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**The Evolution
of Ballet Training**

**Margie Gillis
Legacy Project**

**Hope Muir Takes
on Charlotte Ballet**

**In Conversation
The Royal Ballet's
Marcelino Sambé**





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CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN CANADA AND ABROAD

SPRING 2018 | VOL. 46 No. 1

Publisher Vancouver Ballet Society

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Art Direction Brenda Finamore

Copy Editor Margaret Jetelina

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Fulfillment Inovva

Printing Horseshoe Press Inc.

Mailing Mail-O-Matic

Advertising Jorssen Media

Social & Digital Media Brynn McNab

DANCE INTERNATIONAL is published quarterly by the **Vancouver Ballet Society** (vbs@telus.net), a not-for-profit organization established in 1946 to support dance.

Opinions expressed within are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of DANCE INTERNATIONAL magazine, the Vancouver Ballet Society, its directors or editors. The editors reserve the right to make changes in materials selected for publication to meet editorial standards and requirements. No part of this magazine may be reproduced without written permission.

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Distributed in Canada by Magazines Canada

Distributed in the USA by Coast to Coast



Canada Council
for the Arts
Conseil des arts
du Canada

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country.



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ISSN 1189-9816
Federal Tax Exemption No. 0308353-22-27
Public Mail Agreement No. 40050848



Here in the office, we have been pouring over the results of *Dance International's* reader survey. The highlight for me has been the discovery of how many of you appreciate our magazine's international focus. This was shared by an overwhelming number of respondents, including many who have been buying the magazine for more than 10 years and many who are newcomers to our pages. Several readers at home

in Canada gave the thumbs up to the way our global reach places Canadian dance and dance artists in a broader context.

Such feedback bolsters all of us working behind the scenes on the magazine, offering clear support for the global perspective we believe is so important in these divisive times. As one respondent noted, *Dance International* offers a "sense of the dance community as a whole entity." Not us versus them, or even us and them: we are all on the same side, making and viewing and writing and reading about dance.

Some of you longed for more of your particular passion, such as classical ballet; others wanted more diversity beyond ballet and contemporary. It's a hard juggling act to cover all the bases in only 64 pages, but I try over four issues each year to offer the kind of variety that supports the broad community of dance.

Ideas about companies deserving review were shared by a few, as well as suggestions for locations to expand our city reports. Feel free, always, to send in ideas for coverage. It may not always be possible to follow up your leads for a variety of reasons, including having a writer available, as well as budget and space, but knowing what's out there is definitely a step forward.

Thank you to everyone who responded. Your support is heartening.

Kaija

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Hope for the Future

Hope Muir brings a fresh vision for Charlotte Ballet



by Steve Sucato



Hope Muir in studio
Photo: Courtesy of Charlotte Ballet

In a dance studio on the grounds of upstate New York's Chautauqua Institution last July, Hope Muir stood before Charlotte Ballet's dancers for one of the first times since being named their new artistic director. She was focused and ready to lead company class before a long day of rehearsals in preparation for the following evening's show.

Named as longtime director Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux's successor over a year before, Muir, the fourth artistic director in the company's history, officially took the helm in the midst of the annual summer residency at Chautauqua, which the company, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, has gone on since the early 2000s.



Charlotte Ballet's Raven Barkley
in Ohad Naharin's *Minus 1*
Photo: Jeff Cravotta

Singer Levi Kreis with Charlotte Ballet
in Javier de Frutos' *Elsa Canasta*
Photo: Jeff Cravotta

As the class began, Muir called out barre exercise instructions infused with visualizations, such as telling the dancers to imagine laser beams shooting diagonally out of their ears that pulled them up, to help with the resistance quality and alignment of their pliés. She followed that with vocalizations to illustrate the rhythm and pace of the exercises.

Hands on and in amongst the dancers, the diminutive Muir was determined and business-like in her teaching approach. She appeared to have one eye looking out for adjustments to individuals, and the other eye on the group's work as a unit. "Engage, engage!" she called out

to the dancers in the British accent the Toronto native picked up after moving to London with her family at age 16. Muir exuded a strong sense of being in her element, teaching the class and passing on her expertise to the dancers who, heeding her call, appeared fully "engaged" in the class.

Muir's journey in dance began at age three when, she says, she was an extremely clumsy child, and her mother thought dance classes would help with co-ordination. From that inauspicious introduction, Muir says, "I got the bug. I ended up doing more and more of it and found out I had a natural ability. The clumsiness was still there, but not in the studio and onstage."

It was when her family, who has Scottish roots, moved to London, that Muir began seriously training for a career in dance. She was one of the first students to attend Peter Schaufuss' London Festival Ballet School (now the English National Ballet School) and went on to a decades-long career performing with English National Ballet, Rambert Dance Company and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.



After her performance career ended, Muir served as an assistant and répétiteur to former Rambert Dance Company artistic director and choreographer Christopher Bruce. She was also a guest rehearsal director for choreographer Crystal Pite and for Ballet BC's artistic director Emily Molnar. In 2009, she joined Scottish Ballet as ballet mistress, later becoming the company's rehearsal and assistant artistic director.

"I started teaching, but after getting pulled back into the studio by various choreographers to set work, I realized how much I really enjoyed being in the studio," says Muir.

When she started to get more responsibility at Scottish Ballet, Muir became interested in all aspects of running a ballet company. "I love finding new choreographic talent, mentoring dancers, and collaborating with theatre directors and acting coaches."

While heading a ballet company wasn't initially on her radar, Muir says it was a natural progression. "I don't know if I could have remained as a rehearsal director for much longer. I needed that next new challenge."

In addition to her experience at Scottish Ballet, Bruce's leadership style at Rambert Dance Company was hugely formative in Muir's approach to being an artistic director. She was impressed with how he communicated and kept the attention of dancers, and by his detail and integrity over performance standards.

Muir feels confident in her ability to lead Charlotte Ballet. So, too, does former fellow company member at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Robyn Mineko Williams. In a recent interview I had with Williams, she said, "When Hope came to Hubbard Street, she had so much experience behind her. She always looked to help and guide the younger dancers like myself, and I looked up to her. I think she is a natural leader and loves that role."

Founded in 1970 as North Carolina Dance Theatre by Canadian Robert Lindgren, who was also dean of the dance department at Winston-Salem's North Carolina School of the Arts, the company was cited by the National Endowment for the Arts as the highest-rated touring company in the United States in 1982. In 1990, North Carolina Dance Theatre relocated to Charlotte and, in 1995, after the tragic death of then artistic director Salvatore Aiello, former New York City Ballet stars Bonnefoux and Patricia McBride took over as artistic director and co-associate artistic director respectively.

In the two decades of Bonnefoux's tenure as artistic director, he financially stabilized the struggling company, built a repertoire of new contemporary ballets augmented by classics and family programming, and solidified the company's place in the Charlotte

dancers. To address this, Muir is looking to have bespoke ballets that are designed for the company's size and personality and that utilize the dancers' individual skills.

One step in that direction is perhaps the boldest addition to Charlotte's repertoire this season: de Frutos' *The Most Incredible Thing*, in March 2018. It's a 2011 Sadler's Wells' production based on Hans Christian Andersen's fable about a king who holds a competition to determine who can make the "most incredible thing," and it features an original score by British pop group Pet Shop Boys.

Unlike Bonnefoux, who choreographed for the company, though sparingly, Muir, who has created some ballets of her own in the past, admits choreographing is not her forte. "I will leave that to more skilled choreographers," she says.

She wants Charlotte Ballet "to be a place that nurtures creativity," and to eventually be able to provide support for young choreographic talent.

Muir, who also has a background in and passion for theatre, says she is 100 percent committed to collaborations with acting coaches, dramaturges and theatre directors in the creation of ballets, seeing this as a way of giving her dancers additional skills. Collaborations with local arts organizations are also high on her priority list. Already in the works are projects with the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, the McColl Center for Art + Innovation and University of North Carolina at Charlotte's departments of dance and theatre.

In order to realize her vision and accomplish the goals contained

Hope Muir wants Charlotte Ballet "to be a place that nurtures creativity," and to eventually be able to provide support for young choreographic talent.

arts community. In 2010, the company moved into the newly constructed Patricia McBride and Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux Center for Dance and, in 2014, changed its name from North Carolina Dance Theatre to Charlotte Ballet.

In taking over from Bonnefoux, who is a tough act to follow, Muir was sensitive about causing unrest by changing things too fast. "I have been through changes in directors in my dance career and know what that can be like." With that in mind, she extended to everyone in the company a year's contract to get to know her and vice versa.

Like Bonnefoux, Muir will oversee the entire organization, including Charlotte Ballet Academy and Charlotte Ballet II, the eight-member junior company, but leave the day-to-day operations to these organizations' own directors.

"Charlotte is an extremely proud and ambitious city, and I think Charlotte audiences want dance on a world level," says Muir. "I've looked at the choreographic voices Jean-Pierre has brought in and have extended the family tree a bit further with some new voices."

For the 2017-2018 season, her first season of programming, Muir has featured several choreographers new to the company, including Swede Johan Inger and Venezuelan Javier de Frutos, and San Francisco Ballet's Myles Thatcher and Williams.

Audiences can still expect to see their favourite story ballets, says Muir. "I think it is really important to continue the art of storytelling through dance." While she is committed to narrative work, it can be challenging to do more traditional story ballets that require large numbers of performers with Charlotte Ballet's 20 non-ranked

in her five-year plan, Muir says she will need to further mould the dancers' technique and abilities to work with a variety of choreographers. "I have an understanding of what dancers need to achieve a certain style. It's about bringing in the right teachers and coaches at the right time throughout the year to introduce them to different styles and underpinning their technique so that when a certain choreographer comes in, [their work] feels natural and organic for the dancers."

As for cultivating a specific group look, Muir doesn't favour one style, but likes a lot of turnout in her dancers, fast footwork, the ability to handle allegro and, most importantly, versatility.

Future goals for Charlotte Ballet include adding to the annual touring the company already does; increasing the ranks of company dancers to 30 and putting them on 52-week contracts (up from 36 weeks); developing a unique repertoire and projects for Charlotte Ballet II; and increasing the organization's \$6.5 million annual operating budget.

Muir says she is adapting to life in Charlotte nicely with her cat, Alfie. She collects books (Kerouac, Dickens and poetry), loves going to plays and rooting for her favourite sports teams (the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team and English Premier League football club Tottenham Hotspur). "I am nostalgic," says Muir. "I like my memories and keep all my old mementos." What she misses most about leaving Britain, she adds, is "I can't seem to make a good cup of tea." ■

THE EVOLUTION OF BALLET TRAINING



INSIGHTS FROM MASTERS OF THE FORM

BY JENNIFER FOURNIER



Thomas Lund rehearsing students of the Royal Danish Ballet School
Photo: Courtesy of the Royal Danish Theatre

Before her final performance with the National Ballet of Canada, in the title role of *Giselle*, Chan Hon Goh began her day as she had most days since she was a child — by taking ballet class. As she did the tendu exercise in company class, she thought about the words of her father and first teacher, Choo Chiat Goh: “Keep your heel on the floor until the very last second — until the toes have to stretch.” She had dedicated her life to mastering the art of ballet, her standards always increasing, and she would end her career still trying to do a perfect tendu.



“Class” has an almost sacred place in the ritual of a dancer’s daily life. Class is where, step by step, the essential building blocks of ballet are acquired, and where, even as a mature dancer, the aim is to continuously secure and refine technique. If the stage provides the opportunity to display mastery, class is a place where dancers must constantly push their limits.

“You have to face everything in class,” says Chan, who is now the director of Goh Ballet Academy in Vancouver. “You can’t be afraid of failure; you have to practise the side where you are weaker, you have to work on the things that are difficult with honesty and humility.”

Class is both laboratory and lecture hall — a dancer’s humbling daily reckoning with the longstanding and unyielding principles of ballet itself.

“You have to remember what ballet is built on. You can’t change the rules of the body; they will always stay the same,” says Nancy Kilgour, a master teacher and pedagogue who has taught at the Royal Ballet School and Canada’s National Ballet School, among others. Kilgour has a profound knowledge of these rules, and was a formative teacher for some of the 20th centuries’ great ballerinas, including Karen Kain, Alessandra Ferri and Darcey Bussell.

Dancers have long sought out the best teachers: Antoine Bournonville brought his young son, August, to Paris to train with Auguste Vestris in 1820, and Diaghilev sent Serge Lifar to work with Enrico Cecchetti to learn the principles of classicism.

Writing in the 19th century, Carlo Blasis advised young dancers to “seek to place yourself under the direction of an experienced master, whose knowledge and talents will serve as true guides to perfection and point out the path that leads to pre-eminence.” Even in this age of YouTube, when young dancers can watch classes at the Vaganova Academy and learn variations on their iPhones, classical ballet — which requires of its practitioners a sophisticated understanding of movement, anatomy, musicality and theatricality — does not lend itself to being self-taught.

The “dancing master” has been integral to the form since the establishment by charter of France’s Academy of Dance in 1662. Until then, codes of comportment flowed directly from the king, and knowledge of them conferred membership in a privileged class. When King Louis XIV entrusted the maintenance of standards and the teaching of dance to a group of 12 individuals, ballet started to assume autonomy as an art form. These early masters were responsible for recording dances and choreographing *divertissements* for the king upon request, but their principal task was to develop dance as a system of knowledge that would provide a strong foundation of training.

Knowledge of anatomy, which was starting to flourish, became an important pedagogical tool. “Turnout machines,” a popular device that strapped the feet to rotating platforms,

were abandoned once dancing masters recognized that turnout started in the hip joint, and advised that students do ronds de jambe and battements to increase rotation of the leg in the hip. Teachers also realized that postural alignment was achieved through internal strength rather than through external supports such as the corset, and began prescribing preliminary exercises to develop the muscles necessary to stabilize the core.

As ballet evolved into a field of study in the late 17th century, dancers began to devote more hours each day to practising the existing dance vocabulary of five positions of the feet and seven basic steps: plier, elever, sauter, cabrioler, tomber, glisser and tourner.

As Susan Leigh Foster observes in her *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire*, these basics had a built-in capacity to promote the achievement of new standards of proficiency with the addition of repetitions, embellishments and increased levels of difficulty. For example, once one mastered a cabriole "simple," a double cabriole could be attempted; changements de pieds could be embellished with the use of arms and head or by beating the legs; and a quarter turn could become a double or triple pirouette.

By the 19th century, Blasis would exclaim that "the dancers of the early part of the last century were inferior to those who flourished toward the latter end of it, and still more to those of the beginning of the present age ... That energetic execution, that multiplicity of steps, that variety of enchaînements

Van Schoor explains that a professional school should have a well-defined curriculum that allows the clear progression of work from junior to professional level. Leading children's bodies through this progression requires a deep and fundamental knowledge of artistic and physical development. Kilgour believes the hardest thing for a teacher to learn is this "build-up," the training of a dancer from the ground up, which she says the great teacher Agrippina Vaganova perfected. "You can't teach by giving young children a ballet class in miniature."

Magdalena Popa, former prima ballerina at the Opera of Bucharest and principal coach of the National Ballet of Canada, recalls her time studying at the then Leningrad Choreographic Institute, now Vaganova Ballet Academy. Popa's teacher was Vaganova's assistant, Naima Valieva Baltacheva. "She had the most beautiful port de bras, and I learned how to move the arms so that the expression goes all the way to the fingernails," says Popa.

"The training had a strong discipline, but the most important thing was co-ordination. The moment you do a position, it doesn't matter what, the body has to be completely alive. Every moment was a co-ordination between legs, arms, head, everything. I kept that all my life and now I pass it on.

"I also learned how to accept criticism, to learn from it and solve the problem. Nobody told me how fantastic I was — no, I don't remember that — but they told me what I needed to work on without putting me down."

If the stage provides the opportunity to display mastery, class is a place where dancers must constantly push their limits.

and pirouettes were not then in practice, and the rising art, unadorned with these complicated embellishments, confined the performer within the narrow limits of simplicity."

This exploration of the limits of technique transformed ballet into a form that bore little resemblance to its origins in 17th-century court dances. However, virtuosic tendencies were limited by these aristocratic origins, which favoured qualities such as ease, charm, lightness and grace. This is still mostly true today, and the greatest dancers were then, and are still, those who can perform extraordinary feats and make them look effortless. As August Bournonville succinctly put it in his *Études chorégraphiques* of 1861, "Noble simplicity will always be beautiful. The astonishing on the contrary soon becomes boring."

Ballet teachers, much like the early dancing masters, address both principles of comportment and physical training in the earliest classes. Diane van Schoor, former ballet principal of the Royal Ballet Lower School, White Lodge, and an expert in the Cecchetti method, says, "Teaching classical ballet is the teaching of manners — impeccable manners denote respect, not only for the art form, but also respect for the masters and teachers you learn from."

Today, there are many training methods and techniques, including the French School, Vaganova, Balanchine, Cecchetti, Bournonville and the Royal Academy of Dance. Each one has been influenced to some degree by other schools. For example, the fiery Italian dancer and ballet master Cecchetti brought a fresh spirit to the ballet when he arrived at the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg. Bournonville's intensive studies in Paris with Vestris transformed him into a virtuoso whose sweeping movement quality, precision and electrifying jumps revolutionized the Danish style. In turn, Bournonville's pupil, the Swede Christian Johansson, brought his teacher's ideas to Russia where he passed them on to Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina and Vaganova. As van Schoor notes, "Ninette de Valois took the best from the Italian, Russian and Danish methods and incorporated all to create the English School and, ultimately, the English style."

Nevertheless, a school must have its own individual stamp. "It could be Vaganova, Bournonville, Cecchetti ... the method is a starting point to give you a solid ground to build on," says Nikolaj Hübbe, former principal dancer of the Royal Danish Ballet and New York City Ballet, and now artistic director of the Danish company. "Learning to dance ballet is like learning



For Magdalena Popa, the ability to express oneself through dance is another way of describing talent, something you can develop, but not necessarily instill. “There are two parallel tracks in becoming a dancer. The first is the development of knowledge — of what to do and how to do it; and the second is the development of expression — or talent.”

Magdalena Popa
Photo: Sian Richards, courtesy of
the National Ballet of Canada



Murray Kilgour and Nancy Kilgour
Photo: Courtesy of Alberta Ballet

a language. Now we are talking about form, because ballet is so stylistic — you take the form and shape it with style.”

Hübbe says that he prefers a one-method scholastic approach to the child, which provides a strong technical foundation that can then be applied to a variety of styles. “Dancers have to know the form must one day be used to dance *La Sylphide*, *Kylián*, George Balanchine,” but a school can’t stress every technical and stylistic idea in training “or the dancer becomes a prince of everything, king of nothing.”

Bournonville’s exercises are taught to the Royal Danish Ballet School’s students in a weekly class starting at age 11. “The exercises are extremely prescriptive and diagnostic: this is for speed, this is for sustained strength, all to differentiate and educate the musicality of the body,” says Hübbe.

Thomas Lund, director of the Royal Danish Ballet School, says that students also have classes that give a wider range of exercises necessary to adapt to various styles of choreography. For Lund, introducing new styles is a matter of timing. “If you do it too early, you end up without one full language. We try to balance the development of the school [curriculum] with our traditional one — if you have a strong identity, you don’t have to be afraid to lose it.”

Lund is very conscious of preparing his students for the realities of the job market. “Most of our teachers are from the Danish tradition, but we visit the Paris Opera Ballet, the Royal Ballet, the annual *Assemblée Internationale* at Canada’s National Ballet School, and we learn and share ideas. We have to go to other places, we have to keep up an international level of technique.”

Bournonville, though his approach to training even during his own time was considered “old school,” wrote, “It is up to the artist himself to give the style and modern touch, and to adapt them to different situations.” Van Schoor believes that if Cecchetti were here today, he would have evolved his own method. “He was a progressive thinker and bodies have changed — they are more lithe, more physical.”

Tracing the evolution of a school’s training is a bit like examining a family tree in which dancers, teachers and choreographers all play a part, as illustrated by the Royal Danish Ballet. When Bournonville taught daily class, he gave a short and strenuous barre to serve as a warm-up for the centre where students would dance his variations, including his many enchaînements for ballon and elevation. These classes were taught largely as he gave them until 1951, when the Vaganova-trained Vera Volkova came to Copenhagen to teach the company and reorganized the school. Hübbe says that Harald Lander, then artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet, had invited Volkova to Denmark so that the Danish ballerina Toni Lander (who was also his wife) could benefit from



Diane van Schoor teaching class
Photo: Brian Slater, courtesy of the Royal Ballet School

the Russian training of port de bras. (Ironically, Harald Lander was fired just as Volkova arrived.)

Until Volkova's arrival, rotation had not been emphasized in Danish training because Bournonville believed that excessive turnout was "uncalled for," Hübbe says. With the Russian influence, leg extensions became higher, and the pelvis more lifted to make room for the hip joints and the use of the inner thighs.

