laughs, which telegraphed their intention and dampened the joke.

Among internationally famous artists, Louise Lecavalier returned to the festival a second time with her widely toured 2012 work, *So Blue*. Some new leg stretches and quick turns were apparently added to her long opening solo, which moved through several stages — distraught, frenzied, calm. In her duet with Frédéric Tavernini, their arms sawed the air around their bodies, evoking a dramatic vision of sexual intercourse.

Other notable shows included South Korean Eun-Me Ahn's *Dancing Grandmothers*; Senegal's venerable Germaine Acogny in her own solo, *Somewhere at the Beginning*; Emanuel Gat's *Sunny*; and the festival opener, *East Shadow*, a 2013 duet by Kylián, who was the subject of a special exhibition.

Although called Prague Dance, the month-long festival also presented shows in several Czech cities featuring many Czech contemporary dancers and choreographers.

"Regional performances are difficult because there are no venues," said Kreuzmannová in an interview. "It's similar to the early '90s in Prague. There's no money, but people are enthusiastic. That's what we want to develop."

— VICTOR SWOBODA



Venice Biennale

Captained exuberantly by artistic director Marie Chouinard, the 2018 Venice Biennale dance festival offered choreographic voyages on a Grand-Canal scale as well as meanderings down narrow channels.

Among big shows were those by Marlene Monteiro Freitas who received the Biennale's Silver Lion for promising artists, and Meg Stuart, Golden Lion recipient for career achievement.

Fearlessly creative, Freitas immediately set a powerful image in *Bacchae — Prelude to a Purge* (2017). In front of a backlit wall, 10 white-clad performers stood among black tube furniture and music stands. A woman bent over and "lip-synched" a song with her butt cheeks. Drum sticks became phaluses. Trumpets, masks and stylized gestures created a madcap cabaret. Incongruously, a grainy video showed a child watching a Japanese woman give birth. Overall, an impressive feat of staging, but the ultimate impression

was one of clever theatricality.

Stuart's ironically titled *Built to Last* (2012) examined the notion that people tend to either revere the past or to dismiss it. Many visual time references popped up, including a silly large-model T-Rex skeleton. More nuanced were hints of German Expressionist dance and Vaslav Nijinsky's faun. A fascist figure addressed a group who responded with robotic salutes. Though Stuart's Damaged Goods dancers were compelling, some sequences felt long. A scene with planet-like globes swirling around a woman far outlasted its point.

Was Israel Galván a serious artist or a clown in his highly entertaining 2014 show, *Fla.co.men? Clown/artist* modes alternated unexpectedly. Pretending to follow a choreographic score on a music stand, Galván progressively tore it up and kicked the stand. He lay prone and banged a drum with his head, producing laughs. He produced unease, circling the audience in darkness while

making frightening percussive sounds. He danced barefoot, smashed a jug, beat his chest. All was precisely co-ordinated with excellent musicians. A show as merry as a fiesta.

Joyful, too, was Chouinard's witty *24 Preludes by Chopin* (1999), performed by the 15 female students invited to study in the Biennale College – Dance. They also performed the first group work by Montrealer Daina Ashbee, who presented two small-scale pieces last year in which female dancers banged themselves against floors and walls. The new work's central figure stood on all fours, repeatedly banging her legs and moaning. Without context, the image was so ambiguous, it was meaningless.

Compagnie Marie Chouinard performed a 40-year retrospective of Chouinard works, including delectable early solos like *A Few Ways to Quietly Make My Way to You* from 1980 (sensually danced by Catherine Dagenais-Savard), the over-the-top

Earthquake in the Heartchakra (1985) with its fiery finale, and an excerpt from *S.T.A.B.* (1986) with hypnotic Motrya Kozbur as the plumed female warrior.

Frédéric Gravel's *Some Hope for the Bastards* (2017) presented a strong Montreal cast initially lolling aimlessly onstage, gently thrusting their pelvises. Small groups formed, raising hope of meaningful interplay among the "bastards." Gravel's onstage rock band climaxed thunderously amid blinding spotlights directed at the audience.

A more mesmerizing rhythmic soundscape accompanied *Running Piece* (2018) by Montrealer Jacques Poulin-Denis in which Manuel Roque impressively jogged for an hour on a large treadmill while video images flashed behind him. Roque's body language evolved expressively during this critique of Western on-the-go culture.