Indirectly, the arrival of Volkova shaped the direction of ballet in America as well. "Because Volkova only spoke Russian and English, Stanley Williams was her translator. That is how Stanley started teaching, learning from Volkova." Williams then travelled to the United States, where he taught at the School of American Ballet and was influenced by Balanchine. When he returned to Denmark, the barre became longer. Williams would become a legendary ballet master and train many generations of dancers at New York City Ballet.

Back in Denmark, Volkova's arrival had not been without controversy in a company whose traditions had been preserved since the Romantic era; some insisted the Danish style and technique would be lost. However, Hübbe explains that a baby boom as a result of curfews during the Second World War had led to an influx of applications to the Royal Danish Ballet School, and the larger talent pool had produced dancers with better bodies. New choreography for the

teacher-training courses, with their emphasis on theory, neglect the importance of teaching that there are different types of dancers.

"Good teachers have long recognized that their responsibility is to develop the qualities and eliminate the imperfections which everyone, not even excepting the greatest of talents, is obliged to combat," Bournonville wrote.

Hübbe concurs. "The greatest thing for a teacher is to be able to unlock a technique and expression, no matter what body type, as a tool for expressing music, turning in pirouettes, lifting a partner, going into a room with a choreographer or doing an adage."

Perhaps the most mysterious aspect of training is how a dancer becomes an artist. There is no question this transformation requires a strong base in all of the arts. According to Blasis, the study of drawing and music were "almost indispensable to make a perfect dancer." At the Vaganova Academy, Popa studied the history of art and sculpture, the history of music, and historical, character and modern dance. "When I started learning roles, there was a class for how to express a role. I would also read about the ballet, listen to the music, and we all took piano lessons and learned the score. Some people have a natural instinct, but instinct is not enough, you need knowledge."

Tracing the evolution of a school's training is a bit like examining a family tree in which dancers, teachers and choreographers all play a part.

company also contributed to the shift. "The repertoire became more diverse when Niels Bjorn Larsen, the company's artistic director, brought in Roland Petit, Balanchine and Cullberg, and through the influence of international choreographers the training started changing, not deliberately, but through osmosis."

Ballet masters play an essential part in the lineage of a school's tradition as it is passed from one person to another. Kilgour, who began her teaching career at the National Ballet School, says, "I learned about musicality from Celia Franca [founder of the National Ballet of Canada], the importance of passion for dance from Eugen Valukin [a former Bolshoi dancer who taught at Canada's National Ballet School], and how to teach from Betty Oliphant [the school's co-founder]." But this knowledge can easily be lost when links between generations are broken. She advises young teachers that it is imperative to observe other teachers.

Kilgour had the opportunity to watch Mikhail Baryshnikov in Alexander Pushkin's graduating class at the Leningrad Choreographic Institute on a visit to the Soviet Union in 1965. She recalls thinking, "He's so talented, but he only does half the barre." Baryshnikov, she learned later, only did half the exercises because Pushkin believed his muscles needed the opposite of what the other students needed. Kilgour worries that

At the Royal Danish Ballet, mime is an integral part of the tradition, and students take drama classes from the ages of five to eight, and understand that along with a strong technique they must learn to be expressive onstage. Because Bournonville used children in his ballets, the students grow up in the theatre and can watch and learn from the older dancers when they are performing together. "We try to find the essence not by acting, but by being the part. I don't know if ballet ever becomes completely natural," says Lund, "but we don't express from the outside in, but the inside out."

Another famous Dane, Erik Bruhn, says in *Erik Bruhn, Danseur Noble*, "If you don't have the confidence to show what you feel through technique, then you remain a product."

"I know what Erik means by 'product,'" says Hübbe, "and it is a hard word when we are dealing with human beings. But there is something cut and dried about training a dancer. You can't jump the production line and go straight to art."

For Popa, the ability to express oneself through dance is another way of describing talent, something you can develop, but not necessarily instill. "There are two parallel tracks in becoming a dancer. The first is the development of knowledge — of what to do and how to do it; and the second is the development of expression — or talent," says Popa.

"You can't teach someone to dance as you danced. Dancers must use the knowledge you give to be themselves." ¹¹

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Royal Ballet first soloist Marcelino Sambé chats with Gerard Davis

In Conversation

It's late summer in London and pouring rain as I make my phone call to Lisbon. At the other end of the line, newly promoted Royal Ballet first soloist Marcelino Sambé tells me he is sitting on his balcony in glorious sunshine, waiting for the start of the new season. It's a rare moment of rest for the 24-year-old Portuguese dancer after a hugely successful year that saw him established as an artist to be reckoned with.

Aside from critically acclaimed performances in works as diverse as Crystal Pite's *Flight Pattern*, Balanchine's *Tarantella*, Liam Scarlett's *Symphonic Dances* and Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*, he managed to impress notoriously demanding *Financial Times* critic Clement Crisp, who described his Colas as the best he'd seen since the original *La Fille mal gardée* casting of David Blair in 1960, topping even Baryshnikov.

Sambé's blossoming dance partnership with young principal Francesca Hayward is getting people just as excited.

"When I saw Frankie for the first time," he says, "I knew she had this special quality of being natural and showing the inside of her heart. Every time I dance with her, I feel I might be getting closer to achieving that myself." This humble desire for learning reveals much about how Sambé operates both as a dancer and a person.

His background is atypical for a ballet dancer. He grew up in Alto da Loba, a small town on the outer reaches of Lisbon, training in athletics, particularly hurdling, and also in African dance at a local community centre with a group called Estrelitas Africanas (Little African Stars). "I was five or six and tiny, but I was naturally flexible and loved showing off," he recalls. "I was the only guy in the group, so I kind of became their mascot."

He describes growing up within an "unstable biological family," and seeing a psychologist at the community centre from a young age. This psychologist saw his African dancing and felt he might have enough talent to become a professional dancer. Sambé says he didn't think too much of this, but, at eight years old, he decided to audition for Lisbon's National Conservatory Dance School. "I'd never been to the centre of Lisbon before and figured it would be a nice day out," he laughs.

It wasn't your run-of-the-mill audition. "I didn't know anything about ballet and didn't have proper kit, so I had to dance in my socks. They asked me to improvise to some Scott Joplin music and I started doing my African choreography. I remember seeing the jury laughing because it was quite a weird combination, but I got in."

He enjoyed school. "The directors and teachers believed in me and pushed me hard — it was pretty intense. I learned a lot about discipline and they treated contemporary dance and ballet as equals, which meant I could be both types of dancer. Also, I was quite lucky to have a friend who was already there and who was one of the best students in the school. I looked up to him and he kept me on the right track."

At the end of his first year, tragedy struck when his father died; his mother found herself unable to cope, and he spent the next three years as a foster child. "My adopted mum and dad were super-supportive. They're so intelligent and down-to-earth, and they're still my rocks."

He also gained another sister because his foster parents had a daughter, Maria Barroso, who was studying at the same school. "She's inspiring," he says. "Maria was so focused on becoming a ballerina and on being the best she could. We would come home at night, do stretches together and watch ballet videos — we became obsessed with ballet. She's now dancing with the National Ballet of Portugal."

As he got older, Sambé started taking part in international competitions, winning a silver medal at the Moscow International Ballet Competition in 2008, first prize at the Youth America Grand Prix in 2009, and a gold medal and special award at the USA International Ballet Competition in 2010. It was the Prix de Lausanne when he was 16 that had the most profound effect; the late Gailene Stock, director of the Royal Ballet School, saw him perform and offered him a scholarship in London. "My goal was to finish my studies at a prestigious school and that's exactly what happened."

He didn't make it easy for himself, however. "I didn't have much fun in a social sense because from day one I had a plan to get

better. I had to be honest with myself; I looked at my new colleagues who were tall, handsome and had amazing physiques, and knew that wasn't going to be my journey. I would have to find something else to distinguish me from all these beautiful dancers, so I worked my butt off."

His hard work paid off. At the end of the second of his three scheduled years, he was offered a contract with the Royal Ballet. "I'm living probably the most exciting time of my life at the moment," he says. "You know, when you've been onstage for 10 years, people start looking at you as though you're old news already, but at the moment everything is new, and I'm riding the wave."

That includes working with some of the most important names in contemporary choreography — Pite and Hofesh Shechter have both chosen him to perform in their Royal Ballet commissions. "Every time it's announced that a contemporary choreographer is coming, I get excited and hope I get to work with them. Someone from outside the Opera House brings a different approach and that broadens your horizons and makes you a more versatile dancer."

Sambé can be regularly seen in the wings of the Covent Garden stage diligently watching performances, even when he's not in the show. When I ask who's influenced him the most, he admits he can't pin it down to one person. "It's such a major question, it's kind of overwhelming."



Above: Marcelino Sambé in Crystal Pite's *Flight Pattern*
Photo: Tristram Kenton

Top centre: Marcelino Sambé (Colas) and Francesca Hayward (Lise) in Frederick Ashton's *La Fille mal gardée*
Photo: Helen Maybanks

Bottom centre: Marcelino Sambé in Liam Scarlett's *Symphonic Dances*
Photo: Bill Cooper

Right: Marcelino Sambé in Christopher Wheeldon's *Within the Golden Hour*
Photo: Bill Cooper

All Photos: Courtesy of the Royal Opera House



He's also established himself as a young choreographer to watch. In 2011, his *M'cā cré sabi* (I Don't Want to Know) won second prize in the prestigious Ursula Moreton Choreographic Awards, and, in 2012, he was chosen as one of Youth Dance England's Emerging Choreographers. Last year, he created *Land of Nod* for New English Ballet Theatre. He's pragmatic about this side of his ability. "I get inspired every time I listen to music or see a piece of art or a play, but I'm so busy at the moment that the choreographic part of me is put to the background. Working with New English Ballet Theatre was a nice taste of what I want in the future, but right now I need to concentrate 100 percent on my dancing."

He remains, however, a devoted painter. "I can't be without it," he says. "It's a form of personal expression and, although it's a private thing, I like to see my colleagues' reactions. Some of them say my paintings are horrendous, but others enjoy looking at them. They are colourful and abstract, but they do show people what's going on inside my mind."

In conversation, Sambé comes across as joyful and positive, an outlook he seems to carry around with him wherever he goes. "I get a lot of energy when everyone around me is in a good state.

I feel at my best when my friends and family are happy; it puts me in the same spirit."

We talk briefly about the upcoming season, where he has some big roles to prepare, such as Hans-Peter in *The Nutcracker* and a first revival of Shechter's *Untouchable*. He tells me how much he's looking forward to some major debuts in the second half of the season, including Lescaut in Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* (alongside David Hallberg and Natalia Osipova), and Albrecht, his first lead role in one of the great 19th-century classics, with Hayward as his Giselle. Then, with a cheery goodbye, we finish our conversation and, for him, it was back to the Portuguese sunshine. *DI*

The Characters

by Karen Barr

WITHIN



The National Ballet of Canada's Greta Hodgkinson in Peter Wright's *Giselle*
Photo: Aleksandar Antonijevic

Greta Hodgkinson, Rachael McLaren and José Navas share favourite costumes

When three dancers from completely different backgrounds and styles of dance were asked to talk about their favourite costumes, the conversation was as diverse as the performers.

Greta Hodgkinson, principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada, had a huge collection of costumes to select from. Over more than 25 years with the company, 20 as a principal, she has played every leading role in its classical repertoire. Yet, she's quick to pick one.

"*Giselle* is my favourite ballet and I love the Romantic tutu," she says, referring to the flowing, ethereal white costume she wears as Giselle rising from the grave in Act II of Sir Peter Wright's *Giselle*. "Dancing this role is a very spiritual experience for me."

The lightness of the fabric allows Hodgkinson to feel the air move right through it as she dances. The designer, the late Desmond Heeley, added a sentimental element in the bodice that closes over the breast in the shape of a heart, a tribute to Giselle's true love for Albrecht.

Hodgkinson was also thrilled, five years ago, when she performed in Jerome Robbins' *Other Dances*, set to Chopin and with costumes by Santo Loquasto, to celebrate her 20th anniversary with the company. She had long wanted to dance this modern 1976 work. In it, she wore a knee-length blue chiffon dress, which she could feel swirling around her. "It's beautiful and very feminine," she says, noting that while wearing it, she felt the freedom to enjoy the exquisite choreography and the dance onstage.

"I wasn't a dress-up kind of kid," she says. But, as an energetic child growing up in Rhode Island in the United States, she was eventually forced to choose between ballet, ice skating and gymnastics. So, why ballet? "The shoes were a big draw. I couldn't wait to get on pointe."

Offstage, Hodgkinson describes her street style as casual, yet classic, wearing blue jeans, with mix-and-match sweaters, jackets and pants in greys and black. As the result of dancing for years in pointe shoes, there is one thing she absolutely can't live without: "Really comfortable shoes," she says with a laugh.

Costumes have a magical quality to transform dancers and enhance their performance.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Rachael McLaren and Jamar Roberts in Alvin Ailey's *Blues Suite*
Photo: Paul Kolnik

Canadian-born Rachael McLaren also dreamed of becoming a ballerina, and took ballet classes at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet school from a young age. By chance, she auditioned and won a spot in the Toronto production of *Mamma Mia!* Suddenly, at the age of 17, she was dancing on-stage every night and living on her own. After a couple of years, she set her sights on New York and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, with whom she's been dancing for 10 years.

"I fell in love with the company and everything it stood for," says McLaren. She loves the heartfelt energy of Alvin Ailey's choreography. "The dance comes from the soul of the community. From people who didn't have a voice." The comment refers to Ailey's experiences as an African-American, growing up poor in a small Texas town, who drew inspiration through the music of the Baptist church.

McLaren, who describes herself as relaxed and non-confrontational, admits she starts to embody the personality of a character minutes after stepping into her costume, and likes her sassy diva role in *Blues Suite*, the very first piece Ailey created in 1957. In a very theatrical lover's duet, McLaren plays a woman scorned. Her costume, redesigned from the original by Normand Maxon, is a pink lace and satin dress, reminiscent of lingerie, accentuated with attention-grabbing red tights. Red satin high-heeled shoes have a rhinestone cluster, and match her bracelets, earrings and choker. The lightweight pink satin coat is edged with a feather boa.

"Our duet ends happily," says McLaren, "I finally jump into his arms and he swoops me away."

Offstage, her style is more earth goddess, with lots of flowing dresses. She finds them in vintage clothing stores or buys a beautiful fabric, which her friend and fellow dancer, Germaine Perry, designs and crafts for her.

Venezuelan-born, Montreal-based contemporary dance artist José Navas, the director and choreographer for Compagnie Flak, had always assumed costumes were really just visuals for the audience. When first asked to participate in this interview, Navas thought he did not have anything to contribute, but, after spending a couple of retrospective days, he started to connect costumes not only to their influence on his art, but to his feelings.

In his day-to-day life, Navas describes himself as shy. "I like to disappear into the crowd wearing jeans, T-shirts and sneakers." Yet his performances reveal something else. "Where does it come from when you decide, I'm going to wear red high heels, the face of a dog or perform naked?"

Navas found the thick rubber dog mask, a fetish piece, in a sex shop in Montreal. He wore it in *Personae*, a collection of six solos that he created and performed throughout North America and Europe.

"It's very tight and restricts the breathing," he says. At first Navas thought he would not be able to dance in the mask for fear of passing out, but, he says, "I felt very powerful in it. The look is very shocking for the audience." In fact, Navas feels it was the mask that made the solo a success.

After his last performance of *Personae*, which toured from 2011 to 2015, he sadly packed up the dog face. "I had tears in my eyes," he confesses. Today, it sits in his office as a memento.

In *Personae* he also wore a long red gauzy skirt, with an under layer of black. The skirt was designed by Navas and made by L'Atelier de couture Sonya B. Using it like a matador's cape, he swirled the fabric during the performance, his bare chest exposed. "Wearing the costume was a conflict to me. I was showing my torso, which I am very self-conscious about." He also admits to an overwhelming sense of the ridiculous. "Here I was, a 40-something-year-old man, dancing in a skirt." Navas says the 35-minute solo made him feel vulnerable, but each time he completed it, he felt closer to overcoming his body image issues. ❦



Compagnie Flak's José Navas in his *Personae*
Photo: Valerie Simmons

Dance notes



Suzanne Farrell Ballet in George Balanchine's *Serenade*
Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

Forever Balanchine

The Suzanne Farrell Ballet, dedicated to showcasing the works of master choreographer George Balanchine, gave its farewell performances at the Kennedy Center Opera House in Washington, D.C., in December 2017. Since 2001, the company has revealed unique insights into Balanchine's works, drawing out their musicality and nuance. As the *New York Times* put it: "The wit is Balanchine's, but still nobody communicates it better than Ms. Farrell . . . she understands rare secrets of time and space."

The farewell program included two works specifically created for Farrell, the former New York City Ballet ballerina and muse to Mr. B: the pas de deux *Meditation*, the first ballet he made on her, and the gypsy fantasy *Tzigane*, which begins with a five-minute solo. Also included is the seminal 26-dancer *Serenade*, the first ballet Balanchine made in America, which includes the Dark Angel role that, years later, became Farrell's first solo as a dancer.



Manuela Benini, Aalang boatyard, Gujarat, India
Photo: Devansh Jhaveri

Red Dress at Darbar Festival

The Red Dress Project created by Manuela Benini is a series of photographs featuring Benini's movement interactions within natural, architectural and industrial landscapes. The collection of images, which have travelled internationally since being launched in India in 2006, evoke gender, place and identity, while addressing the complexities of tradition and the constant cycle of change.

Included in last November's Darbar Festival in London, presented in the foyer areas of Sadler's Wells Theatre, were a number of images from Benini's interventions captured across India, including the vast landfill of Deonar in Mumbai and the Aalang boatyard.

1001 Lights

The immersive installation *Scintillements | 1001 Lights* by filmmakers Marlene Millar and Philip Szporer of Mouvement Perpétuel is featured at the Museum of Jewish Montreal until March 22. The installation, previously shown in Ireland and China, consists of individually documented Shabbat candle-lighting ceremonies playing in syncopation with each other. At the crux of the film's visuals is a fluid hand-gesture dance, created by choreographer Ami Shulman with a group of dancers and artists spanning four generations, in response to these individual ceremonies. The 15-minute film is projected on a loop in the late afternoon and evening hours onto the museum's street-level windows. During the day, visitors can experience the entire piece in an intimate projection room while listening to the score on headphones.



Marlene Millar and Philip Szporer's *Scintillements | 1001 Lights*
Photo: Anthony McLean

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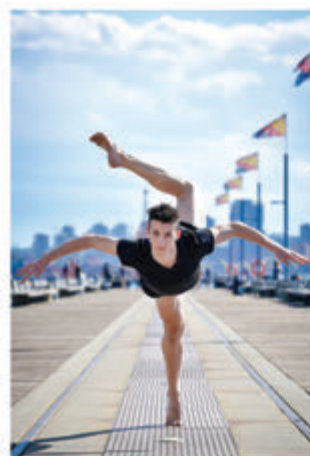


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by Tessa Perkins Deneault

As part of Margie Gillis' Legacy Project, Caitlin Griffin makes the past present

"I never dreamed it could lead to so much," says Caitlin Griffin about meeting modern dance icon Margie Gillis at a workshop in the summer of 2015. Although the Vancouver dancer, educator and choreographer had never seen Gillis perform live, she knew of her career and had jumped at the chance to be in the studio with her. Not long after, Gillis invited Griffin to join her Legacy Project.

The project is based at Gillis' property in Acton Vale, Quebec, where the dancers absorb her choreographic style, teaching method and performance technique. "It's an amazing opportunity to be around Margie and learn from her directly," Griffin enthuses. The experience is valuable not only for the chance to be mentored by Gillis, but also to work with some of the other participants, who number more than 50 dancers with a strong commitment to Gillis' legacy. Among them are Makaila Wallace and Maggie Forgeron, formerly with Ballet BC, former Gallim Dance member Troy Ogilvie and Montreal's Le Broke Lab co-founder, Susan Paulson.



For more than 40 years, Montreal-based Gillis has been creating and performing her own original works. Her uninhibited, grounded style has garnered comparisons to Isadora Duncan, and her iconic long, free-flowing hair is unmistakable. With a repertoire of more than 100 pieces, Gillis is primarily a soloist, but has danced as a guest artist with companies including Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal and the National Ballet of Canada. Tours have taken her to almost every continent, and she is the recipient of many honours, including the Order of Canada, the Ordre national du Québec and the Governor General's Award for the Performing Arts.

The Margie Gillis Dance Foundation, created in 1981 with a mission to represent the human condition through dance, facilitates the Legacy Project, an initiative aimed at preserving her creative output. In a video documenting the project, Gillis defines legacy as "an abundant river flowing from source to source."

At the Legacy Project's March 2017 public launch at Montreal's Place des Arts, Griffin performed Gillis' 1999 solo, *Loon*. "It's so rooted in the natural world, with a strong sense of Canadian identity," says Griffin. "I fell in love with it. The character is a little bit crazy, a little bit of an animal, and a lot of fun." The connection to the natural world was emphasized during her second performance of *Loon* at the 2017 Vines Art Festival in Vancouver as she danced outside among a grove of trees.