Mette Ingvartsen's *to come (extended)* (2017) started with male and female dancers in blue body suits striking group-sex poses. Then, nude, facing the audience, they collectively huffed-and-puffed an "orgasm" before launching into a free-for-all swing dance. Contrasting the blue-suit scenes with the happy-go-lucky swingers apparently said something about people's attitudes toward sex. An entertaining work, it was not deeply informative.

Two works by Francesca Foscarini only partially fulfilled promises. Her duet exploring male-female duality, *Vocazione all'Asimmetria* (2016) had audiences closing and opening their eyes at the words "dark" and "light." The ploy generated surprises but was dropped just as it became

interesting. In Foscarini's world-premiere second piece, *Animale*, Romain Guion reflected light off a handheld mirror as insects chirped. He vigorously shook his head, finally flopping to the floor. Bela Lugosi's recorded voice spoke of "a race of super beings," an inadvertently comic moment. At last, Guion, virtually nude, sat while a video of a unicorn played across his chest. A solo made intriguing by the soloist.

Xavier Le Roy's *Le Sacre du Printemps* presented three performers taking turns "conducting" a recording of Stravinsky's score. A bore. Tepid, too, were two half-hour group pieces by Irina Baldini. *Quite Now* (2018) and *7 Ways to Begin Without Knowing Where to Start* (2017) supposedly explored spatial relations, but they fell into contemporary dance clichés — cold, stilted movement, robotic soundscapes, zero drama.

Baldini might learn from *Figure a Sea* (2015) set on Cullberg Ballet by the Judson Church pioneer Deborah Hay. Motionless, the 17 dancers in white or black cautiously eyed each other, then rapidly crisscrossed the bare stage. As dancers sat or mixed onstage, others milled on the peripheries, imparting an aleatory quality. Seemingly chaotic, the choreography clearly had a guiding energy reminiscent of individuals on a crowded street hurrying to specific destinations. The hour-long work sped along quickly until suddenly, magically, the stage was empty.

Halfway through her four-year Biennale mandate, Chouinard set a brisk festival pace.

— VICTOR SWOBODA



Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa /
Vendetta, Storie di Mafia

If ever there was a ballet destined to thrill, it's *Vendetta, Storie di Mafia*. Predictably a big winner for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, the dazzlingly danced tale of the rise of a Mafia daughter to the head of her clan is a violent and glamorously staged commission from Colombian-Belgian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa.

Inspired by the mystique and violence of the legendary mob cult, *Vendetta* is set in the 1950s on the cusp of changing social values. For almost two hours, the two-act ballet races through well-researched themes of betrayal, vengeance, families, feuds and even feminism, a sort of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Godfather* rolled into one.

Dancing — especially the men's — is a knockout! More vivid than the most swash-buckling sword-fighters, *Vendetta's* mobsters fling themselves into some of the trickiest airborne manoeuvres while acting and fighting with knives, fists and pistols. It's so compelling, they rival the fiercest fights of moviedom.

The storyline about clashes among three Chicago Mafia families is straightforward and easy to follow, yet never simplistic. On the contrary, Lopez Ochoa's originality, clarity and immense subtlety is front and centre.

The plot goes like this: on the day Rosalia, the cherished only daughter of the Carbone clan's Godfather, marries into a rival family, a vicious killing

The Royal Swedish Ballet

Marcia Haydée / *Sleeping Beauty*



occurs, triggering a long-lasting vendetta among mob families. In the course of their criminal activities — police corruption, racketeering, smuggling, gambling and prostitution — the Godfather is killed in a hail of bullets. Enraged that her brothers did not protect him, the daughter sheds her traditional homemaker's role as a good Italian woman, adopts the grim, explosive and perpetually violent mob machismo attitudes, and replaces her father as head of the clan.

Vendetta concludes ambiguously. Rosalia's triumph clearly suggests victory, but hasn't she simply sold out by perpetuating the cutthroat tactics of her male role models?

Vendetta is an enormously ambitious ballet with 28 scenes (a picnic, an Italian wedding and a prostitute-filled Las Vegas casino among them); legions of

costumes, wigs and props; several non-dancers including two padrones and their mobster children (one is the daughter of the lead dancer, the lovely demi-soloist Anya Nesvitaylo); and a large, two-level set. With its \$1 million price tag, *Vendetta* is one of the most expensive ballets Les Grands has ever mounted.

Choreographer Lopez Ochoa's extensive and bankable track record reduced Les Grands' gamble on the ballet's success somewhat. She has choreographed more than 50 works for mostly small and mid-sized companies all over the world, from Scotland and Cuba to Turkey, the United States and Australia. *Zip Zap Zoom*, created for Montreal's BJM in 2009, has proved an enormous success.

In *Vendetta*, her vision is acute, and her research of Mafia life has evidently been extensive, deliberately drawn from documentaries instead of Hollywood. Her preservation of mob mystique is nuanced and exacting; typical Mafia mannerisms (recognized from film) like tosses of head, thrust of chin or shoulder, and the classic swipe of fedoras, are *Vendetta* trademarks, performed with remarkable naturalness and aplomb. Although the choreographer has said she didn't pattern her ballet on the quintessential *Godfather* film starring Marlon Brando, it is difficult to watch the ballet without comparing the two.

Vendetta comes out glowingly ahead.

In addition to the brilliant dancing (especially those sensational fights), Nesvitaylo's character development from naive, loving daughter to hardened criminal, and the spirited corps in its multiple guises, *Vendetta's* large set is vital to the production. An elevated walkway running across the back of the stage emphasizes the urban — literally “underworld” — habitat of the bottom-feeding gangs. It's a perfect vantage point to expand the split-screen style action, an ideal spot for gangsters to settle scores and gun down opponents.

Vendetta's world premiere was one of Les Grands' most technically and artistically smooth in memory, a feat due perhaps to having had two weeks of rehearsals to iron out kinks in the company's private mini-theatre at its new state-of-the-art headquarters in Montreal's theatre district. Within days of its debut, *Vendetta* was booked into a theatre in Israel and negotiations were begun with several U.S. presenters as well.

At press time, proud company executive director Alain Dancyger confirmed that despite its size, *Vendetta* was made to tour by land or sea. For starters, an estimated five 40-foot containers will bring it to Tel Aviv in February. I hope it comes to a theatre near you in upcoming seasons.

— LINDE HOWE-BECK

The curtains are drawn and the opening scene unfolds at the court of King (Andrey Leonovitch) and Queen (Jonna Savioja) Florestan during the christening preparations for their baby, Princess Aurora. Amid three rows of green columns and a royal throne, the members of the court stand motionless. Their ornate textured costumes, each a distinct colour — purple, crimson, brick orange, pale teal and faded emerald — dazzle. The dancers suddenly stir and the ballet begins.

It is as if a pop-up book has come to life. The storybook quality of Marcia Haydée's exquisite rendition, designed by Pablo Nunez, abounds in her *Sleeping Beauty*, which premiered in Stockholm at the Royal Swedish Opera House in 2012 and was remounted there in June. As one of the greatest dancers of the pre-war era, the 81-year-old Brazilian-born Haydée continues to make her mark as an acclaimed choreographer in Europe and Latin America.

The young and vibrant dancers of the Royal Swedish Ballet performed the struggle between good and evil that is at the heart of the fairy tale's drama and suspense. The rose and thorn used in the ballet's design, a symbol of this opposition of good and evil, reflects the Swedish title of the ballet — *Törnrosa*, or rose thorn. The thorns that surround the



kingdom dissolve so that the prince can enter to kiss Aurora as she and the court are about to awaken from their curse of 100 years of sleep. In the Garland Waltz, in the image of Aurora in a deep sleep and in the Vision Scene, winsome scatterings of pink roses and green stems adorn the sets and the tutus of the corps de ballet.

The story begins with the fanciful gift-giving solos of the five good fairies, accompanied by the Lilac Fairy (Nadja Sellrup). Each fairy's unique character and individual artistry as a dancer shone throughout the scene. Haydée's ability to bring out the distinctiveness and strength of each dancer stood out in her remount. Bearing the gift of exuberance for Aurora, the Pink Fairy's solo, magnificently danced by Natalie Ogonek, was sprightly and high-spirited. With knees bent ever so slightly, she stepped elegantly backward, adding playful hip twists to her solo. With gentle shimmers executed with technical precision and elegance, the Yellow Fairy's dance, performed by Kisa Nakashima, bestowed the gift of imagination on the infant. In her sumptuous saffron tutu, she appeared as a flickering dancing doll on the top of a musical box.