Gillis' pieces are constantly evolving, says Griffin, and there is plenty of room for editing and interpretation. "Margie guides each of us to develop a deep understanding of the personality and 'life' of each of the pieces while being true to our own artistry," she explains. "As I become more acquainted with *Loon* and familiar with Margie's approach, a whole landscape of possibilities is unfolding for my own journey through the work."

The Legacy Project includes creation and mentoring, performance technique, teaching, conflict transformation and social change, and performances that include Gillis dancing one of her solos as well as the project's dancers in repertoire and new creations.

The conflict transformation component involves dancers committed to

social change and humanitarian endeavours; Gillis solidified her commitment to this work during her facilitation of a conflict theory project from 2009 to 2013 in Switzerland: Dancing at the Crossroads. That project resulted in a book, *The Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience*, to which she contributed two chapters.

Involvement in the Legacy Project is individually tailored. Griffin has met with Gillis on six occasions so far, usually in the summer months or before a Legacy Project performance, and each time they spent about two weeks together working on technique and repertoire. In between those meetings, Griffin works on the material on her own.

With so many choreographers creating new work, why is it important to pass on Gillis' repertoire and philosophy to the next generation? "She's a pioneer and a master of what she does," says Griffin, referring to Gillis' uninhibited performance style and generous teaching methods. "There is an element of ritual to her work that I think we're seeing a

bit less of. It's important to hold on to and understand that ritual."

Griffin describes "ritual" as the constant practice of approaching and observing work with an expectation of brilliance. "Margie is teaching us to create and perform, but also how to constructively observe and nurture each other's processes, too. We make a ritual out of seeking the humanity of the dancer and the work."

Participating in the Legacy Project has had a transformative effect on Griffin. "It's given me a boldness I didn't have before," she says. "It's deeper than confidence. There's an assuredness I have around being an artist, woman, teacher and creator."

As Griffin passes Gillis' teachings on to her students, she finds validation in Gillis' thriving career. "Seeing the value of what she has done, not just in the studio but for dancers and the community — there's a lot of affirmation in seeing that it doesn't all go away when the curtain comes down." ^{vi}

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What's Next for Arts Criticism?

A new face for a digital age

by Brittany Duggan

“You have to vomit art. You have to f—ing VOMIT it!!!!”

So read a line in the manifesto-like pamphlet that Eva Brunelle was handed as she walked into Montreal's Place des Arts. She was there to see the much-anticipated new work by Quebec's enfant terrible of contemporary dance, Dave St-Pierre.

Brunelle had seen this choreographer's work before and knew his brand of performance to be bold, raw and unapologetic. His acclaimed *Trilogy*, for example, features naked cast members in blond wigs crawling on top of the audience. So this aggressive new piece, *Suie*, didn't startle her.

What did surprise her was waking up the next day to a flurry of online commentary about the show. Her Facebook feed was filled with posts and comments, some from people who hadn't even seen the work. There were negative reviews, some positive, and a lot of commentary about how the presenter turned its back on the artist by offering subscribers the opportunity to swap tickets for a more conservative show later in the season.

Bloggers had opinions. So did traditional arts critics in mainstream media, as did the public and even the artist himself. In the days following, Brunelle took the time to develop her own assessment, deepening her own understanding by hearing from others. “I think it is very important [that a range of people talk about art] because it allows people to see things in a different way, to be confronted with other ideas.”

For arts criticism everywhere, this explosive reaction demonstrated how much contemporary criticism has changed. No one person led the conversation. Anyone with a strong opinion came off as equally authoritative, declaring the new dance great or far from it, asking if this artist was worthy of public funding or not.

Headlines continually declare that arts criticism is in crisis. And they're not wrong. Criticism, not unlike many other sections of the newspaper, has been cut down to near non-existence in the last few decades. But critical arts coverage has been adapting. So much so that some say it's experiencing a renaissance — just in a new, digital medium.

“When the market and everyone else has given up on you,” wrote New York art critic Martha Schwendener in the *Village Voice* about arts criticism's reported crisis, “that's often when things get interesting.”

For as long as people have been making art, people have been talking about it. The term “criticism” in relation to the arts, however, only goes back 300 years with the emergence of visual-art salons and summer exhibitions in Paris and London. Back then, newspapers would regularly publish the work of independent critics or writers would publish their own responses as pamphlets to be distributed at the events. Schwendener describes the writing of this time as “eclectic and inclusive in its diversity of voices.”

That started to change by the 20th century when criticism became more authoritative as the professional role of the critic became more monolithic. As well, critics started writing about the political and socioeconomic issues that affected art, artists and the art market. The tone of the writing evolved, moving away from criticism's poetic beginnings to being more journalistic and academic — styles that have largely prevailed.

By the end of the 20th century, the role of the critic was becoming less prominent. One reason was the growing influence of professional curators. The other was, of course, the internet, which made it possible for anyone with an opinion to reach an audience at no cost. Prior to this, people looked to critics in legacy media to learn about art and how to evaluate it and, as a result, critics and their employers saw themselves as being responsible for blanket coverage of the arts.

“I had a look at how theatre was covered in the *Ottawa Citizen* back in the day,” says Patrick Langston, the former theatre critic for the daily. “One of my predecessors was

a theatre critic into the late '70s and she was a full-time staff member, travelling to Shaw and Stratford, even New York, just to cover theatre for this regular daily in a mid-size Canadian city. That kind of just shows you the trajectory.”

Langston was relieved of the beat he'd covered for a decade when, in the fall of 2016, the *Citizen* cut all its freelance contracts, leaving most specialized reporting to be covered by staff writers. With these niche reporters gone, so go much of the informed opinions and nuanced perspectives on the state and practice of specific fields of art. But it's not all bad news.

Langston acknowledges that the decline of criticism in legacy media and the availability of digital publishing have ushered in new brands of critics, like the blogger. He says: “Those who are good are insightful and thoughtful, but those who aren't, I think probably do a disservice to both criticism and to the community.”

Professional critics aren't the be all and end all, but they're professionals because of their expertise — in critical writing itself, but also in terms of the art they cover, for which they typically hold much passion.

“My primary responsibility is not to the consumer or to the artist, but to the art itself,” says Colin Thomas, an independent Vancouver theatre critic. Thomas believes criticism's job is to hold art accountable, like other forms of journalism do for their respective subjects. “My job is to contribute an informed opinion to the discussion. In the long run, [cheerleading] doesn't help.”

The old guard is often criticized for being nostalgic, for comparing criticism today to some golden age. Yet the profession has undergone significant changes in a relatively short amount of time, and scholarly attention, particularly out of the Nordic countries, is newly focused on these changes. “Cultural journalism is a growing subfield of considerable public significance,” writes Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Unni From in *Cultural Journalism and Cultural Critique in a Changing Media Landscape*. It reveals how the “current and interconnected processes of commercialisation, professionalisation, digitalisation, and globalisation have widened the role of cultural journalism in society.”

Reflecting on these changes, veteran Alberta theatre critic Liz Nicholls — another recent departure from a Canadian paper, the *Edmonton Journal* — says: “I think it's important to have a diversity of voices.

But experience, I think, counts. It provides context, which is an important component of arts criticism.”

Arts criticism is traditionally defined as an expert interpreting a particular work, considering the larger context within which the work is being presented, and responding with intellectual curiosity. Newer types of critics might not adhere to this expectation.

The last couple of decades have seen the rise of voices on blogs and social media, even some podcasts, challenging the assumptions about who gets to be a critic and what critique looks like. Today, we have the intellectual cultural critic, the professional cultural journalist, the media-made arbiter of taste and the everyday amateur expert. Everyone really is and can be a critic, and many are embracing new ways criticism can look and act.

In the digital environment, critics are using new tools to do what they have always done: respond to art.

New York-based visual art critic Ben Davis is one example of a critic who is challenging the text-based norm and getting creative. At a 2015 American arts journalism and criticism conference, Davis shared an Instagram experiment. This involved three images collaged together: one was the piece of visual art being reviewed; another, an image that Davis associated with the art being reviewed; and the third, an image that represented the relationship between the two. Nothing particularly revolutionary as a new form of criticism, he says, but it was enough to earn him significant pushback from conference-goers who suggested he was proposing to give criticism a BuzzFeed quality.

“People have this precious attachment to what they do and how they do it,” says Davis. “They’re very scared about their jobs and see there’s competition out there.”

Davis sees two parallel questions that criticism is facing right now. “There’s the economic sustainability,” he says, referring to the crisis in the media industry in general. But there’s also the cultural sustainability part, which is how to make a kind of criticism that people want to read.

It’s the second part that Davis was trying to address in his visual criticism. “You either have to figure how to use these tools in a critical way, or they’re going to be used in an uncritical way. Just look at how the [American] election was moved by social media and memes. These aren’t jokes.”

Davis believes there is a hunger for

serious art criticism out there. “It just has to be criticism that actually engages with the contemporary reality of art.”

One of the ways people are trying to combat the rise of ubiquitous, uninformed criticism is by creating curated opportunities for critics to practise by doing. In 2011, Brie McFarlane co-founded the New Ottawa Critics, a website for emerging theatre critics in hopes of reviving an interest in theatre criticism.

McFarlane looks to capitalize on a future where independent online criticism is engaging and innovative. “I’m a young, quote-unquote millennial who wants to see stuff that is relevant to my time, that is addressing stuff in Ottawa, and I hope our criticism tries to reflect that.”

An international site like *Exeunt Magazine* encourages experimentation online. *Exeunt*, founded in the U.K., covers London, Edinburgh and New York, and aims to “be playful and to find new ways of bringing the experience of performed arts to readers from sonnets to storybooks to plays to drunken dialogues.”

This kind of response as criticism doesn’t work for everyone; online arts

publication *Momus* markets itself as a return to plain, outstanding writing. *Momus* was founded in 2014 by Toronto-based art critic Sky Goodden. “I was noticing a real lack of evaluative criticism,” she says of the visual-art realm. “I wanted something that was accountable and responsible, something online criticism hasn’t historically been able to do.”

For Goodden, there is no crisis in criticism. In fact, it’s found its ideal home online. “The reality of review publishing is that it’s always sought out a niche public,” she says. “Online publishing just does that by its very nature.”

For all the challenges that digital has presented the industry, it has also created great opportunity. Critics are there to facilitate conversations and digitally, conversations are happening easier than ever and in all kinds of ways: between critic and artist, between critic and reader, between critic and critic. There’s no one foolproof method, but arts communities and their audiences are stronger for the many invested individuals who are committed to keeping informed conversation about art alive — whatever that looks like. ^{vi}

Artists as Critics

Artists themselves are taking on a bigger role in the arts criticism microcosm. Today, many continue to facilitate conversation and generate ideas, much the same way a critic has been expected to. As critics disappear from more mainstream public platforms, artists are going even further to spur critical dialogue. Digital platforms are hosting these conversations, like in Erin Brubacher’s Facebook relay where members of Toronto’s theatre community were invited to a closed group to discuss burning questions together. They included, “How do presenters play a role in how women are being represented in programming?” or, “Is it ever OK for someone to tell a story that is not their own, especially if that story is about an oppressed community/group?”

Not surprisingly, artists have often been a critic’s biggest critics. Nathalie Petrowski of *La Presse* in Montreal wrote of an increasing trend where artists are attempting to neutralize negative criticism by taking to the stage prior to the show and reading off the negative coverage, or inserting defences in the show program itself.

“You can laugh at it,” she wrote (originally in French), “but it may also be asked whether this is not a form of intimidation whose aim is to muzzle criticism.” Petrowski’s main point is that, if criticism is failing, so is the art. “As for the artists who see themselves as agents of progress and social change and who do not hesitate to criticize society, if not the universe, how can they question this function and refuse others?”

Michael Crabb's Notebook



The cancellation was thus quickly interpreted as a political rather than artistic decision, with conflicting reports that Russian culture minister Vladimir Medinsky had personally intervened. The fact that Serebrennikov, a respected albeit iconoclastic stage and film director with a penchant for sticking needles in the Kremlin, was under investigation for allegedly embezzling state funds in connection with his renowned and innovative Gogol Center, only heightened the conspiracy theories.

Possokhov, Demutsky and Serebrennikov had already collaborated on an earlier and generally well-received Bolshoi production, 2015's *A Hero of Our Time*, based on Mikhail Lermontov's classic novel. It was Possokhov who'd suggested a ballet about Nureyev, a brave proposal given the history.

Rudolf Nureyev, as a dancer, director and, more debatably, as a choreographer, was a preternaturally brilliant artist. A relative latecomer to ballet, he nevertheless through relentless dedication rose to become one of the Kirov (now Mariinsky) Ballet's brightest hopes. His name, however, might now be forgotten had his rebellious spirit and urge for artistic and personal freedom not propelled him to defect in Paris in 1961.

Nureyev's motives were not in themselves political, but his "leap to freedom" at Le Bourget airport was pounced on by Western media as emblematic of Soviet repression. The Kremlin naturally took a dim view of the situation, not because Nureyev was irreplaceable as an artist, but because of the way the incident became a Cold War political football. KGB operatives were rumoured to be planning Nureyev's recapture or, failing that, to break his legs. Unsuccessful on both scores, Soviet authorities did their best to expunge his very existence. The name Nureyev became anathema.

Only the gradual thaw under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, which led to the

Even by the standards of the historically scandal-roiled Bolshoi Theatre, the maelstrom that for the latter half of 2017 engulfed an already controversial new production about Soviet-era ballet defector Rudolf Nureyev is surely one for the history books.

Scheduled for a July 12 Bolshoi main-stage premiere, the much-anticipated event was cancelled by the theatre's general director Vladimir Urin after he'd attended a July 7 dress rehearsal. By Urin's defensive account, he decided the technically complex production, choreographed by Yuri Possokhov to an original score by Ilya Demutsky and under the overall stage direction of Kirill Serebrennikov,

was "not ready" for public exhibition. Although insiders conceded Urin's reasoning was supportable — the dress rehearsal had reportedly been shaky — hardly anyone swallowed the explanation.

It had already been widely rumoured that the ballet would deal explicitly with Nureyev's homosexuality; not surprising, but baited meat for Russia's rabid homophobes. Right-wing critics were appalled, accusing the ballet's makers of breaching a law that bans supposedly corrupting "homosexual propaganda." How could such a travesty — the ballet was rumoured to include men in high heels and a projection of photographer Richard Avedon's famous full-frontal "Rudi in the Nudi" portrait — be allowed on such a hallowed stage?

dissolution of the U.S.S.R., made Nureyev's 1987 return to Russia to visit his dying mother possible. By that time, Nureyev — a Mick Jagger in tights — had become a superstar whose celebrity reached far beyond the ballet world. Nureyev was an unprecedented phenomenon who in large part triggered a new Golden Age for Western ballet — the nostalgically lamented “Ballet Boom.” Through the sheer animal verve of his thrilling stage persona and technical bravura, he legitimized the notion that dancing could be a worthy and respectable career for men.

Even so, for hard-liners, the idea of the Bolshoi Theatre, where Nureyev never performed, celebrating the life of a former traitor, flamboyant homosexual and ultimate AIDS victim in a work spearheaded by a radical and unabashedly provocative stage director, was like insulting Mother Russia herself.

Still, to his credit, Urin did not entirely buckle. He characterized the cancellation of the July premiere as a postponement with the somewhat vague assurance that the ballet would be rescheduled in the following season — enough time, perhaps, for tempers to cool and revisions to be made. Meanwhile, foreign media continued to have a field day covering what they saw as another example of cultural suppression in Putin's Russia.

We will probably never know what backroom maneuvering it took, made more complex by the further prosecution of Serebrennikov, who was placed under house arrest in August, but by September Urin had announced that the new ballet would be squeezed into a busy late 2017 fall season.

The rescheduled December 9 premiere was the hottest ticket in Moscow. Putin did not attend, but Dmitry Peskov, his press secretary, did. According to reports, he “really liked it.” Perhaps Peskov blinked during the momentary projection of that Avedon nude.

Notably unable to enjoy the ovation that greeted the premiere was Serebrennikov, still under house arrest. He had to content himself with reading the mostly positive local reviews, assuming he's permitted that much contact with the outside world.

Still, he was not entirely overlooked. When Serebrennikov's artistic collaborators took their bows, they boldly wore protest T-shirts reading “Free the Director.” *DI*



Vincent Warren 1938-2017

While the bilingual documentary *A Man of Dance / Un Homme de danse*, about dancer, teacher and historian Vincent Warren, toured Canada, its subject quietly passed away, on October 25, 2017, in his adopted home of Montreal, at age 79. In Linde Howe-Beck's review of Marie Brodeur's film, published in *Dance International* in Spring 2016, she describes Warren, born in Jacksonville, Florida, as having at one time been “the poster boy for Montreal dance, hugely sought-after as a partner and almost outrageously popular among audiences during his 18 years with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Even decades after his retirement in 1979, his image in the centre of a huge photo tapestry is the first thing theatre-goers see as they enter Place des Arts' main hall.” Montreal's Bibliothèque de la danse Vincent-Warren, with its extensive collection of dance history titles, from books to posters to DVDs, is another ongoing legacy, as is the Norman McLaren classic 1968 film, *Pas de deux*, in which Warren, partnering Margaret Mercier, so beautifully dances.

— KAIJA PEPPER

Top: Vincent Warren in Joseph Lazzini's *Ecce Homo*, 1969-1970
Photo: R. Faligant, courtesy of Dance Collection Danse

Top right: Pepper Fajans and David Vaughan in rehearsal for *Co. Venture*, 2015
Photo: Gilbert Gaytan



David Vaughan 1924-2017

Dance historian and archivist David Vaughan passed away on October 27, 2017, at age 93. The London-born Vaughan was best known for his tenure as archivist for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, from 1976 until the group folded in 2012. He is the author of three books: *The Royal Ballet at Covent Garden* (1975), *Frederick Ashton and His Ballets* (1977) and *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (1997), and co-authored *The Encyclopedia of Dance and Ballet* (1977). Vaughan was also a performer, who recently appeared in Brooklyn Touring Outfit's *Co. Venture*, a storytelling duet with Pepper Fajans. The piece, which premiered at the 2015 Montreal Fringe Festival, was about Vaughan's friendship with the 60-years-younger artist and carpenter Pepper Fajans, which included their mutual work and friendship with Merce Cunningham.

— KAIJA PEPPER

Dance as Prayer

Three kathak practitioners in Ahmedabad

by Thea Piltzecker



Dhwani Emmanuel
Photo: Harshul Sheth

On a hot afternoon in Ahmedabad, India, in March 2017, Dhvani Emmanuel throws open the windows of her dance studio, trying to tempt a breeze. Several adult students join her, turning on fans before tying on their ankle bells. Emmanuel's father sets up his harmonium and mandolin on a bench by the wall. As he begins to play, the students gather in the centre of the room, and Emmanuel, dressed in a loose purple shift, leads them through a series of slow hand and arm gestures.

These movements are the grounding premise of kathak, a form of Indian dance so deeply rooted in Hindu religion and culture that its performance is considered a prayer.

As Emmanuel's students tap their fingers on the opposite palm, they murmur syllables that correspond to the gesture and the musical notation. Everyone has a chance to use their ankle bells when the music picks up, stamping their bare feet in a complex pattern.

Now properly warmed up, they begin

a fluid, full-body sequence. Arms rise elegantly above heads; feet spin on metatarsals; torsos twist around the spinal axis. The dancers move between levels (lowering themselves to the ground and rising again), reach to the sides and spin around themselves. They stay largely within an imaginary box, never crossing the floor or interfering in their neighbour's personal space.

Emmanuel describes this spatial aspect of kathak in terms of a mandala. Like the religious paintings, in which concentric circles or squares expand outward from an image of Krishna (or the Buddha, in other traditions), kathak sequences can be entirely self-contained. "We actually become the mandala," she says.

Movements may undulate outward, but the focus is always drawn back into the self, the core of the body. This core, like the painting, is understood to contain the god Krishna, made accessible through the "active meditation" of dance.

"We're dancing like gopis [milkmaids] used to dance around Krishna," Emmanuel explains. "The gopis are our souls, and our souls are trying to become one with Krishna."

Since its inception in 400 BCE, kathak dance has been entwined with religious practice. According to Indian folklore, Lord Krishna appeared in the dream of a villager from Uttar Pradesh, asking him to worship by dancing. The villager then taught the north Indian classical dance form of kathak to his descendants as a way of showing his bhakti, or devotion, to Krishna.

The word "kathak" means "storyteller," and traditional performers are bards who transmit stories about the god Krishna and his love for Radha, a human milkmaid. The romance between Radha and Krishna also serves as a model for the love between the individual soul and divine cosmic energy.

Yet some contemporary kathak dancers, facing an increasingly secular or multi-religious audience, are carefully reconsidering the Radha-Krishna duets at the heart of its practice. For some, debates about new forms are incidental to the larger goal: transcendence through devotion.

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Usha Gupta

pioneers kathak in Edmonton

by Kate Stashko

It is sometimes said that one of the hallmarks of an artist is their continual desire to learn, grow and seek new experiences. By this definition, 76-year-old Usha Gupta fits the bill with dedication and passion to spare. She has been choreographing and teaching kathak dance in Edmonton, Alberta, since she arrived in 1989 through her school, Usha Kala Niketan. She then established her professional company, Usha Gupta Dance Entourage, and has become a pillar in the large, tightly knit local Indian dance community.

Gupta was born in Jalandhar, India, and trained with her guru in music and dance from a young age. She spent much of her early career in the Middle East, moving there when her husband was offered a position as a sales director. They first lived in Doha, Qatar, where she taught dance and created work, before moving to the United Arab Emirates. Then, during 15 years in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, in addition to teaching and choreographing, Gupta served as the Indian cultural ambassador.

When their daughter moved to Edmonton, Gupta and her husband followed. She established a school in their basement with only two students; by 1990, she had 150 students, and the school now has its own fourth floor studios.

In those early days, she remembers making dances overnight, and she would cook for the dancers to sustain them in their all-night rehearsals. "I always choreograph the piece on the spot," she says. "I never prepare before. The ideas just start coming."

While ideas came easily for Gupta, a large selection of well-trained kathak dancers did not. In the early 1990s, there were limited training opportunities in Edmonton beyond Gupta's own program, and her students were mostly youth and not yet advanced enough to perform with the troupe. Being committed to working with local artists and giving back to the community that had generously welcomed her upon her arrival, Gupta decided to hire professional contemporary dancers to complement the handful of advanced kathak dancers she had met in Edmonton. It was a choice born both out of necessity and a desire for collaboration with the contemporary dance aesthetic, influenced in no small part by Gupta's strong relationship with dance artist Brian Webb.

This was certainly a risk, and Gupta was criticized by some government funding bodies who told her she should source

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Dance is my source of energy – this is my bhakti. Indian classical dance is not something to do, it is something to be.

– Dhwani Emmanuel



Maulik Shah and Ishira Parikh
Photo: P. M. Dalwadi

Emmanuel grew up in a religiously divided household; her father is Christian and her mother is Hindu. She credits this experience with opening her eyes to underlying spiritual currents in both religions. “I love both, and for me, dance is my God,” she says.

Emmanuel’s dance training began with Maulik Shah and Ishira Parikh, founders of the Anart Kathak school and company, which is also based in

Ahmedabad. Shah and Parikh play with classical themes while expanding their reference points. The traditional Indian aesthetic of shringar, or romantic love, takes on new emotional tenors when paired with Krishna’s multi-faceted personality. Shah and Parikh are currently choreographing a series of duets on the permutations of love: the divine connection between Krishna and Radha; a long-married couple; and a young pair just beginning their courtship.

This dance has a personal significance to them; Shah and Parikh met while dancing, in their 20s, and have spent their personal and professional lives together. “When we first started dancing together, our teachers saw that our styles were very complementary,” Parikh recalls. “There was this unspoken understanding,” she says of their first joint performances in the 1980s. Their complementary styles include both reverence for ancient teaching methods and a willingness to experiment in performance. Traditional movement vocabulary and pedagogy are essential to good kathak training, but their performances broaden the range of themes.

“We try to develop the kathak dance style for today, expanding it within the framework of classical kathak dance,” says Parikh, who questions blind devotion to traditional stories and forms. “What was contemporary yesterday is a tradition for me, now. When you have an audience [in 2018], how relevant would it be just to talk about Radha and Krishna?” While these themes are “very beautiful, is there nothing between then and now?”

Their neoclassical style incorporates stutis (hymns) in honour of Shiva, Ganesha and Krishna — all classical kathak requirements — as well as nods to more earth-bound concerns. “People want something different in performances,” Shah says.

The couple sees no conflict in their presentation of duets with religious content and their lack of religious observance offstage. Instead, they find spiritual nourishment in the act of performance. “Our puja [worship] is

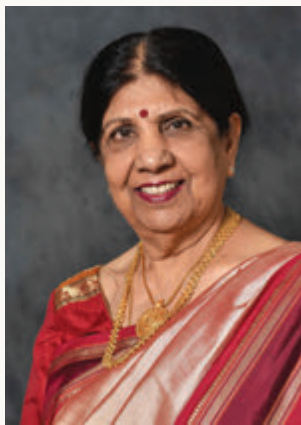
rehearsal,” says Shah, who believes the aim of kathak is to connect the human and the divine.

Ultimately, kathak dancers should be the embodiment of bliss. “It doesn’t happen every time, let me tell you that,” Parikh laughs. “But, when it does, you cherish those moments.”

Shah is more direct in his inspiration. “I see God, here,” he says, straightening his arm through the elbow. “And I pray.” Sweeping his arm to the side, he closes his eyes as a smile spreads across his face.

Kathak’s own history mirrors its dancers’ search for balance. Despite its deep religious roots, its cultural height occurred in a secular context. The form was nourished for many years by the Mughal emperors. Hindu kathak dancers abstracted their religious themes in order to secure patronage under Muslim rule. Emmanuel, Parikh and Shah all acknowledge that interreligious interaction in this period strengthened kathak’s legitimacy as an art form and codified much of its vocabulary. “The art form is like a river, and it must flow,” says Parikh. “Artists of each generation must contribute what they can.”

Perhaps, then, drawing too fine a point on what exactly the form should be in today’s context misses the overall message. “Dance is my source of energy — this is my bhakti,” Emmanuel says. “Indian classical dance is not something to do, it is something to be.” ^{vi}



Usha Gupta
Photo: Kim Griff

trained kathak dancers from outside Edmonton or even outside Canada, if necessary. When she took this advice, other funders encouraged her to increase the proportion of local artists in her projects. She found herself in a difficult situation as one of the pioneers of kathak dance in Edmonton — how could she create kathak work on local artists when there were few professional kathak dancers among them? And what was an appropriate definition of a professional kathak dance artist back then when the form was still being pioneered in Edmonton? At heart, Gupta believed so strongly in working with, and learning from, the community that she continued with her mixed-background troupe of local artists for several years, complemented by the occasional guest from India.

Fast forward to the present day, when her training program has successfully graduated several skilled kathak dancers who now perform with her company, which has toured across Canada and throughout India. She combines both traditional kathak and contemporary dance aesthetics, and uses her extensive musical training to advantage as both a choreographer and a performer. Though she doesn’t dance onstage anymore, she provided live vocal accompaniment in her recent work *Aalaap*. Gupta maintains a strong commitment to community-building events and has created pieces for several local fundraisers.

Her upcoming work, *KHOJ*, will premiere in Edmonton in June 2018 as part of Brian Webb Dance Company’s season. The theme? The continual search — for knowledge, love and wisdom. It seems appropriate for a woman who has spent her life searching for new knowledge and opportunities for growth. When I ask why she’s still doing this in her 70s, she says simply, “It’s my passion. I learn a lot. And I’ll never stop.” ^{vi}



Usha Gupta Dance Entourage
Photo: FO Photography

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As technological automation continues to push once in-demand cognitive and technical skills into obsolescence, dancers' capacity for creativity, collaboration and emotional intelligence are highly valued in areas beyond performance, including the non-arts workforce.

Skills such as perseverance, physical and emotional resilience, and an ability to learn quickly are often attributed to successful dance artists. These skills are assets in many careers, yet dancers' intense focus on artistic tasks often leaves little opportunity to consider the applicability of their skills to other jobs and sectors.

When the Dancer Transition Resource Centre conducted its 2016 Survey of Professional Dancers in Canada, 37 percent of respondents were actively working in a "parallel career" alongside performance work. For some, a parallel career may be an additional role in the dance industry. Others find work or create entrepreneurial opportunities in technology, merchandising, health and wellness, and other fields.

There are many reasons why dancers may be compelled to take on careers beyond performance work — a desire to explore new roles within the cultural sector, an interest in applying creativity to new mediums or industries, or a need for a higher or more stable income. The survey also demonstrated trends of decreasing income and increasing financial strain amongst Canadian dancers, perhaps accounting for the large increase in dancers with parallel careers when compared to the 2004 version of the survey.

Regardless of motivation, identifying skillsets is a necessary step for any dancer to take before broadening their career into new directions. "It's important for dancers to know how to talk about their skills and experience in a way people outside the art world will understand," explains Amanda Hancox, the DTRC's executive director.

Career development specialist Yvonne Rodney recently ran a DTRC workshop to assist dancers in identifying their transferrable skills. Rather than relying on vocabulary common to the cultural sector, Rodney provided lists of skills that were

non-industry specific. These were sorted into "skill clusters": communication, analytical, human relations, work survival, management and leadership, creative/artistic and physical/technical.

By relying on a different vocabulary, and reframing their professional experience outside of its particular artistic context, some dancers were surprised to see which skills they had identified within themselves, and which ones they desired to use most often in future work.

Performance psychology consultant Kate F. Hays suggests that dancers look deeper into their training and employment, thinking less about specific jobs and more about "the necessary ingredients." She also prompts dancers to keep a list of basic skills and values that were important in their professional progress, and to share these items with a friend or colleague, "responding as if you were advising a fellow dancer."

Next comes the greater challenge of moving these skills into the language of another industry. Hancox says, "A lot of dancers know they have incredible value to offer employers, but they struggle to verbalize it. If you look at the most common, core workplace competencies — teamwork, leadership, innovation, adaptability — these are things so many dancers possess. They just need the confidence to talk about them."

Professional counselling is a great way of seeing one's skills from another perspective. Psychotherapist Carolyn Dallman Downes has taken notice of the wide range of skills dancers share. She points out their tendency to be "hard-working and persistent, even in the face of injury or setback. They are mentally tough — able to take criticism or direction and use it to enhance performance. They are usually able to work in a team or alone and, depending on the kind of dance, also know a thing or two about partnership."

No matter what their career goals may be, dancers' knowledge, attitudes and values will help to realize them. As Dallman Downes says of dancers' skills, "It never hurts to remind a prospective employer that you possess them." ■



Excerpt from
A SIMPLE STORY: THE LAST MALAMBO
 By Leila Guerriero
 Translated from Spanish by Frances Riddle
 New Directions
 ndbooks.com

“That Friday night, Rodolfo González Alcántara moved to the center of the stage like a hurricane-force gale, like a puma, like a stag, like a robber of souls, and he remained nailed to the spot for two or three beats, his brow furrowed, staring at something that no one else could see. The first movement of his legs made his *cribo* tremble like a soft sea creature rocked by the waves. Then, for four minutes and fifty-two seconds, he made the night crackle with his blows.

It was the open field, it was the dusty ground, it was the taut horizon of the pampa, it was the smell of horses, the sound of the summer sky, the buzz of solitude, it was fury, sickness, war, it was the antithesis of peace. It was the blade and the cut. It was all devouring. It was punishment. When he was finished, he pounded the stage with a monstrous force, froze on the spot, and stood staring out through the fine layers of the night, covered in stars, all ablaze. And, half-smiling — like a prince, like a ruffian, or like the devil — he tipped his hat. And then he left the stage.

That’s how it was.

I don’t know if they applauded him. I don’t remember.”

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Kenneth MacMillan choreographed *Romeo and Juliet* for the Royal Ballet in 1965 and many consider it to be the definitive version of the ballet. This DVD, from Italy's La Scala, is a wonderful opportunity to experience a work which has lost none of its visceral intensity, its heady brew of passion, sex and violence rooted in Prokofiev's surging orchestral score.

It's also a chance to see two of today's biggest ballet names — Misty Copeland and Roberto Bolle — as the star-crossed lovers. The choreography shows off Copeland's innate musicality and light, effortless jump. Equally important, she captures Juliet's emotional journey and makes the character believable; the moment she realizes her parents expect her to marry Paris, and the subsequent rage and sense of abandonment toward her nurse, are heartbreaking. Bolle is a handsome Romeo, with immaculate technique and attentive partnering, although not quite matching Copeland's emotional commitment.

The La Scala production is newly designed by Mauro Carosi and Odette Nicoletti, with costumes for the Montagues and Capulets verging on garish — a riot of turquoise, plum, orange, emerald, scarlet and gold. The camerawork is frustratingly erratic at times, zooming in on crowd details instead of showing the central action. However, the dancing is excellent throughout: Mick Zeni's Tybalt, the epitome of smooth menace, delivers a splendid death scene, and Emanuela Montanari is a compelling Lady Capulet, struggling to hold herself together in the face of tragedy.

The DVD includes an interview with Bolle about dancing Romeo, working with Copeland, the music and the choreography.

— HEATHER BRAY



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By Raymond St-Jean

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The film *Louise Lecavalier in Motion* documents the life and work of the acclaimed Canadian dancer, who began her career working with choreographer Édouard Lock and La La La Human Steps in the 1980s. Post-La La La, Lecavalier is flourishing on the international stage. Close to age 60, she is a true icon of contemporary dance, still performing, creative and vital as artistic director of her own company, Fou Glorieux.

— KAIJA PEPPER

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GLOBAL REPORTS

Vancouver



by Kaija Pepper

For Vancouverites who have been watching dance for a while, contact is a familiar form, whether improvised or set. It has been popular here since the mid-1970s, and developed through the work and teaching of EDAM (Experimental Dance and Music), founded in 1982. Today the form, with its weight-based partnering, is one part of the toolset of a well-rounded professional dancer.

At the opening show of the Dance Centre's Global Connections series, the contact-based double bill by Sharon Fridman felt both familiar and fresh, formed through the consciousness of the Israeli choreographer and his Madrid-based company.

The two works — the short duet *Hasta Dónde...?* and *All Ways* for seven dancers — had a vibrant pulse, found in both the choreography and original music, which was by Luís Miguel Cobo in the duet (played live on electronic keyboard), and by Idan Shimoni from the band *Danski* for the ensemble (featuring a live singer with guitar).

All Ways also had vibrant costume design by Inbal Ben Zaken (from the label MIZO) in the form of dresses and tunics whose rich subdued colours and lacy or shiny fabrics revealed subtle textures under chiaroscuro lighting. Its vortex of movement constantly formed and reformed into whirlpools of action or long friezes of

entangled bodies, in which the relaxed lines of legs and feet, arms and hands, were sensual and human, not hard and technical. These bodies offered each other a lifeline in a work that created a romantic, seductive space.

Fridman follows his own pulse, outside the mainstream, as does Finland's Tero Saarinen, whose *Morphed* opened the DanceHouse series at the Playhouse. Here, seven men galumphed gracefully to the often epic-adventure sounds of Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Foreign Bodies*, a 2001 orchestral piece.

Saarinen's dancers have a range of training, from breakdance to ballet, and their unison leaps and extended legs were never uniform. Hyper-expressive hands seemed the initiating force of their impulse to move, and the lower bodies were contained, legs and feet never extending to the same fulsome degree as arms and hands. As the men crashed across the stage, shedding hoodies and then suits, the choreography had a sketched-in look, as if there was only time to etch quick craggy lines in space. The men move with what was described last August in London's *Evening Standard* as "rough-hewn heft"; there was something fascinating about their blunt force and deliberate lack of polish.

David Scarantino's delicate wanderings to Salonen's 2009 *Violin Concerto* added a quieter, more personal note in this piece exploring, according to the program, themes of change and sensuality as

experienced by men. Why men only? For biographical reasons; Saarinen had created the 2014 piece after reaching an introspective age — 50 — and wanted to turn the spotlight on his gender alone.

Two more European men had their choreography featured, this time by Ballet BC in its November bill at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre: Cayetano Soto and Johan Inger, familiar names on the company's programs. Soto, Ballet BC's resident choreographer since 2015, premiered *Eight Years of Silence*, set to six short pieces by British composer Peter Gregson, who mixed strings and synthesizer to produce a contemplative, often sad soundscape. The dance was equally sad, but less ethereal, with solid, muscular movement. A grey curtain filled the back wall, and the 13 fit and polished dancers wore skin-tight gunmetal grey tunics that seemed to barely contain their muscular push into movement. They were often anonymous in the darkness or under harsh lighting that left faces in shadow.

Soto, responsible for lighting and costume design as well as choreography, presented movement dependent on extreme thrust and flexibility, making a virtue of arms that hoiked themselves into the space behind the body and of hunkered down, weighted pliés. The dancers struck full-bodied poses like plastic action figures determined to burst out into the real world. The choreography captured the lonely silence suggested by the title, well complemented by the music, which suggested another, more hopeful kind of quiet.

Inger's *B.R.I.S.A.* was created for the young dancers of Nederlands Dans Theater 2 in 2014. It's an odd mix of humour and angst, with the former coming from comic play over the different ways the dancers keep cool, including a paper fan, a hairdryer, a leaf blower and an industrial-sized fan that is given the final moment onstage as it blows cool air directly into the auditorium.

Again the music — three recorded songs performed by magnificent Nina Simone — carried its own message. *Black Swan* by Gian Carlo Menotti started things off, cueing swan arms; *Wild is the Wind* gave the impetus for the fans; and *Sinnerman* provided rhythmic impetus for several exciting storms of movement from the untiring dancers, with Kirsten Wicklund an absolute goddess of furious flight. *DI*

Ballet BC's Emily Chessa, Brandon Alley and Justin Rapaport in Cayetano Soto's *Eight Years of Silence*
Photo: Michael Slobodian

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's artistic director André Lewis took audiences down memory lane with the program *Our Story*, featuring seminal turning points in the company's 78-year history. The historically rich mixed bill, also celebrating Canada 150, paid homage to six prominent choreographers who have left their footprint on the "Prairie fresh" company, including a premiere by one of them, Peter Quanz (who is also an alum of the RWB School Professional Division).

By its very nature, *Our Story* also honoured the company's late legendary artistic director Arnold Spohr, whose diverse programming would regularly include a classical piece, a dramatic work and "something to wake up the husbands."

The three shows held mid-November 2017 and, unusually, performed with recorded music, were staged not in the company's typical stomping grounds of the Centennial Concert Hall, but in its in-house performance space, the RWB Founders Studio. While infusing the two-hour evening with greater intimacy, the location suggests ever-looming fiscal restraint

biting at the heels of so many arts organizations today.

The mixed bill opened with Quanz's classically inspired ballet *straight against the light I cross*, performed on pointe. It's his first commissioned work created for the RWB, though the company has performed other Quanz ballets, co-produced with his own company Q Dance — and dedicated to the late Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal dance artist Vincent Warren (see *Obituaries* on page 29), a revered mentor.

Performed by a 12-dancer ensemble to Canadian composer Marjan Mozetich's *Concerto for bassoon and string orchestra with marimba*, and featuring Anne Armit's sleek blue-grey unitards, the 21-minute piece, titled after American Frank O'Hara's poetry, suggested chapters in the choreographer's own artistic story, evoking the sweeping lyricism of his 2010 signature work *Luminous*, the sculptural liquidity of his 2011 full-length ballet *Rodin / Claudel*, the sparkling ebullience of his 2014 pas de deux *Blushing*, and the emotional, plumbed depths of 2013's *Untitled*.

In *straight against the light I cross*, Quanz bleeds smaller ensembles into a larger

whole, with the dancers appearing like constantly shifting sands of kinetic movement that felt somewhat hectic at times. Longtime RWB soloist Yosuke Mino with soloist Alanna McAdie burst into playful skips during their pas de deux, while second soloists Liam Caines and Elizabeth Lamont's more introspective section includes Lamont being lifted with her flexed feet undulating in the air like sheaves of blowing wheat. Corps de ballet members Saeka Shirai and Yue Shi performed intricate steps comprised of abrupt shifts of direction, juxtaposed with soaring lifts.

Quanz's final barren landscape features the male dancers curling their bodies around the women's feet — literally grounding the ballet and each other — before everyone rises again to leave the stage except for Caines and Lamont. When Lamont also departs into a shaft of light, Caines remains lying on the floor, utterly alone, human and vulnerable, as one might feel after losing a friend and steadfast advisor.

Another cornerstone of the evening was *Miroirs*, by the company's first resident choreographer and former soloist, Mark Godden, commissioned by the RWB in 1995 and set to Ravel's impressionistic solo piano suite of the same name. The

Winnipeg |

by Holly Harris



The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's Sophia Lee in Jacques Lemay's *Le Jazz Hot*
Photo: Simeon Rusnak

beautifully crafted contemporary ballet unfolding in five movements is steeped in Godden's darkly dramatic aesthetic and architectural sensibility.

Standout performances include principal dancers Jo-Ann Sundermeier and Dmitri Dovgoselets in the first section, *Bird*, with their pensive movement arriving at moments of stillness, including its final image of Sundermeier clasp her fists to her face.

Mino popped like a champagne cork during his effervescent Jester solo, bounding about the stage with a white feather quill and furred scroll, a testament to this powerhouse dancer's still enthralling athleticism at an age when others are honing their stable of character roles. In *Boats*, Sophia Lee, Yayoi Ban, Caines and Tyler Carver created elegantly lyrical lines heightened further with Paul Daigle's long, flowing skirts. The final movement, *Bell*, includes a trompe d'oeil in which McAdie wildly swings between Josh Reynolds' and Stephan Azulay's taut arms like a joyous, peeling bell.