Enraged at not being invited to the christening, the evil fairy Carabosse set the court in turmoil. This role was performed with creativity and impressive technical skill by Oscar Salomonsson. His long black hair adorned with a dark-jewelled tiara, Carabosse was dressed in a flowing black robe that accentuated the fairy's waist. He appeared from the back to be a woman, as is traditionally the case with this role. But his male chest and broad shoulders were visible through the costume.

With this character, Haydée twists the characterization of evil in the story, which is neither male nor female but occupies a space in between. The choreography shapes this gender bending. Carabosse's powerful grand jetés were adorned with the swirling fabrics of Salomonsson's dress. Carabosse was raised high in the air by the fairy's seven evil helpers in a frightful mirroring of the way the ballerina is typically lifted by a male dancer in classical ballet. The evil fairy loomed over the helpers, who were absorbed within layers of billowing fabric that surged around them like a dark tornado. Haydée had a male dancer play this role at the premiere to pay tribute to her dancing partner, Richard

Cragun, who died in 2012. Just as Cragun had lifted Haydée for years, she has Carabosse's male helpers lift him high above the ground in this commemorative role.

Haydée's reinterpretation challenges the tradition of Charles Perrault's 17th-century fairy tale, where Carabosse embodies the stereotype of women as the source of evil. But the impact of women dancers in this ballet is diminished when the powerful role of Carabosse is taken away from a female dancer.

The female dancer does triumph through the remarkable performance of Haruka Sassa as Aurora. Sassa performed the Rose Adagio with breathtaking artistry and outstanding technical precision. She greeted the four princes one by one with an impeccable pirouette followed by a strong grand battement. Executed with softness and power, the movement stirred us to feel the music through the rising turnout of each leg extension. Her balance — the most challenging part of the adagio — was perfect.

Her radiant expression throughout the ballet conveyed the goodness that becomes victorious in her marriage to Prince Désiré (Daniel Norgren-Jensen). In the final Wedding Act, Sassa's virtuosity and aura were magnetic in her duet with the prince. She appeared even to affect Norgren-Jensen, whose dancing became more accomplished and expressive in her presence.

Performed brilliantly by the orchestra of the Royal Swedish Opera, led by Philip Ellis, Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* ties good and evil together in this ballet as musical themes. Crystalline sounds contrasted with menacing ones.

— SHEENAGH PIETROBRUNO

Royal Swedish Ballet's Haruka Sassa (Aurora) in Marcia Haydée's *Sleeping Beauty*
Photo: Sören Vilks

dance@ thegrange Series Debut

Company Wayne
McGregor and
the Royal Ballet

Since the opening of the Glyndebourne Festival in 1934, there's been a British summertime phenomenon known as country house opera wherein the upper echelons of British society spend the day watching live opera in converted country estates. Black tie is de rigueur, and performances are punctuated by extraordinarily long intervals so the audience can enjoy a picnic in the gardens. One of them, the Grange in rural Hampshire, invited Wayne McGregor to become their founding director of dance.

The result was dance@thegrange, a four-and-a-half-hour-long performance (including two intermissions) on June 7 that presented the talents of eight dancers from the Royal Ballet (including Francesca Hayward, Sarah Lamb and a guest appearance from Alessandra Ferri) and 10 from Company Wayne McGregor. Alongside the dancing, Rick Guest's photographic exhibition of dancers adorned the walls of the estate's main mansion, and Jane Gordon Clark's sculptures of Royal Ballet principal Ed Watson lined the corridors.

"The idea is about blurring boundaries," McGregor explains in the program notes. "If you think about the shoulders of greatness that



we're standing on, they could be Merce Cunningham's shoulders or Frederick Ashton's — these days it doesn't matter. We want to show that you can see a beautiful, classical pas de deux alongside something more gritty and contemporary and follow the golden thread that runs between them."

The first section of *dance@thegrange* saw four excerpts from McGregor's oeuvre, along with Christopher Wheeldon's *After the Rain*, Frederick Ashton's *Meditation from Thaïs* and a brand-new work by Charlotte Edmonds. There were no pauses between pieces — allowing no time for applause or curtain calls — which forced examination of the disparate works as one continuous whole.