The program also included a rare performance of Norbert Vesak's *Belong pas de*

deux from his RWB-commissioned 1973 ballet *What to Do Till the Messiah Comes*. Dovgoselets and Chenxin Liu were given the daunting task of interpreting the searing work that had earned the RWB's former prima ballerina assoluta Evelyn Hart a prestigious gold medal with David Pergrine at the Varna International Ballet Competition in 1980, and became one of her signature works.

Dovgoselets and Liu executed the near-mythical duet, which features an electro-acoustic score by Syrinx, with fluid, expressive grace and athletic strength, their bodies entwining like lovers' limbs. A greater emotional connection between the two dancers would have deepened their performance even further.

The program also included *LED*, choreographed by Shawn Hounsell (a former RWB dancer) in honour of principal Tara Birtwhistle's retirement from the stage in 2008, when she performed the duet with husband Dovgoselets. Another real-life power couple, Sundermeier and Reynolds brought the requisite intensity to the stirring work set to Arvo Pärt's *Für Alina*, performing Hounsell's often gestural,

angular choreography, punctuated by recorded, organic breath sounds, with controlled precision.

The evening's oldest offering featured another company pillar, the internationally renowned choreographer and director Brian Macdonald, represented by his tongue-in-cheek story ballet *Pas D'Action*. The late dance artist's wife, retired ballerina Annette av Paul, travelled from her Stratford, Ontario, home to stage the work. Av Paul, who was in the audience on opening night, had premiered the work with another RWB icon, David Moroni, a former principal dancer and the founder of the RWB School's Professional Division.

Macdonald's fantastical kingdom featuring Lamont's Princess Naissa and her co-conspirators — Carver's Prince Sebastian, Shi's Count Florimund, Ryan Vetter's Duke of Westphalia and Caines' Telemund — perform goofy leaps, spin like tops before collapsing into the floor and gasp for air during lifts, making the difficult choreography look oh-so-easy. Kudos to Lamont for her comic acting skills, not to mention pristine technique, with her final solo capped by a blaze of flashing fouettés.

Finally, the evening featured Jacques Lemay's *Le Jazz Hot*, premiered in 1985 by the acclaimed choreographer, who performed it then with RWB principal dancer Laura Graham (who came to mount the work). The duet featured Lee and Azulay, outfitted in Lemay's own costume design of bowler hats, character shoes, fringed dress (for her), and natty vest, trousers and bow tie (for him). The tour-de-force work melds jazz dance with balletic technique, with these two dancers high kicking, shaking and shimmying to a sizzling Henry Mancini score, perhaps pushed out of their comfort zones, but clearly having the time of their lives.

As Canada's oldest ballet company, and notably North America's longest continuously operating troupe, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet has proven many times over its resilience and fortitude, able to constantly reinvent itself, and moving now toward its 80th anniversary in the 2019-2020 season. *DI*



Dmitri Dovgoselets and Chenxin Liu in Norbert Vesak's *Belong pas de deux*
Photo: Simeon Rusnak

Toronto

by Michael Crabb



The problem with many garden-variety ballet galas is the monotony of star turns in bravura classical pas de deux. Although the second Canada All Star Ballet Gala convened at Toronto's Sony Centre in October cleaved to the duet format, with offerings often extracted from longer works, the extraordinary variety of choreography, most of it new to local audiences, and the international mix of well-established and emerging talents, made for a satisfying evening.

The first Canada All Star Ballet Gala — such a clumsy name — was held in February 2017, the brainchild of former Bolshoi Ballet star and now National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Svetlana Lunkina. Although Lunkina is the gala's producer/curator, the events are not built around a single star name.

The first gala highlighted the various schools of classical dance. This second edition was designed to reveal how much the art of ballet has evolved in the hands of such choreographers as Roland Petit, Mauro Bigonzetti, Yuri Possokhov, Wayne McGregor and David Dawson.

Seen as a totality, two things emerged. Where contemporary choreography is concerned, there is a preponderance of hyper-physicality and angular disharmony that tends toward sameness. Had William Forsythe been among the choreographers, we might have been able to pinpoint the genius behind this prevalent new aesthetic.

Related to this, one detects a more nuanced and complex reading of gender relationships. Where romance is evident, it is not idealized. Women are neither icons nor odalisques. The traditional power

imbalance of strong male and delicate female is replaced with something approaching a meeting of equals — not a bad takeaway for a ballet gala.

Although it does not call itself a gala, Fall for Dance North (FFDN), the Toronto version of the New York City dance-smorgasbord original, could certainly qualify. It is celebratory, culturally inclusive and, in part because of the flat \$15 price point, hugely popular, effectively selling out the 3,200-seat Sony Centre for three nights. There's no accurate way to measure its spillover effect, but some audience first-timers were doubtlessly seduced into becoming lifetime dance devotees.

Highlights of the October 2017 edition included the local debut of Canadian expatriate Eric Gauthier and his Stuttgart-based Gauthier Dance, in the FFDN-commissioned *Children of Chaos* by National Ballet choreographic associate Robert Binet, featuring a cast of Canadians who, like Gauthier, have built careers abroad. Another was Charles Moulton's 1979 *Precision Ball Passing*, reconfigured for a community-drawn cast of 72. It may not be dance in the conventional sense — it was made in the last gasps of American postmodernism — but it is a physical spectacle of oddly haunting beauty and humanity.

In what even by Toronto standards was an exceptionally busy fall, ProArteDanza featured a substantial premiere by Matjash Mrozewski, *Future Perfect Continuous* — English grammar gurus will recognize the title's derivation — that, with a mix of dance and spoken word, takes a wry look at climate change. It's almost like a danced play — playwright Anna Chatterton wrote the text — and the cast

of 12 executes their dual responsibilities impressively. *Future Perfect Continuous* succeeds in being neither didactic nor preachy and, by offering a jumble of conflicting viewpoints, ultimately reflects the overwhelming complexity of the climate change debate — as if there needs to be a debate — and the daunting prospect of grappling with something so huge.

ProArteDanza's Anisa Tejpar, who performed in Mrozewski's new work, presented her first solo show in November, an ambitious production that packed the Aki Studio Theatre. *In Time* is a collaborative endeavour with choreography by Hanna Kiel, original music by John Gzowski, lighting by Simon Rossiter, video design by Jacob Niedzwiecki, outdoor film footage by Jeremy Mimmagh and an effective set design by Joe Pagnan. Tejpar did all the dancing and her own costuming.

In Time is at one level a personal piece, reflective and introspective, but, in its subtle exploration of memory and the passage of time, it is sufficiently universal in theme to move beyond the purely biographical.

Kiel's choreography gives Tejpar, always a powerful stage presence, ample opportunity to display her command of dynamics, of speed and stillness, force and delicacy. Projected imagery floats at times surreally on the stretched fabric butterfly wings of Pagnan's design, like fragments of a jigsaw puzzle. Memory, it appears, is a retrospective construct that wriggles and morphs.

Memory is also a component of Dreamwalker Dance artistic director Andrea Nann's new work *Dual Light*, but where *In Time* plays with memory as a means of grasping a fugitive reality, *Dual Light* embraces and even celebrates the transitory nature of human experience.

Dual Light, made by Nann in collaboration with fellow performers Kristy Kennedy, Yuichiro Inoue and Brendan Wyatt, proceeds by scenes, covering a lot of ground — personal and universally philosophical. The performers recount particular experiences. Their physical interactions seem as much spontaneous as choreographed. A linking thread is an exploration of how life unfolds in a flow of transitions, of departures and arrivals, literal and metaphorical.

Dual Light aims to offer a glimpse of the ineffable and, through mood and atmosphere, comes close to achieving that impossible goal. ▯



Months of hard labour went into *Dance Me*, an 80-minute choreographic interpretation of 15 songs by the late, gravel-voiced bard Leonard Cohen, performed by BJM – Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal. A year after his death, the December premiere in his hometown was much anticipated, with audiences selling out Théâtre Maisonneuve in Place des Arts for all six performances. Artistic director Louis Robitaille boldly hired three foreign-born choreographers to bring individual styles to the songs that he and veteran stage director Éric Jean moulded into an overriding vision.

Andonis Foniadakis, who created *Kosmos* for BJM in 2015, brought a constant-motion approach to six songs. His fast pace acted as a counterpoint to the more measured beat of songs like *Everybody Knows*, with dancers wielding metal poles as weapons (“... the war is over / Everybody knows the good guys lost ...”), and *Nevermind*, which ended in principal dancer Céline Cassone perched on top of a huddle (“I live among you, well disguised”).

The high-energy *Boogie Street* included a trio of men carrying a woman over, around and below them with a

wonderful fluidity of motion that characterized all of the show’s 14 performers. Although acrobatic, the choreography had erotic overtones that surely would have appealed to Cohen’s distinctly amorous side.

Another six songs were choreographed by Ihsan Rustem, making his company debut with sensitive attention to lyrics like those of *Dance Me to the End of Love*, in which Benjamin Mitchell, quietly powerful, searched for love in short passionate duets with seven different women. Left alone, consoled by a male friend, Mitchell perhaps found lasting romance in a final duet with Cassone. *Lover Lover Lover* flew by with jazzy coordinated steps and gestures by a male contingent of six.

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, who made *Zip Zap Zoom* for BJM in 2009, contributed *It Seemed the Better Way*, an alternately slow/fast duet with a soupçon of ballroom dance moves for Cassone and Alexander Hille, whose complicity in several highly engaging duets added layers of deep romance on top of Cohen’s poignant longings.

Throughout, Cédric Delorme-Bouchard’s imaginative lighting for songs like the show opener, *Here It Is*, where dancers emerged in and out of

light and dark, made *Dance Me* a memorable aesthetic treat, thunderously applauded.

Earlier in the season, at Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, public outrage was not what new artistic director Ivan Cavallari expected — nor presumably desired — for his first program, a double bill of Edward Clug’s *Stabat Mater* (2013), to Pergolesi, and Uwe Scholz’s *7th Symphony* (1991), to Beethoven. *Stabat Mater*’s poster raised the ire of Montreal’s transit service, STM (Société de transport de Montréal), which refused to display it in its shelters or in the metro. The poster featured dancer Vanesa Garcia-Ribala Montoya in a blood-covered white cloak, with rivulets of blood running down a bare arm and leg to her foot pierced by a long spike. For Cavallari, it reflected the Virgin Mary’s sorrow at Christ’s crucifixion. The STM, however, deemed it too graphic. Somewhat disingenuously, Cavallari countered by pointing to the extreme violence seen in movies and on TV. True, but the STM does not show such scenes in its shelters either.

At any rate, *Stabat Mater*’s worst on-stage “violence” was a mild roughing up of a male figure, who was later suspended, taped onto a pillar, in a vaguely crucifixion pose. Otherwise there was nothing particularly troubling, unless anyone was offended by the sight of a man placing his head under a woman’s T-shirt, giving her a pregnant appearance. Suggestive symbolism extended as well to scenes of women running to catch men falling back in a faint, and high-heeled women making themselves available to men who led them away. The piece finished with a woman stretching out next to a man lying prone inside a coffin-like box. Such visuals made an intriguing opening act, enhanced by a live orchestra and splendid soloists, soprano Kimy McLaren and mezzo-soprano Maude Brunet.

Scholz’s *7th Symphony* whizzed by, with dancers scurrying in parallel or opposing lines, pirouettes, jumps galore, sky-high développés and ballerinas lifted overhead. Throughout there was a rapprochement between gesture and sound. Beyond this enjoyable musicality, much of the choreography impressed largely through force of numbers, as

though Busby Berkeley had gone ballet. The many pretty poses and rapid comings and goings had the kind of let-me-show-you-what-I-can-do exuberance that young ballet students dream of.

Under former director Gradimir Panov, Les Grands' dancers rarely had a chance to flaunt their training. Presumably, Cavallari — reputedly a hard taskmaster — wanted to give them a piece to challenge their capability and stamina. With many new dancers on the roster — there were so many unfamiliar faces that Les Grands almost looked like a visiting company — a test was a good idea. "It's nice to see Les Grands doing something neoclassical," remarked one woman after the show. Yes, it was.

Former Les Grands dancer Anne Plamondon has forged a notable career since leaving the company in 2000, initially with Rubberbandance, where she performed scintillating duets with Victor Quijada. Now a soloist doing her own choreography, her sensitivity is at a stage where the smallest gesture compels.

Plamondon's new solo created with dramaturge Marie Brassard, *Mécaniques nocturnes*, began with her pushing heavy bags and stacking them at a freestanding ballet barre. This long, slow-moving section was followed by movements at the barre reminiscent of ballet positions, but with an unpredictable rhythm and unorthodox poses, moving upside down hand-over-hand along the barre. The nuances that she imparted to her movements gave them vigour and life. In another section, she cavorted on a metal structure like it was a jungle gym, ending with runs around the set before expiring on the floor in darkness.

Slightly too long at one hour, the piece showed Plamondon's unflinching concentration as she moved on the Agora de la Danse stage near enough to the audience to see their eyes. With a riveting stage presence and a strong dance intelligence, Plamondon might well be the Canadian female dancer to pick up the mantle of Louise Lecavalier one day.

Montreal troupe Tentacle Tribe

continues to grow in both vision and number of dancers. *Threesixnine*, a new hour-long piece by founders Emmanuelle Lê Phan and Elon Höglund, had them joining four other fluid movers. The interweaving complex patterns were never predictable and highly original in the many ways in which the dancers' limbs merged and separated. Veteran break dancers Lê Phan and Höglund have assimilated breaking into an expressive vocabulary that requires extraordinary timing and body awareness.

In one sequence, Höglund tumbled backward, stretched out his leg and smoothly hooked his foot around another dancer's neck. What was striking was not the virtuosity, but how it added to the overall conversation about singularity and multiplicity. Always aware of the dramatic power of contrasts, the choreography also had Mecdy Jean-Pierre and Lê Phan in a back-and-forth duet in which his hands beckoned her to approach each time she withdrew. What will Tentacle Tribe try next? ▫

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San Francisco

by Allan Ulrich



With the Berkeley debut of New York-based Reggie Wilson / Fist and Heel Performance Group on September 23 at Zellerbach Hall, Cal Performances at the University of California launched *Joining Generations*, an ambitious, four-part survey of African American choreography. The California premiere of Wilson's 2013 *Moses(es)* inaugurated the project in arresting, if not entirely successful fashion. However, it was past time to engage the Brooklyn-based dancemaker, whose Bay Area debut seven years ago was memorable.

The event epitomized Berkeley RADICAL, a new style in arts presentation by Northern California's most formidable impresario. Most visiting dance companies, orchestras or theatre troupes are now asked to give Berkeley residencies. They can include onstage interviews, panels, master classes, public rehearsals or community dance classes, most of them free. In November, Nicolas Blanc of Joffrey Ballet created a Cal Performances-commissioned work, while the public looked on through these ancillary events, which recalled the legendary Joffrey residencies here in the 1960s.

So far, everyone seems happy with Berkeley RADICAL and that includes Cal Performances associate director Rob Bailis. He doesn't deny that the series has stimulated interest among potential ticket buyers. Drafting university faculty to participate is a savvy move; Bailis notes that "we live in an information age, people are

seeking access." Bailis doesn't say so, but reaching out to audiences dispels the notion that the performing arts are an elitist diversion.

No doubt *Joining Generations* was, in part, designed to attract an African American crowd who customarily turns up only for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, who bring the series' final show in the spring. Indeed, they came for Wilson, as well, while the second offering, Camille A. Brown and Dancers' *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* sold out.

In *Moses(es)*, Wilson is thinking on a grand scale. The unusual spelling of the title suggests, as does novelist Zora Neale Hurston, who inspired the piece, that there is more than one religion fostering its own Moses legend. The choreography seems to investigate several versions of the story.

Wilson in white is always hovering on the periphery, seemingly willing his seven dancers to perform. The movement is heavy with group unisons at the start, but gradually encompasses a multiplicity of style. The weighted manner and deep pliés of West African dance stand out, but the attack seems lighter than usual. Just when you think you have had enough, Wilson will shuffle his dancers like playing cards. In a series of solos, stylistic oddities prevail: the men's lanky extensions suggest a squad of Broadway hoofers.

Not strictly a narrative, the piece comes with terrific music by Louis Armstrong, the Klezmatics and the Blind Boys of Alabama. Wilson uses *Wade in the Water* in a very different way from Ailey in his

classic *Revelations*. The second part conjures a more tribal feeling. I loved the moment when the sound of the shofar (an ancient horn instrument) generates celestial light, which turns out to be a cut-glass ballroom globe. This is Wilson's only full-evening opus to date, and the structure is uncertain. Nevertheless, the dancing, particularly by Rhett Aleong, combined muscularity and delicacy.

There were no reservations about *BLACK GIRL*, which marked dancer-choreographer Brown's Cal Performance bow December 8 in the more intimate Zellerbach Playhouse. What I experienced there was 50 minutes of pure dance heaven, and the joint just rocked as the five dancers and onstage jazz combo reveled in the rites and rituals of urban African American women in that stage of life between childhood and maturity. To understand a culture, Brown seems to say, observe how the members of that culture dance. That's all one needs.

The tone is remarkably playful and mildly competitive, yet you constantly sense the bonds that unite these women. Their world is an inner city playground, set with elevated risers. Brown adds the final touch to Elizabeth C. Nelson's décor by adding her own contribution to the dominant background board, festooned with chalked graffiti; she then launches a solo that begins with furious isolated arms. That energy travels down to the feet and generates a rhythmically riveting solo; it's a genuine accomplishment when you realize they are all wearing sneakers. *Joining Brown* onstage, sassy Catherine Foster lays down a more graduated rhythm and the pair generate a striking contrapuntal structure, abetted by piano and guitar backup.

Brown has infused the choreographic structure with an array of children's street games like hopscotch, double Dutch, red light/green light and Marco Polo. These are carefully interwoven into the texture, yet the feeling of improvisation is bracing. In time, Mayte Natalio, Beatrice Capote and Kendra "Vie Bohème" Dennard dance on, and relationships metamorphose from chummy to something more. Dennard's spidery extension lingers in the memory.

So does *BLACK GIRL*. Brown should be better known. She certainly merits a return visit. *DU*

Twyla Tharp Dance opened the Joyce Theater's 2017-2018 season in September with a triple bill made of two oldies and one premiere. To mark the occasion, the Joyce Theater painted, billboard-size, the following statement by Tharp on its outside wall: "Art is the only way to run away without leaving home."

The dancer and choreographer, who has been creating dances since 1965, has consistently been focused on creating new work, leaving it more or less to other groups to stage her past efforts for their own repertoires by former Tharp dancers. Since revivals of Tharp's work under her personal direction are rare, these prompt attention first. *The Raggedy Dances*, from 1972, to the music of Scott Joplin, Charles Luckeyth Roberts, William Bolcom and Mozart, was staged by Sara Rudner and Rose Marie Wright, both of whom danced in this work when it was new, and by Rika Okamoto, a Tharp dancer as well as an administrator and archivist for Tharp's organization. Okamoto also has staging credit for *The Fugue*, from 1970, and danced the ambient sound of footfalls on an amplified stage.

Both works helped establish Tharp's choreographic career as a key one in the later 20th century. *The Raggedy Dances*, at once a witty and teasingly counter-pointed affair, had flower-power colouring, some of it literally in its original Kermit Love costuming. Here, in sleeker new designs by Santo Loquasto, the piece looked more like a learned activity, projecting less spontaneity than originally. The two-man and three-woman cast exuded a bemused air as they danced to an unpredictable piano mix of American rags and Mozart's *Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman*. Memorably, the understated but riveting rendering by Kellie Drobnick of the Joplin-accompanied solo, *The Entertainer*, originally performed by Tharp herself, left an image almost as lasting as Tharp's own.

The Fugue, a rigorous trio of 20 variations on a 20-count movement phrase, was first danced by all women; here, it was a man with two women. All were costumed by Loquasto in long pants, which dulled the full impact of the choreography's percussive

accents that were so visible with Love's 1970 costuming, which bared some leg. Impressive, statuesque Kaitlyn Gilliland dominated here. The pulse of this consistently driven choreography remained, but something of its piquancy was absent.

Moving on to Tharp today, the program offered *Entr'Acte*, an unscheduled, seemingly impromptu addition, danced by Tharp's current seven-dancer group, which the choreographer herself joined, conducting a zany lecture/demonstration onstage "to show how we spend our days." It wasn't easy to follow, especially given Tharp's rapid-fire commands to her dancers, but it had an amusingly manic flow that fit Tharp's antic aesthetics.

The scheduled premiere, *Dylan Love Songs*, is one of Tharp's takes on the recordings of iconic songsters. This one included her abiding interest in theatrics. Veteran Tharp dancer John Selya played a central, mostly pantomimic figure. Garbed in Loquasto's layers of dark, casual clothes, Selya may be a surrogate for Dylan himself or for his songs' individual characters. Likewise he can seem the embodiment of the shadows cast by Jennifer Tipton's graphic lighting, with its look of magic lantern projections.

The approximately 30-minute, seven-song dance involves its five dancers, in

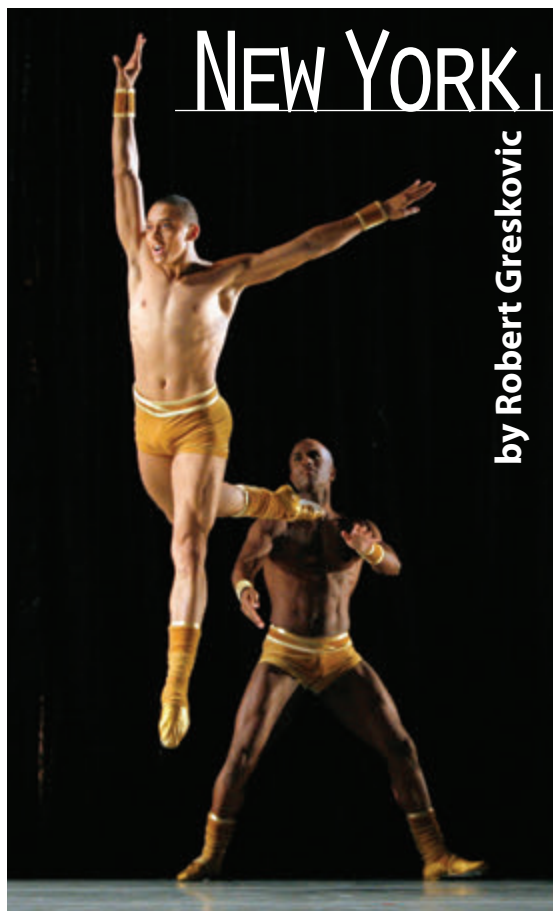
addition to Selya, who's uncredited, in solos and duets that passingly address Dylan's music and lyrics, as they ride the pulse here and home in on the words there. Classically crisp Matthew Dibble commanded attention for the way he accented the taut pauses and dynamic moves of *I Want You*.

Gilliland made her presence notable when passing through the action of *Shelter from the Storm* like a siren in a wide-brimmed sun hat that suggested the shelter named in the song. Others surfaced to command attention in the somewhat sprawling activity, such as impressively centered and sure Reed Tankersley. The presence of an uncredited scenic element — a curtain rod with two black curtains that Selya maneuvers to interact with Tipton's lighting — makes it seem as if the love-song dances are being performed on a stage within the stage, a curious Tharpian touch.

In December, at New York's City Center, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater revived Tharp's *The Golden Section*, which is the climactic portion of *The Catherine Wheel*, her 1981 production to the music of David Byrne. This restaging by former Tharp dancer Shelley Washington reveals a 1980s side of Tharp. Originally the capstone to a "nuclear family" dance-theatre affair, the self-contained excerpt fills the stage as a celebration of free-flown men and women, all clad in Loquasto's skin-baring, golden satin and velvet costumes, which present these individuals as champion athletes.

The company's radiant dancers coursed through the challenging circuits of Tharp's choreography as if pacing through a marathon, or with daring lifts, catches and carries, as if passing through an obstacle course that, while tricky, is also a piece of cake to such experts. Standouts in the cast I saw were electrifying Jacqueline Green, daring Chalvar Monteiro and gallant Jeroboam Bozeman.

The thrilling dance, which brings its cast of 13 into the action as if shot from guns, is dominated by maneuvers and poses that recall the pinwheeling fireworks of an actual Catherine wheel, with seemingly unending flashes and configurations. ²¹



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Clifton Brown and Glenn Allen Sims in Tharp's *The Golden Section*
Photo: Paul Kolnik

London₁

by Sanjoy Roy

It was the major event of the ballet year: a festival marking 25 years since the death of Kenneth MacMillan, bringing all five of the U.K.'s major classical companies (the Royal, Birmingham Royal, English National, Northern and Scottish Ballets) onto the Royal Opera House stage, plus the small and indomitable contemporary Yorke Dance Project into the studio theatre. A formative choreographer of 20th-century ballet, MacMillan is commonly associated with the character-driven dramas of three-act works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Mayerling* and *Manon*, so it was illuminating to be able to focus on only one-act works, in a gamut of styles.

The Judas Tree, MacMillan's last work, deals with a theme that he returned to several times over the course of his career: the rape of a woman. It was unavoidably viewed today against a wider backdrop where revelations of sexual harassment by Trump, Weinstein and other powerful names across all sectors, together with an outpouring of disclosures by women of all backgrounds, revealed such harassment as not only persistent and widespread, but also systemic. *The Judas Tree* revolves around a gang rape — a blatant and brutal enactment of the sexual subjugation of a woman by a male-dominated society. That makes it — potentially — an explosively powerful theme to explore artistically. But that demands an exploration of the rape and its conditions, and an interrogation of the exercise of power. Alas, even on third viewing, all I could see in *The Judas Tree* was a violation enacted — a spectacularly unedifying approach.

The story (apparently inspired by the Gnostic gospels) goes like this. First, a woman is carried onto a construction site in a white shroud, already more a symbolic object than a character. Unveiled, in a lurid leotard, she proceeds to both tease and copulate with the site foreman and his two sidekicks, while a gang of construction workers circulate wolfishly. One of the sidekicks appears to actually “like” her, which the foreman resents, so he rapes her, then leaves her to the workers to rape as a group, after which he kills her, which upsets his sidekick, which incites the gang to turn on the sidekick and kill him. Finally the foreman hangs himself, and the ghost of the woman returns in the white shroud.



The choreography itself is powerfully wrought, and the company perform it with absolute conviction (anything less, and it would collapse). Dramatically, though, it is wilfully blind to the questions it raises. The woman is never alone onstage or the subject of any scene; rather, she is a transactional object, passed between the men, with no status of her own. We can't help but feel her pain and abjection, but the narrative drive and destination is all about the foreman and his mate.

On this note, it's also worth pointing out another, largely undebated subtext.

Just before hanging himself, the foreman plants a kiss on his friend's cheek. Rather than the “Judas kiss” of betrayal, it smacks of repressed desire. Indeed, take away the woman, and the entire ballet would come across as a clichéd gay fantasy: bare-chested construction workers in ripped overalls, all worked up and with no outlet until they end up in a group sex scene. Yes, *The Judas Tree* really is about the men, but not in the way that it thinks. It is, rather, a mass of masculine disavowals, evasions and displacements, wrapped in a legitimizing if incomprehensible tissue of religious allegory. Dear Lord, please spare me.

As ever (and as here), *The Judas Tree* provoked the most heat around the MacMillan season — a shame, in some ways, since there was plenty of different work to savour and think about.

The Fairy's Kiss (Scottish Ballet) is far more traditional balletic material — a folktale featuring a young man confusedly pursuing three icons of femininity: comely maiden, brazen hussy and elusive fairy. It's a nicely choreographed piece, but you sense MacMillan straining against its winsomeness.

For my tastes, he could have strained a little harder in *Gloria* (Northern Ballet), an anthem for lost youth that brims with familiar First World War tropes: poetically doomed men, poetically sorrowful women. Far more interesting was Yorke Dance Project's *Sea of Troubles*, a chamber ballet that distills (albeit murkily) the essentials of *Hamlet* into a quartet of interchanging characters, in a style more redolent of mid-century modern dance (particularly Graham technique) than ballet.

But the best were two abstract works. Birmingham Royal Ballet's *Concerto* (to Shostakovich) shows MacMillan as a master of group composition and musical form and, in its central duet, enraptured by the supple beauties of the classical adagio. And *Song of the Earth* (English National Ballet, to Mahler) is an outright masterpiece — again, tautly tied to the music, but now charged with a mysterious symbolism that seems to run in the arteries of a piece whose surface is all quiet restraint. That is not a quality commonly associated with MacMillan, but as the festival showed, with a choreographer as varied as this, what you find in his work may say as much about you as about him. ▫

Waslav Nijinsky achieved mega-fame during his brief career as a dancer and choreographer, as well as legendary status that still resonates to this day. He was ambivalent about the fame, with soaring highs (literally, too, with his jumps) and all-time lows, both of which were described in his diary. He was never to be much aware of that fame as, soon after achieving it, Nijinsky descended into mental illness. Who the young Nijinsky really was is something many a choreographer, inspired by the near-mythical figure, has striven to explain.

While John Neumeier's expertise and enthusiasm on the matter cannot be denied, his 2000 ballet called simply *Nijinsky*, created for his own Hamburg Ballet and shown at the Palais Garnier some years ago, is unconvincing. It brims over with myriad historical references wasted on the layman. If anything, it characterizes the chaotic ramblings of a schizophrenic mind through its sheer length and profusion of choreography.

The bonus this time around was to see it performed by the National Ballet of Canada, which had not come to Paris in some 45 years, in October, at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. An apt venue, incidentally, as that is where Nijinsky premiered his legendary *Rite of Spring* to such raucous audience discontent that Stravinsky's thunderous score could barely be heard. The company under artistic director Karen Kain struck me as being technically strong with some outstanding lead dancers, who were not, however, always physically suited to the roles bestowed upon them.

A tall, lean and handsome man, Guillaume Côté, for instance, caught the melancholy mood of Nijinsky as he danced for the last time in 1919 at the Suvretta House hotel in Saint Moritz, Switzerland, but looks nothing like the squat dance god that a doting Jean Cocteau once described as a little monkey with sparse hair. Côté is ballet prince material, while Nijinsky's sturdy thighs would appear wildly overdeveloped by today's standards. Côté dances beautifully, but Nijinsky was a unique sensation.

The same goes for Evan McKie in the role of Diaghilev. McKie's lean elegance and sultry mystery hardly echoes the heavy-set figure of the imperious impresario. Still, McKie brilliantly expresses Diaghilev's perverse possessiveness, and moments in his tumultuous duets with Nijinsky reach a truly dramatic apex.

Such highlights can be found in the piece, but are soon lost in this overly long maelstrom of a ballet. The initial scene at Suvretta House is compelling. What follows — Nijinsky's tension with Diaghilev, his marriage to Romola, the war, the asylum — is drama beyond reason. Multiple dancers impersonate the different roles that marked Nijinsky's career. They move around together, giving a kaleidoscopic vision of the dancer's scintillating and chaotic life. But kaleidoscopes never fascinate for very long.

Over at the Garnier, audiences enjoyed some fun entertainment for Christmas courtesy of *Play* by Alexander Ekman, the young Swede that some like to call the new

antics à la Pina Bausch with a spot of Mats Ek thrown in and, to alleviate the long uninspired playing, some magnetic group dancing by the 35-strong cast on the huge Garnier stage.

Beauty lies in the blindingly white sparse set and there was some fun from green balls raining down from the flies at the end of the first part. By the end of the two hours, both green and yellow balls fill the orchestra pit like an Ikea children's pool. Dancers fooling around in the pool start throwing them at the audience, as well as huge white balloons, which end up bouncing off the head of happy punters. The first rows of the stalls turn into a mosh pit of operagoers who seem delighted to be able



Paris

by François Fargue

dance prodigy, performed by the Paris Opera Ballet.

The 33-year-old choreographer is a jack-of-all-trades who designed both the costumes and sets for this premiere. As for the choreography, it is surely no offense to say that there is none to speak of since the Paris Opera Ballet dancers were apparently asked to improvise using objects and characters pertaining to the realm of children's games, such as trampolines and clowns. The main yet meagre meat of the show, for which Ekman was given a fair amount of rehearsal time, thus lies in uninteresting

to throw the soft balls back to the dancers.

Ekman's avowed ambition is to make grownups find the child within. Mission accomplished. Audiences can be guaranteed a sensational tsunami of balls and the interactive throwing thereof had everyone duly thrilled and no doubt that it was happening within such a historical house added to the titillation. About 15 minutes of such amusement is, however, not much out of the two-hour long *Play*. Besides, one may seriously wonder how dancers who have so much to offer can be asked to give so little. ▫

Two of the most popular dancers right now are also red-carpet celebrities — Roberto Bolle and Eleonora Abbagnato. Bolle is an idol for thousands of fans who rush to see him whenever he dances at La Scala or in the ancient open air theatres and arenas, and his popularity opened the doors of Italy's Rai Television, which broadcast *Dance with Me*, his second special, on New Year's Day.

Abbagnato is an étoile at Paris Opera Ballet, a frequent judge in TV talent shows and the wife of former football defender Federico Balzaretti, a Roma football club idol for Italians. But, above all, she has been ruling Rome Opera Ballet as director for three years now, a job for which the stakes are high. She needs to prove that ballet can be a resource and not an economic loss for the opera house in which it is based.

Only three years ago, Rome Opera was at risk of bankruptcy. Its deficit amounted to 54 million euros. The new intendant, Carlo Fuortes, vigorously inverted this trend, assisted by the benevolence of the Italian Ministry of Culture, and now Rome Opera productions are considered at the same artistic level as La Scala's.

Abbagnato, helped by Benjamin Pech (former Paris Opera étoile), who is maître de ballet and deputy director, has strengthened the standard of the ballet company, added younger dancers in the ensemble and carefully balanced programs to help the dancers improve technically and artistically. Abbagnato is also good at finding occasions to get media attention.

The opening production in November offered one such occasion: Mikhail Baryshnikov's *Don Quixote*, created in 1978 for American Ballet Theatre, with new sets and décor by two artists close to the legendary Misha: Vladimir Radunsky, the Russian-American illustrator for children's literature, and American lighting designer A.J. Weissbard. It was staged by former Paris Opera Ballet étoile Laurent Hilaire, but Baryshnikov himself was present to give his definitive touch on the eve of the premiere. His presence resounded clearly as an endorsement for the Roman dancers' quality.

If on paper the event looked good, with Rome Opera's season opening with a ballet in lieu of an opera for the first time, when the curtain opened many things disappointed. The principal problem came from the décor. To emphasize the story's fanciful aspects, the sets looked painted by children, with vivid colours and warped shapes, and acid colours in lighting design.

As for the costumes, they went against the golden rule of grand ballet, where dance must find the perfect balance with the set in order to exalt the harmony of the choreographic ideas. In this case, the excess of surrealistic ideas distracted and confused. In some cases, the oversize shapes and harsh colours were funny — for example, the enormous balloon breeches and the light blue beard of the comic Gamache; in others, they really disturbed.

In the first act, the costumes were a mess of shapes and lines. Mercedes wore a black leotard with a long white gown and a red wig. Kitri was too pretty in pink.

Basilio looked too much like a prince. In the grand pas of the last act, the women wore meringue tutus that badly cut their lines, while Kitri and Basilio were wrapped in flashing gold tissue. Not only was the Spanish flavour missing, but this mess did not favour the dancers and the dance.

Under Abbagnato's guidance, the company looks in good shape: the virile matadors were bold and accurate; the dryads were delicate and precise, headed by a lovely Cupid, the musical and light Flavia Stocchi. However, newly appointed étoile Rebecca Bianchi did not look perfectly at ease as Kitri, lacking the necessary virtuoso attack. Twenty-two-year old guest artist Angelo Greco, a principal with San Francisco Ballet, was a first-rate Basilio, impeccably sparkling and joyful in virtuoso moments.

Over in Reggio Emilia, Aterballetto's management turnover is not going well. Former artistic director Cristina Bozzolini left in July, and Pompea Santoro, the former Cullberg Ballet dancer who replaced her in September, resigned in November. The cause is the contrast of artistic and managerial vision with the new general manager, Gigi Cristoforetti, who arrived with 10 years experience as director of the contemporary dance festival Torinodanza.

Cristoforetti's first undertaking was to emphasize the role of the National Dance Foundation, which he would like to be the leading centre for production and promotion of dance in Italy. This is a challenging and very ambitious goal.

And what about Aterballetto? Thanks to its former direction, the company regained its prime role as the most important independent company in Italy, and the time could be right to transform itself into *the* national company. But it seems this is not a priority, considering the first steps of the new management. At the beginning of 2018, the National Dance Foundation will produce a revival of *Tango Glaciale*, a multimedia theatrical piece from the early 1980s by director Mario Martone, with no Aterballetto artists involved. The first production of Aterballetto under the new management isn't until September 2018.

These events are very worrying. In Italy we say: the good day is announced by the morning. The dawn of the new day in Aterballetto is cloudy and dull. *»*

by Silvia Poletti



Rome & Reggio Emilia

Rebecca Bianchi and members of Rome Opera Ballet in Mikhail Baryshnikov's *Don Quixote*
Photo: Yasuko Kageyama



by Anne-Marie Elmbj

COPENHAGEN I

In 2007, the Royal Danish Ballet had a huge success with Jiri Kylian's *Silk & Knife*, a selection of his works. In November 2017, the year of his 70th birthday, *Silk & Knife 2* gave another retrospective view of his oeuvre.

In Kylian's *Symphony of Psalms* (1978), the Stravinsky score for chorus and orchestra provides a strict rhythmic frame that alternates with more lyrical Alleluia sections. Lines of dancers walked across the stage, the women in flowing grey dresses and the men in grey shirts and black pants. One after another, couples broke away into highly emotional pas de deux that proved the company's corps dancers to be true individual artists.

Also on the bill, the all-male *Sarabande* (1990) revealed both sensitive and extreme macho features, contrasting with a repeat of last season's energetic, all-female *Falling Angels* (1989).

The final work was *27'52"* (2002) for three female and three male dancers, the title signalling the length of the ballet.

Abrupt movements reflected text spoken in different languages and then played backwards, mixed with Dirk Haubrich's both melodious and percussive composition, which, at times, seemed to enforce dynamic arms and legs slicing the air. The dance took place on large lengths of dance vinyl that stretched across the stage and also hung from the borders, often with one or two dancers at a time in the vast space. One woman insistently continued dancing while the floor was pulled away from under her. The stunning final duet, the women bare-breasted, conveyed a serene finality and ended with both dancers hiding under the vinyl far from each other, while large hanging pieces came crashing down.

Later in November, artistic director Nikolaj Hübbe's recent interest in re-staging Russian classics resulted in his new production of *Raymonda*. The ballet has never been in the Royal Danish Ballet repertoire and was only seen here in 1965, when the Australian Ballet visited with Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf

Nureyev. Hübbe decided to move the story from the original version's medieval times to rococo France. In Act I, Richard Hudson's grand scenography and stunning period costumes in pastel shades unfolded, followed by a white and silvery dream sequence, where Raymonda dances with both her betrothed and his exotic rival. In Act II, the latter and his entourage arrived in a flash of red and gold, while the final wedding act was kept in stylish black, white and gold.

French ballerina Florence Clerc, who in 1983 created the title role in Nureyev's version at the Paris Opera, was called in to polish the sophisticated choreography. The title character and her two girlfriends amazed with controlled balances and filigree pointe work in their varied solos to Alexander Glazunov's dance-inspiring score.

J'aime Crandall, Amy Watson and Kizzy Matiakis in the three casts succeeded in giving Raymonda individual traits of longing poetry in the first part, when her fiancé was delayed, and decisive temperament, when he finally arrived. Her Hungarian fiancé was danced with poise in the virtuoso solos by all three casts (Alexander Bozinoff, Gregory Dean and Andreas Kaas). Both Jón Axel Fransson and Benjamin Buza brought a gust of passion to the role of her Spanish-Moorish suitor, which justified Raymonda's temporary attraction. A scoop was having boys from the ballet school perform the slaves' dance and four miniature boy-girl couples do the Slavic folkdance, which they performed with genuine focus.

Also in November, two dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet (Susanne Grinder and Esther Lee Wilkinson) and two freelance modern dancers (Tiziana Fracchiolla and Bo Madvig) performed *Sorella – a portrait*, in which Danish choreographer Pernille Garde has created a mosaic around charismatic Sorella Englund.

Born in 1945, in Finland, Englund came to the Royal Danish Ballet as a 20-year-old, becoming principal in 1970, and later a character dancer and coach. With her beloved mother dying when she was just 10 years old and with her own heart attack at 33 at the peak of her successful career, she became acquainted early with the darker aspects of life.



Royal Danish Ballet's Tobias Praetorius
in Jiri Kylián's *27'52"*
Photo: Henrik Stenberg

Rodin, the focus was on the creative process of Auguste Rodin, whose sculptures are well represented in the Glyptoteket museum, where excerpts of the work were shown at an event to mark the 100th anniversary of the artist's death. Apparently, Rodin had his models dance for him in order to study the body in motion; Isadora Duncan is also known to have danced for him. In *Rodin*, the artist's gaze was represented onstage by art photographer Ingrid Bugge, who suggested movement ideas to the dancers.

With playful and spontaneous physicality, Liv Mikaela Sanz's and Tilde Knudsen's amazing control of muscles and sinews moved them through poses that were reflected in pictures of Rodin's art that appeared on walls and the floor. Certain positions and corporeal approaches evoked a feeling of strong sensuality, but in spite of passages with various degrees of nudity, any hint of steaminess was avoided due to the natural presence of the two dancers. ^{DI}

During the piece, her voice with the characteristic Finnish accent offered, with excoriating honesty, wise reflections drawn from her life as a dancer and human being. Onstage, the four dancers embodied Englund, her mother, her composer father and other family members as well as some of her roles, gliding in and out of the different characters. They re-enacted excerpts from August Bournonville's *La Sylphide*, in which Englund danced the title role in her youth and, later, her groundbreaking *Madge*, which led to her staging the ballet internationally. They also added their own memories of watching or working with Englund. Video projections that showed her in memorable roles as the Firebird and Carmen fleetingly appeared on the backdrop.