After the first interval, Company Wayne McGregor performed the entirety of McGregor's *Atomos*, and the grand finale after a second dining interval was McGregor's *Bach Forms*, which saw the Royal Ballet and Company Wayne McGregor join forces onstage.

In purely visual terms, McGregor's dynamic, hyperflexible style doesn't vary greatly between the two groups (the difference is in the details) and the linking together of both sets of dancers in *Bach Forms* was remarkably fluid, with classical dancers partnering contemporary and vice versa. Perhaps the most telling of McGregor's repertoire inclusions, though, was the only new commission, Edmonds' *Jojo*.

Edmonds has been on the Royal Ballet's Young Choreographer Programme since 2015 and was its inaugural beneficiary. She's also made pieces for the Dutch National Ballet Junior Company, Yorke Dance Project, the Genée International Ballet Competition and in November 2016 she created a show of new work alongside Robert Binet at the Royal Opera House's Clore Studio as a celebration of their mentorship by McGregor. She only left school three years ago (after studying at the Royal Ballet School and then Rambert)

and thereby represents a voice of the future.

Jojo, a contemporary solo set to Chinese Man's *Pandi Groove* created on a classical ballet dancer, Joseph Sissens, gelled in a very comfortable, spontaneous way, albeit more Michael Jackson than Marius Petipa.

For Edmonds, this is seen as nothing out of the ordinary. "My generation is exposed to that mix already and my natural instinct is to fuse the two together," she said when we spoke in the canteen at the Royal Opera House a few days after the show. "We're getting to a stage where lots of different mediums are being incorporated into dance and you'll find that choreographers aren't just dancers, they might be theatre directors, musicians or whatever. Things used to be black and white, but nowadays everything's merging together and that reflects society, I think."

Are we looking at a future where distinctions between classical and contemporary dance genuinely no longer

exist? You could argue that it's already happening. Look at the paucity of traditional classical works in Paris Opera Ballet's 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 seasons, for example, or Royal Ballet Flanders employing Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui as artistic director, or Berlin State Ballet, from 2019, introducing the co-directorship of Sasha Waltz and Johannes Ohman.

Edmonds doesn't necessarily see it that way. "I grew up watching classical ballet and there's still an audience for it," she says. "It's a question of finding that balance between moving the art form forward and appreciating what classical ballet can be."

Perhaps the venue for the new series itself (which sees Marianela Núñez co-curating alongside McGregor next year) provides some clues as to what lies in wait. Saved from demolition by public outcry in 1975, the Grange is a 1665 estate that now hosts centuries' worth of opera to a primarily older and well-heeled audience who, from the outside, appears to be the epitome of conservatism. That the organizers took a chance on modern dance (as opposed to a showcase of tutus) was a surprise, and the fact that the opera-loving audience took to it so well was perhaps even more so.

Maybe the differences between disciplines that some in the dance world cling onto so passionately just aren't that important to the public. Ultimately, it is audiences who will decide the relevance and commercial success of whatever form contemporary dance and ballet might take in the future, and maybe that was McGregor's point all along.

— GERARD DAVIS



Sun Force

TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER

GALLERYSPACE

As artist in residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario, I was asked to make a performance in response to *Fire & Light*, a 2017 retrospective by master abstract painter Rita Letendre. The research for my duet, *Sun Force*, began with the exhibition catalogue, finding that the titles of three of her works particularly resonated — *Sun Rise*, *Sun Song* and *Sun Force*. My research also included conversations with dancers Ceinwen Gobert and Danah Rosales, and co-curator Wanda Nanibush, who told us about Letendre’s life — she was born in 1928 in Drummondville, Quebec — and her primary concerns — the universe, motion, vibration, abstraction and matter.

Open rehearsals in the museum allowed visitors to become part of the process, which emerged through the building blocks of time, the body, conversation and simply being with one another. Letendre’s paintings were an important part of that being-ness as they informed our thinking and our time together.

In some ways, the performance was an interruption of the large-scale canvases with the body, but it was also a time for the body to learn from another artistic practice.

Tanya Lukin Linklater, born in Alaska and based in northern Ontario, centres her work on Indigenous knowledge production in and through orality, conversation and embodied practices, including dance.

Danah Rosales in open rehearsal of
Tanya Lukin Linklater’s *Sun Force*
Photo: Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario

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