At 73, Englund still uses her unique gift to make others dance from the heart, also maintaining her connection as guest teacher with Canada's National Ballet School.

On December 1, the Royal Danish Ballet opened a run of George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*, in which Caroline Baldwin shone as the Sugar Plum Fairy in her candyfloss tutu, perfectly partnered by her cavalier, Gregory Dean. After the performance, Hübbe came onstage to continue the Royal Danish tradition of surprise-appointing a new principal. This time, it was Chicago-born Baldwin, who became a member of the company in 2009. Hübbe praised the ballerina for her style,

generosity, charisma and poetic musicality. The orchestra responded with a flourish and enthusiastic cheering rose from audience and colleagues.

Finally, Asterions Hus on Teaterøen (Theater Island) in Copenhagen is known for physical and experimental performances. With its latest piece,

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DANCE

Madrid

by Justine Bayod Espoz

Versed in folkloric and classical styles of Spanish dance, Emilio Ochando made the conscious decision early in his career to focus on the lesser-known genres of escuela bolera and classical Spanish over the more popular flamenco. As a result, his personal style as a dancer and choreographer is unique, often fusing multiple styles in order to exalt Spanish dance as a whole.

Fighting almost singlehandedly to keep regional and lesser-known styles from falling into obscurity, Ochando's work has only recently received its long-deserved appreciation.

The road to success began in 2011, when Ochando won second prize for a solo at the Spanish Dance and Flamenco Choreography Competition in Madrid for *Mi Razón* (My Reason). He dedicated his prize money to producing his first full-length production of the same name, which addressed the rivalry between big and small, lesser versus greater, an issue that has played an intense role in his professional life. Ochando juxtaposes classical Spanish with flamenco in this production, at times fusing the two, alluding to the fact that they come from the same source and have throughout history fed one another. This exploration of an interconnected Spanish dance tradition has since become a defining theme of Ochando's work.

Ochando admits that his height (he's five-foot-six) has been a primary deciding factor for most of his career choices. Finding it difficult to get work in flamenco corps de ballets because he was "too short" meant that if he wanted to develop his career, it would have to be as a soloist.

The set for *Mi Razón*, a gigantic chair big enough for Ochando to dance on, and a tiny child-sized chair, is more than a striking

visual, it is the crux of the work's message. *Mi Razón* was meant to explain "the reason why I dance," says Ochando. "Whether you are big or small, you can dance."

In 2014, he premiered his second full-length work, *3deUno* (3ofOne), at the 2014 Talent Festival, a national competition for original works in all genres of performing arts. Featuring two female dancers and himself, this was Ochando's first attempt at creating for a group and one that cemented him in the mind of many professionals as a prodigy of Spanish dance. The work marries escuela bolera, Mallorcan folkloric dance and flamenco, seamlessly transitioning from one style to the other and expertly drawing parallels between them.

Ochando was only a finalist in the main categories, but received the audience award. *3deUno* subsequently had little more than a small local run, but nearly four years after its creation, the piece will finally be presented to an international audience at the 2018 Jerez Festival in March.

After a two-year hiatus from competing and choreographing, which included a

year-long stint teaching in Japan, Ochando entered the 2016 Spanish Dance and Flamenco Choreography Competition and also the Talent Festival with *Tinevo* (a play on the Spanish word for wind, viento). This thrust him into the national dance spotlight when he swept up first prize at the choreography competition — along with an invitation to choreograph for the María de Ávila Dance Conservatory in Madrid and the Carlota Santana Company in New York — and then first prize for dance and the overall prize at the Talent Festival, accompanied by a three-month residency at the Madrid Dance Center. Here he developed *Tinevo* into his third full-length production, *SIROCO*.

SIROCO made its world premiere to a sold-out audience at Madrid's Teatros del Canal in May 2017 and has subsequently been touring nationally. The sirocco is a warm, dry wind that blows from North Africa up to the mid-Mediterranean, which Ochando, hailing from the coastal city of Valencia, knows well. Wind is the production's central theme, and, for that reason, Ochando decided to explore "four

elements that thanks to wind gain swiftness, such as the mantón [Spanish shawl], the fan, the bata de cola [trained skirt] and the castanets," he explains. These typical Spanish dance accoutrements, traditionally used by women, are masterfully worked by four male dancers, including Ochando.

SIROCO combines Spanish classical, escuela bolera and flamenco. When casting the piece, Ochando knew he'd have to turn to young dancers fresh out of the conservatory, where all styles are taught as part of the degree in Spanish dance. Because the majority of work available once a dancer leaves the conservatory is in flamenco, few professionals have the opportunity to sustain their training and technique in other styles of Spanish dance.

Ochando's success has proven there is an audience open to rediscovering traditional and classical styles, and that there are dancers ready and willing to dance them as long as there is an opportunity to do so. *DI*



Emilio Ochando
Photo: Rob Kenyon

The National Ballet of Norway had a great success a couple of years ago with a dance version of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*. This season, at Oslo Opera House, they had a go with his 1890 play, *Hedda Gabler*. Ingrid Lorentzen, the National Ballet of Norway's artistic director, gave the task of staging this ballet version of *Hedda Gabler* to Marit Moum Aune. Aune, who normally directs theatre as a freelancer in Norway, was also involved in *Ghosts*, but then as a dramaturge.

No choreographers were mentioned in early publicity, but closer to the premiere it became known that Christopher Kettner, a former dancer and now ballet master with the company, was Aune's assistant. Kaloyan Boyadjiev, also a former dancer with the National Ballet and now in charge of the youth company connected with the opera house, was credited as choreographer of the group scenes, with the dancers listed as co-creators.

The work starts promisingly, with Hedda as a child playing joyfully among some soldiers; her father, a general, is in charge of the garrison. As a young girl, she is already in full control of her own life.

Boyadjiev created a great scene with the grown-up Hedda (Grete Sofie Borud Nybakken) riding in full gallop over the fields together with the soldiers. All the scenes Boyadjiev was probably responsible for have a great drive in the dancing.

When Hedda and her new husband return from their honeymoon, the ballet loses its dancing energy, probably because theatre director Aune is in charge. Her direction is very much based on the dancers walking around looking knowingly at each other, and at certain moments one feels the spoken word is missing.

Nybakken gives her Hedda Gabler all she's got, from the very first ride with the soldiers to the last scene of disaster when she uses her father's gun to kill herself. One can see she has been a co-creator: certain movements, which she has apparently fallen in love with, are repeated too

many times. This does not negate the fact that because of her portrayal, and Boyadjiev's choreography for the ensembles, the Ibsen play survives in dance form.

In October, CODA Oslo International Dance Festival presented 20 performances, eight workshops and 10 seminars over 11 days. France's CCN – Ballet de Lorraine, a group of 22 dancers with a Swedish director, Petter Jacobsson, opened. Unknown Pleasures, the title of the mixed bill, was apt since the five ballets did not list any of their creators. Instead, the credit read: Unsigned x 5.

The choreography, in both modern and classical styles, was not so distinct that it was possible to guess who the choreographers, designers and composers were. However, the evening ended with the recognizable music of Ravel's *Bolero*, sounding like it was playing at double speed. The company was good looking and well trained, with strong personalities and a pleasure to get acquainted with. It is disappointing not to be able to honour



Oslo
by Fredrik Rütter

the creators by naming them, and it was not possible to get Jacobsson to help out; even the dancers were close-mouthed when asked.

CODA also premiered ballets by two of Norway's most outstanding choreographers. Both have been in the game for more than 25 years, and both have an international career with their companies. First was Ingun Bjørnsgaard, with her Ingun Bjørnsgaard Project in *Notes on Frailty*, set to a new composition from Christian Wallumrød, who was onstage handling his computer. According to the program, Bjørnsgaard wanted to investigate the complexities of womanhood in this piece, a theme present over many years in her earlier ballets.

The four excellent female dancers move slowly and carefully, as if they would fall were the speed increased. In relation to each other, they hardly dare to make contact. They are like four lonely ships drifting on the open sea, one more frail and fragile than the other.

Ina Christel Johannessen and her Zero Visibility Corp brought her latest piece, *Frozen Songs*. As inspiration she looked to the far north at Svalbard, Spitsbergen, where the Global Seed Vault is situated 120 metres down in the mountain, holding some 4.5 million different seeds. The vault is there to secure our survival, and survival is what *Frozen Songs* is all about.

Two Chinese video artists, Feng Jiangshou and Zhang Lin, contribute strong video and film effects, while the dance sequences feel very long, as if Johannessen is stretching them out as far as possible. Line Tørmoe and Pia Elton Hammer are completely different in their way of dancing: Tørmoe is explosive, with a strong physique, while Hammer has long lines that float into each other. The five male dancers complement each other well, each very different in temperament and in the way they attack a movement.

The final section, performed at an extremely fast tempo, must take a lot out of every dancer, as there is no time to rest and it does go on and on. It's a real tour de force, and very concretely brings up the question of survival. ▯

In the world imagined by Singaporean cross-disciplinary artist Choy Ka Fai, technology is advanced enough to analyze the strengths and flaws of choreography using the brainwaves of dancers and viewers, and to help dancemakers manage their “choreographic health,” including conditions as serious as “choreographic cancer.” The features of such specialized care were explained in *Dance Clinic*, a full-evening show in the guise of a lecture-demonstration led by Choy at the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

Co-commissioned for the da:ns festival, which takes place in October, *Dance Clinic* builds on the now Berlin-based Choy’s research on the mind-body connection and his past experiments in bridging dance with neuroscience. In *The Choreography of Things* (2015), for instance, dancers put on a headset to track electrical impulses in their brains while they were performing. This real-time data was visualized as wall-mounted bars of LED lights in different colours — each representing a cognitive process such as attention or perception — rising and falling in response to the performers’ mental activity.

The headset and colour-coded diagrams were also employed in *Dance Clinic*, this time as part of an artificial intelligence system called Ember Jello, which aided Choy in his role as a self-described dance doctor. Interested in finding out “what we think about when we think about dance,” he recorded brainwave graphs of dancers performing pieces by Yvonne Rainer, William Forsythe and other well-known names. The parallels and distinctions between these diagrams prompted him to propose a place for artificial intelligence in dance. “We believe AI can help us to choreograph and, in the future, I will be able to eliminate choreographers from our planet,” said a straight-faced Choy in white shirtsleeves and pants.

This marked the tone for *Dance Clinic*, which hovered somewhere between fact and fiction, gravity and irony. In a trial run of Ember Jello to measure “the presence of the performer onstage,” he asked local dance artist Jereh Leong, in an uncredited guest appearance, to stare at the audience while walking slowly. “When you were moving from right to left, your presence increased more on the left side of the stage, so I would suggest you choreograph yourself more on the left side,” advised Choy.

The results of Choy’s intervention were less clear-cut with his two “patients.”

Austrian dancer Florentina Holzinger, who was curious about audience reactions to her sexually provocative work, performed for two chosen viewers, whose brainwave readings indicated they were “disgusted” to watch her pull blue string from her vagina. Indonesian performer Darlane Litaay, who wanted to re-engage with the spirituality of his native West Papuan folk customs despite being a Christian, was given a Papuan-style mask of Christ to wear while dancing and then slipped into a shuddering trance that continued even after he removed it.

Dance Clinic was intriguing not only for its premise, but also for the cracks in its façade. Why did Choy collect brainwave graphs of dancers performing solos such as Rainer’s *Trio A*, but not those performing in duets, trios and ensembles? Would Ember Jello be able to assist members of a corps de ballet as well as choreographers who are hired to create for others? How much of what was presented was real and how much was nicely animated screen projections? Ultimately, *Dance Clinic* left behind more fascinating doubts than convictions.

There was nothing uncertain about local dance group Chowk Productions’ latest offering, which premiered at the Esplanade Theatre Studio in November as part of Kalaa Utsavam, an Indian arts festival coinciding with the Hindu holiday of Deepavali. Developed by artistic director Raka Maitra, a former disciple of Odissi master Madhavi Mudgal, *from: The*

Platform was inspired by Austrian dramatist Peter Handke’s wordless play, *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*. Maitra turned Handke’s town square into a Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) railway station, peopling it with eight dancers and four actors.

Echoing Zai Tang’s streamlined soundscape, a lingering stillness gradually gave in to an unruffled stream of movement, which carried shades of classical steps and pointed to the little dramas that bubbled to the surface. But no one stopped two men from carting away a struggling woman like livestock: an unsettling reflection of the extreme public apathy infecting India today.

At the School of the Arts Studio Theatre, two premieres by Frontier Danceland saw the company adapting to contrasting styles. In French choreographer Thomas Lebrun’s *Seven Waves*, minimalist music by Steve Reich (*Six Marimbas* and *Electric Counterpoint*) propelled seven dancers into criss-crossing phrases crafted from a lexicon of linear and curved shapes.

Circular jogging patterns formed the heart of Hong Kong dance artist Victor Ma’s *On & On, Turn Turn Turn*, with a percussive score composed and drummed live by musician Sascia Pellegrini. Though the performers occasionally changed direction and spun off course in smaller numbers, artistic director Low Mei Yoke — in an unexpected cameo — jogged around them in clockwise rings, providing a steady presence in their journey. ▫



Singapore by Malcolm Tay

With her unstinting and important advocacy for greater diversity in ballet, Misty Copeland's fame extends well beyond the stage. She is a drawcard no matter what the repertoire and her debut as Aurora gave the occasion even more lustre. When she stepped on to the stage at Sydney's Capitol Theatre to guest with the Australian Ballet in its lavish *Sleeping Beauty*, the American Ballet Theatre principal dancer got a rock star's welcome.

Copeland's vivacity and great personal charm were captivating, but her conquest of Aurora was less fully achieved. She was an alert and good-humoured young

have a hell of a lot more nobles, courtiers, attendants and functionaries.

On the other side of the continent in Perth, West Australian Ballet presented David Nixon's *The Great Gatsby*, which revealed itself to be a highly enjoyable night of theatre, although somewhat less convincing as a ballet. Nixon, Northern Ballet's artistic director, is an old and highly successful hand at creating narrative ballets, but he gave himself a tough assignment with *Gatsby*. His dance translation, which Northern Ballet premiered at home in England in 2013, is faithful to F. Scott Fitzgerald's best novel while at the same time floating over what really lies at its heart.

fabulously wealthy neighbour? Fitzgerald describes Gatsby's fruitless pursuit of Daisy at several removes through Nick's eyes as he looks back. In its concentration on the surface narrative, the ballet loses those layers and Fitzgerald's mood of evanescence with them, despite Nixon's repeated flashbacks showing a young Gatsby wooing Daisy.

A lively selection of 1920s-flavoured music by Richard Rodney Bennett, some taken from his film scores, accompanied lots of swiftly changing scenes. The use of a movement from his 1990 *Percussion Concerto* was particularly effective and Bennett's history as a jazz pianist informed the score's best moments. The West Australian Symphony Orchestra, with Myron Romanul at the helm, gave it a zesty account.

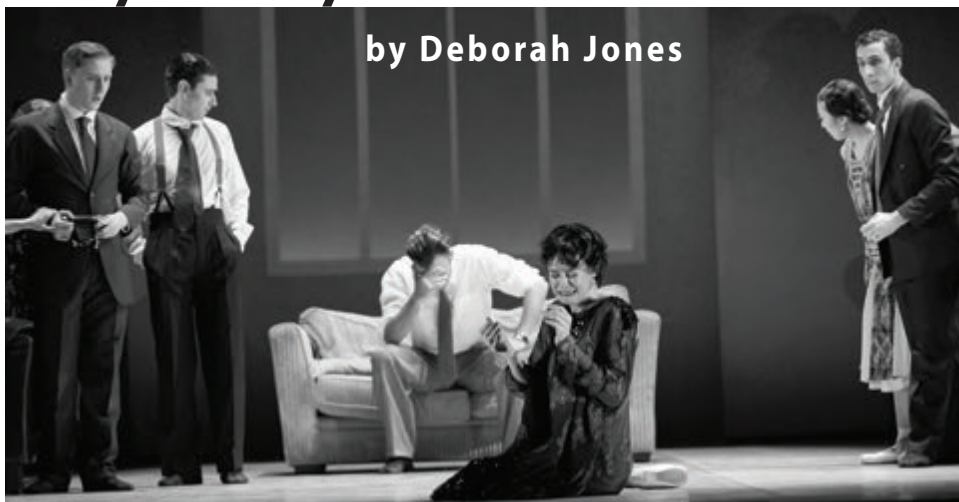
Above all, there were terrific performances from all in the first cast, no mean feat when there are nine key characters. Gakuro Matsui (the elegant, mysterious Gatsby), Chihiro Nomura (careless, feckless Daisy) and Oliver Edwardson (watchful Nick Carraway) were as effective as the limits of their characters allowed. Gatsby is the outsider who stands aloof at his own parties, is seen gazing wistfully across the water at the light on the end of Daisy's jetty, or remembering his early days with Daisy. It makes him an elusive character, even when he finally gets her in his arms for the rapturous pas de deux in both acts. It's as it should be from the Fitzgerald point of view, but makes the role a difficult one onstage.

Matthew Edwardson and Carina Roberts were fresh as the young Gatsby and Daisy while Brooke Widdison-Jacobs was superbly cast as Daisy's golf-champion friend Jordan Baker, wielding a cool, amused demeanour and long sporty limbs.

The really juicy parts, however, are for Daisy's unfaithful husband Tom, his lover Myrtle and Myrtle's husband, George. They get to be vividly steamy and sexy. Matthew Lehmann looked super sharp and gave Tom virile presence. He had looked out of sorts some months earlier in *Don Quixote*, but now seemed refreshed and renewed. Liam Green's George was urgent with longing for his errant wife, and Melissa Boniface was sensational as the passionate, doomed Myrtle. Here was a character for a dancer to get her teeth into. *DI*

Sydney & Perth |

by Deborah Jones



princess on her birthday and approached a more serene grandeur in the climactic wedding pas de deux, shedding the slight but palpable tension of the first act. There was, nevertheless, an overall sense of containment. Copeland shone brightly in motion with delectable cut-glass footwork and luxurious arms, but her radiance was not the mysterious, all-enveloping kind that sends its beams shooting through the theatre and takes heart and soul prisoner.

Copeland was partnered with gorgeous gallantry by Kevin Jackson, rightly the Australian Ballet's prince du jour.

The opulence of Gabriela Tylesova's designs always makes David McAllister's production a treat to behold although there remains a lingering sense that a court of such magnificence really should

Gatsby's world of frenetic parties and unattainable lovers is eminently stage-worthy, and West Australian Ballet looked wonderful in the evocation of jazz-age, Prohibition-flouting high society. The frocks were divine, the women glamorous, the men never seemed sleeker, and the 1920s dances were a delight. Far more difficult to convey were the fluttering nuances of character and shades of meaning that make the novel such an unsettling picture of a changing country with the post-war jitters.

How to express that Daisy's voice is "full of money," as Gatsby puts it? Or that Gatsby was once the impoverished nobody Jimmy Gatz? Or that Nick Carraway is the cousin of Gatsby's lost love Daisy, and thus is being used by his now

Dancers of West Australian Ballet with Melissa Boniface (centre) as Myrtle in David Nixon's *The Great Gatsby*
Photo: Sergey Pevnev

Wim Vandekeybus /
*Mockumentary of a
 Contemporary Saviour*

The founder and creative force behind the acclaimed Brussels-based company Ultima Vez is Belgian choreographer and filmmaker Wim Vandekeybus. For several decades, his productions have been noted for their risk-taking dance and psychological themes.

Mockumentary of a Contemporary Saviour, which premiered in Brussels in early 2017 and arrived at DeSingel art house in Antwerp toward the end of the year, showed a shift to a more theatrical style. Vandekeybus has stated in the past that he will never repeat himself work-wise, and this time, of the seven performers taking part, only three were dancers; the rest were actors. Out went the thrusting, explosive dance moves and bold stagecraft in favour of introverted images and lengthy psychological interaction.

Vandekeybus has never been afraid of tackling the controversial — witness *Puur* (2005), a searing portrait of genocide, or *Blush* (2004), an exposure of love in its darkest forms. In *Mockumentary of a Contemporary Saviour*, his intention, according to the program note, was to shed light on humankind's preoccupation with the notion of a messiah, the saviour figure of so many theological texts.

The setting is a futuristic, post-apocalyptic world where misinformation and the collapse of all basic norms have resulted in mass hysteria. An invisible messiah has decided to save seven individuals, “the chosen few.” These survivors find themselves transported to a surreal state of limbo. The ensuing scenario (from Vandekeybus and author Bart Meuleman) evolved out of



Ultima Vez

autobiographical memories of the performers, who bravely tell their own stories in this lengthy two-hour piece.

The scenography (by Vandekeybus and Meryem Bayram) is impressive. An immense disc hovers menacingly over the darkened stage, which is enclosed in a massive three-sided scrim. One by one, individuals emerged, bewildered, out of the shadows, drawn like moths into its circle of light.

Literally catapulted onto the scene was the orange-clad figure of British actor Daniel Copeland, a large man whose inert body was initially the centre of attention. On awakening, his questions fuelled the performance, which was mostly in English.

Wushu fighter Yun Liu entered with cartwheels; she spoke only Chinese, which was incomprehensible to the group, and hid her insecurity in martial arts. The others, too, were initially defined by movement: dancer Anabel Lopez, a pregnant mother figure in constant lament for her lost child; slender, agitated dancer Masha Kolegova; the serene, muscled Italian giant, circus artist Flavio D'Andrea; and angry, guilt-ridden African American actor Jason Quarles. Finally, blind

Said Gharbi, a Moroccan-born actor/dancer who posed questions to the audience: why is God's presence such a constant in our existence? Does he really exist? If so, is he playing games with us?

There were some powerful moments as the performers interacted, shifting from solitary wariness to closer, more intimate groups. One striking interaction was the duet between Copeland and Kolegova. The questions Copeland put to the young Russian revealed how she has suffered abuse from many men. When he said, “You seem full of pain,” she answered tersely, “You get used to it,” but her fingers were like spikes and she moved disjointedly, like a shaken doll.

At times, the group joined together forming circular patterns; to the powerful rhythmic surge of electronic sound by Charo Calvo, their feet pounded the floor as they closed in ever tighter, taking comfort in ancient ritualistic fashion, or, after resting foetus-like in small enclosures under the scrim, they wrenched off the veils that covered them, using them to flagellate themselves while executing a simple follow-the-leader pattern.

But the effect of these potent

dance images was diluted, overpowered by reams of weighty text. There were awkward returns to Copeland's probing questions, such as Quarles' angry monologues as to whether he or society is responsible for his incarceration, or D'Andrea's monosyllabic answers to suggestions of youthful sexual abuse.

When the UFO-like disc descended, the group scattered out from underneath in the nick of time; subsequently the figure of a child crashed down from the flies. The performers spread out into the auditorium, crawling over the chairs or drifting up the aisles, smiling beatifically as they touched members of the audience gently and murmured phrases such as “Now you are the chosen one.”

It all appeared uncomfortably saccharine up to the point of kitsch. On reflection, though, banality was perhaps the intended effect, with the whole idea of a saviour clearly mocked in the title of the work. Each of us has to use our human existence with all its frailties and strengths in order to seek out an individual salvation.

— JUDITH DELMÉ

Jorma Elo / *1st Flash*
Alejandro Cerrudo /
Silent Ghost
Cayetano Soto /
Huma Rojo

There is nothing quite like knowing, within the first seconds of a performance, that you are in the presence of vital dancers doing equally vital choreography — a combination often missing in the world of contemporary dance, and particularly contemporary ballet. The secret for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet lies in the company's ability to find choreographers who know how to take the dancers' rigorous classical training and technique as the gift it is and add exciting new language to it, rather than asking them to forget everything they've taken years to learn or to simply trod the same old pathways.

For its first trip to Victoria, B.C., in November, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet brought the

program it developed last year for its 20th anniversary season: three pieces, all by European men, two of them commissioned from young dancemakers in their 30s. The first and best piece — simply because it was the most surprising — was one of the few the company has bought from the older Jorma Elo, a sought-after Finnish choreographer whose influence could clearly be seen in the other two works.

Elo's *1st Flash* premiered at Nederlands Dance Theater in 2003. It begins in silence, but we soon hear the first notes of the second movement of Jean Sibelius' *Violin Concerto in D minor*. This lyrical, yearning, technically difficult piece of music sets up expectations that any dance set to it will also be lyrical, yearning and technically difficult. And this one is, sort of — and that's where the first surprise is. Instead of following the mood and beats established by Sibelius, Elo mostly works against them, so the movement is often lyrical, yet not always pretty, and only

occasionally *on* the music. It's also far more buoyant than yearning (dancers occasionally hop like bunnies), technically difficult and highly athletic.

The six dancers, wonderfully precise with hands and feet, and with the very specific direction of legs and arms, are so grounded in classical ballet that the second surprise is how well Elo's oddities, jokes and deliberate awkwardness — fluttering fingers, stiff, staccato arm movements, those hopping bunnies — work on their bodies. Instead of looking grafted on, they seemed organic, which serves, in turn, to make Sibelius' century-old music feel ultra-modern, even futuristic. By the time the piece ends, in silence again, with one flash of brilliant light, the dancers have delivered languorous lifts and perfect arabesques, alternated with startlingly fast spins, body rolls and twitches verging on the manic. Yet it all somehow makes a satisfying whole. Not telling a story, but *being* a story about movement and about how bodies, dancing alone, in couples and as a group, can create shapes, emotions and even a new way of hearing old music.

The lightning-fast speed favoured by Elo appears again almost immediately in Spaniard Alejandro Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost*, with men executing spins as fast as any break dancer. The brief references to hip hop and other current dance forms continue to weave throughout the piece, which, unlike *1st Flash*, definitely is about yearning — yearning for love and for lost loves.

In contrast to Elo, Cerrudo takes music from a variety of contemporary indie-rock and electronica artists, including King Creosote and Jon Hopkins, Ólafur Arnalds and Dustin Hamman, and uses that music as it sounds, sombre and rhythmic. Death

lurks behind each exquisite duet (male-female, female-female and male-male, none of them erotic, but deeply intimate and tender) and even behind the impeccable unison dancing that feels both joyous and melancholy at the same time. But death is quiet enough throughout this piece never to show itself clearly: *Silent Ghost* is serious, but not morose. It does not set out to make you cry, but you just might anyway. The move that got me was a humble one, repeated several times, where one dancer created a circle with her arms (the simple and familiar first position), and her partner dipped his head down and into that circle. She then reached her head down to touch his.

Huma Rojo by another Spaniard, Cayetano Soto, was a completely different kettle of fish, yet still grounded in Elo-style precision and eccentricity. Set to jaunty music by Latin and American jazz luminaries such as Xavier Cugat, Nat King Cole and Ray Barretto, whose infectiously silly *El Watusi* set the tone from the top, *Huma Rojo* (Red Smoke) delivered a bright, light close to the evening. After a voice-over announced that the key to dating success is a big ego, the eight indefatigable dancers — men and women identically dressed in 1960-ish suave red turtlenecks and trousers — strutted, sashayed, wiggled and preened to crowd-pleasing effect.

Throughout all three pieces, lighting was a palpable presence. The eerily beautiful lighting for *1st Flash* was by Jordan Tuinman; Michael Korsch created the mysterious, shadowy world of *Silent Ghost*; Seah Johnson was responsible for *Huma Rojo*'s vigorous stripes.

— ROBIN J. MILLER

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet



Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's Katherine Bolaños in Jorma Elo's *1st Flash*
Photo: Sharen Bradford

Boston Ballet



Jorma Elo / *Fifth Symphony of Jean Sibelius* Wayne McGregor / *Obsidian Tear*

For its fall production, Boston Ballet presented a double bill at the Boston Opera House featuring Wayne McGregor's *Obsidian Tear* and the premiere of Jorma Elo's *Fifth Symphony of Jean Sibelius*. Both works were accompanied live by the Boston Ballet Orchestra, which began the evening by playing Sibelius' *Finlandia*, a "symphonic poem" that is at times resonant and smooth, and at others rousing and triumphant.

Composed in 1899, *Finlandia* remains a symbol of Finnish patriotism during the region's struggle for emancipation from the Russian Republic. The Finnish-themed evening — Elo is from Finland and *Obsidian Tear* is set to orchestral works by Finnish composer Esa-Pekka Salonen — celebrated the centennial of Finland's 1917 declaration of independence, an event Boston Ballet's Finnish-born artistic director, Mikko Nissinen, was clearly proud to present.

Fifth Symphony of Jean Sibelius by Elo, Boston Ballet's resident choreographer, proved most notable. It begins with a dimly lit stage of neutral tones, with 20 dancers gazing stoically, seemingly past the confines of the theatre walls. Above them floats an ominous black ring, which the dancers begin to partner, in unison, beneath.

The scene is quickly disrupted by the emergence of a soloist in pale blue (Ashley Ellis). Ellis introduces a barrage of new pairs who swiftly dart across the space dressed in mauve and olive against an ever-changing backdrop, from lavender to amber. Brimming with the muted hues of nature, the work begins to evoke the four seasons, swirling throughout the space and echoing the ring above and the cyclical pattern of time itself.

In *Fifth Symphony*, Elo plays off Sibelius' lighter musical moments with quick-changing, folksy footwork. Throughout, attention to detail is given to each step's completion. Never is the dancer left stagnant, as every pirouette transitions seamlessly into a triumphant forced arch precisely timed

with a partner's, or glides into a surprising *développé* in the opposite direction before ever touching the ground. These details give the traditional ballet vocabulary a modern edge by omitting dramatized landings and unnecessary flair. Instead, the dancers speed past one another with fluid strength, like leaves caught in the wind.

A series of duets follow, interrupted at times by Ellis, who inserts mischievous levity into an otherwise elegant atmosphere. Where the first duet floats with weightless lifts and leans, the second is punctuated by each precise note from the orchestra. A joyous couple in green is swiftly followed by a bittersweet duet of longing and weighted solemnity. As the work builds to its climax, Ellis returns once more, sprawling herself playfully across the front of the stage as the full cast of 34 behind her appears almost as a breathing landscape.

Elo's *Fifth Symphony* is masterfully choreographed, though its set design, also by Elo, feels out of place. Aside from the brief moments when the dancers circling below mimic the suspended circle above, this large black ring tends to distract rather than enhance, taking focus off the stage and into the space above.

In direct contrast to *Fifth Symphony* was McGregor's *Obsidian Tear*, a co-production between the Royal Ballet (where McGregor is resident choreographer) and Boston Ballet, which premiered in London last year and made its American debut here. McGregor, who is known for his unexpected reconfigurations of classical ballet language, is regularly commissioned worldwide to choreograph for dance, theatre, opera, film and fashion shows.

The bones of the work are solid. The program notes explain that the title refers to a

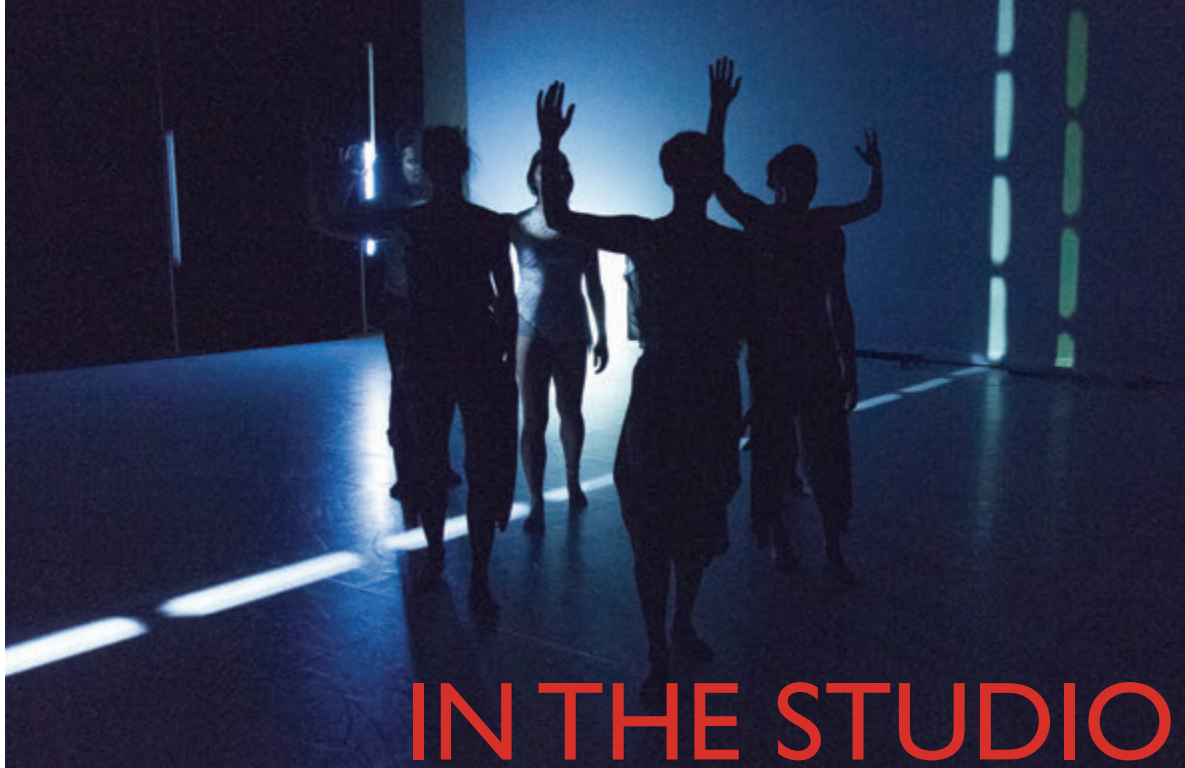
specific type of quickly cooled volcanic rock and that the action delves into the double meaning of the word "tear." This imagery, coupled with composer Salonen's symphonic poem *Nyx* (which is inspired by the powerful and alluring goddess of the same name), is richly developed onstage through the use of brilliant red lighting, a foreboding set and sinewy choreographic phrases. The tumultuous nature of the piece feels deeply rooted in this volcanic rupturing, with its nine dancers struggling against one another while balancing violence with grace.

Where the work disappoints is at times in the movement itself, and at others in the dancers' interpretations. McGregor combines traditional ballet technique with unconventional expressive phrase work to create a hybrid that covers the gamut of both, and this frequently lacks cohesion.

An overly traditional preparation before a turn feels disconnected from an otherwise organic phrase. Likewise, the emphatic flicking of the wrists and flailing of limbs appear too loose for this otherwise precise technique. As well, the dancers' interpretations varied dramatically, creating an unpolished appearance for a company of this calibre. Other moments appeared over-rehearsed. McGregor's choreography proffers several strong and emotionally charged scenes of discord, yet the weight of these moments was often lost as Boston Ballet's dancers overly anticipated each push, lift and thrust to the point of seeming disingenuous.

The evening's two choreographic works could not be more dissimilar, yet both made an important contribution to honouring Finland's historic centennial, beautifully integrating art and artists from the country's past and present.

— MERLI V. GUERRA



Action at a Distance

IN THE STUDIO

AND ONSTAGE

Vanessa Goodman /
Wells Hill

“Art is anything you can get away with.” These bold words of innovative thinker and philosopher Marshall McLuhan were projected across the back wall of the theatre in the opening scene of choreographer Vanessa Goodman’s multimedia dance piece *Wells Hill*. The statement preps the audience for the visual and sonic spectacle that unfolds in the subsequent 60 minutes.

Framing the performance space at Simon Fraser University’s Goldcorp Centre for the Arts in Vancouver were tubes of fluorescent lights, creating a stark landscape that illuminated a small group of seated dancers. Dressed by costume designer Diane Park in various textured fabrics in a palette of whites and greys, they stared mesmerized at a five-foot-high plexiglass cone positioned like a television set at the back of the stage.

Dancer Lara Barclay, wearing a structured mesh dress, stood apart from the group, articulating her long limbs, torso, hands and fingers in slow disjointed movements. The scene played out as pianist Glenn Gould’s 1955 recording of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* filled the space.

After three years of research, *Wells Hill*, which premiered in November, stands out as Goodman’s most ambitious project to date for her dance company Action at a Distance. The piece draws on the work of two Canadian visionaries — media theorist McLuhan and celebrated pianist Gould — who influenced our understanding of how we consume and produce art and information. Bringing together a team of collaborators including projection, lighting and sound designers, with a cast of seven dancers, Goodman tackles their ideas to examine different mediums of art

and performance, and how communication technologies affect the body and human relationships.

Her fascination with McLuhan and Gould stems from a personal connection. “I always knew that I grew up in Marshall McLuhan’s former home,” says Goodman. A permanent reminder was his son’s name, Michael McLuhan, scrawled across a wall in the basement. Coincidentally, before her parents moved into the house, they inhabited the same apartment building as Gould, who lived several stories up from them in the penthouse.

Goodman’s childhood home, situated on Wells Hill Avenue in Toronto, is where McLuhan wrote several of his iconic books, including *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. And, as Goodman learned at a dedication plaque ceremony for McLuhan in 2011, it was also where Gould would

come to play piano and have many discussions with the media critic.

“Growing up, I understood the importance of McLuhan’s work,” she says. He had coined key aphorisms, such as “the medium is the message” and “global village,” and predicted the internet three decades before it existed. “His work laid the foundation for how we understand media today.”

Like McLuhan, Gould was interested in the effects of media and technology on society, specifically how music could be communicated through mass media. “Gould had different ideas around performance, and had a strong sense of opening up opportunities for hearing music where there was no hierarchical structure,” says Goodman.

At the age of 31, Gould performed his last live concert and turned his focus to making studio recordings,

and radio and television broadcasts. “Here he was,” says Goodman, “one of the greatest pianists of his time, rejecting live performance.”

Before entering the process of creating *Wells Hill*, Goodman brushed up on both McLuhan’s and Gould’s work, and read their biographies, to figure out if the *Wells Hill* project was even possible. “The deeper I got into their work, the more possible and impossible it seemed,” she says.

Wells Hill was ultimately created in two parts, the first examining the pre-internet era; the second, today’s information age. Throughout, there is a strong emphasis on the various media at play. At moments, larger than life images of Gould at the piano or of McLuhan’s face stutter into focus, accompanied by a hybrid soundscore (first half designed by Gabriel Saloman, second by Scott Morgan) of classical piano and electronic music with recorded clips of the two men speaking.

“I get very excited about collaboration,” says Goodman. “I love when the whole room dances, and seeing how the different elements create texture in the space and develop into a world.”

The world created in the first half draws on McLuhan’s theory of hot and cool media as a framework to structure the material. McLuhan’s theory posits that hot media, such as the radio, completely engages one sense, requiring little participation by the listener, whereas cool media, like the television, stimulates several senses less fully, requiring the viewer to engage more deeply in the experience. Goodman plays with this theory, working with the idea of high and low definition to construct what the audience sees, by

either obscuring information or giving it directly, to encourage passive or active viewing. She introduces all the physical information, such as individual gestures, at the beginning, and then slowly conceals those gestures in order to achieve a more engaged audience. “One of the ways I tried to do this,” she says, “was by creating a physical screen with other bodies to obscure or distort the movement or by allowing the gesture to live in another body part.”

James Proudfoot’s lighting design helped to create this concealment, while Ben Didier constructed the video imagery in the opposite fashion. For example, “viewers are given pixels of an eyeball and, as the piece progresses, the camera zooms

out until you see McLuhan’s or Gould’s full face and you have all the information,” says Goodman.

In the second half of *Wells Hill*, Goodman “plays on what it is like to live in a reality that McLuhan and Gould predicted.” The audience starts to witness “glitch” — sudden malfunctions and irregularities in the movement, music and visual projections that suggest the effects of media oversaturation that we often experience today. “I wanted to embody glitch in terms of what’s happening as we move through this world, how we’re distracted by many things.”

At one point, a video shows the “chronological disintegration but also elevation” of media. It rapidly snaps through footage of

historical radio and TV landmark moments, and then moves through recent news items, all in just one minute and 30 seconds. This assault of images and sound plays after a hologram of McLuhan’s head appears floating inside the cone from the opening scene, as if he momentarily exists in the future he was so interested in.

In the coming year, Goodman hopes to tour this theoretically intriguing yet very personal project within Canada. “I’d love to take the work to Toronto,” she says, back to the city where her interest in McLuhan and Gould first began at home on Wells Hill Avenue.

— HILARY MAXWELL

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Photo: David Cooper

Day and Night, Coffea Dances the Samba



The basic idea of homeopathy, a system of alternative medicine developed by German physician Samuel Hahnemann in the 18th century, is the Law of Similars, or “like cures like.” This refers to the fact that a remedy has to match a patient’s personality and condition, hence the development of an elaborate diagnostic system of personality portraits used to find the most fitting remedy.

The dynamic intensity of these portraits opened up perfectly into the language of dance in *Sepia Dances Alone: Homeopathic Personality Profiles in Dance Photography*. My choreographic approach to the book’s 26 portraits was based on both research and intuition, supported by photographer Andreas J. Etter’s lighting design. In the iconographic scenarios, featuring professional adult and gifted child dancers, our aim was to build bridges from homeopathy into the dance world. For instance, the remedy Arsenicum is used to represent strong ballet technique, while Sepia offers reflection on Maurice Béjart’s *Boléro*.

The photos shown here are from a series based on *Coffea arabica*, a remedy made from the raw arabica coffee bean. They feature an energetic, friendly, sensitive and nervous person who is full of joy, but sleepless at night.

— ANDREA SIMON
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, TANZPLAN
FRANKFURT AM MAIN

Sepia Tanzt Allein: Homöopathische Persönlichkeitsprofile in der Tanzfotografie
Text and choreography by Andrea Simon
Photography by Andreas J. Etter
Published in German by ff publishers
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Photos of Chiara Irani as Coffea
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