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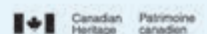
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[subscriptions@danceinternational.org](mailto:subscriptions@danceinternational.org)  
[advertising@danceinternational.org](mailto:advertising@danceinternational.org)

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

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All kinds of writers and all kinds of writing are in store for you in our Spring issue. Gigi Berardi, a familiar name in these pages, brings insider insight into a hard-working part of a dancer's anatomy with her feature, *Beautiful Feet*. Gigi, always tireless in her research, interviews artists from three key dance cities: one in the United States (Seattle, where she lives) and two in Canada (Vancouver and Montreal). We also have Parisienne Laura Cappelle, writing for us for the second time, who like Gigi is a seasoned writer.

Laura, reporting again from Russia, provides a full-bodied portrait of the rapidly evolving Mikhailovsky Ballet.

Rebecca Karpus publishes her first piece, not just with *Dance International*, but ever. Rebecca is with us for a few months on a practicum through Simon Fraser University's Comparative Media Arts master's program. Her featured Dance Note on Crystal Pite's work with emerging professionals at the same university is on page 20.

We also have a few (very) short stories told by dance artists and one producer. Fredrik Rütter, our critic in Norway, gave me the idea for what became *Stories of Encounter* when he mentioned in an email something Merce Cunningham once said to him. I pounced on him to write the anecdote up more fully, then rustled up some other intrepid storytellers.

There's poetry in these pages, too. Patricia Beatty, a co-founder of Toronto Dance Theatre in 1968, evokes the biggest and best moments of being a dancer in a few short lines on page 31. **Her poem should resonate for anyone who has ever experienced first-hand — either as a dancer or as an engaged audience member — the power of expressive dance.**

*Kaija*

Kaija Pepper  
[editor@danceinternational.org](mailto:editor@danceinternational.org)

Angelina Vorontsova, principal  
dancer of the Mikhailovsky Theatre  
Photo: Sergey Misenko



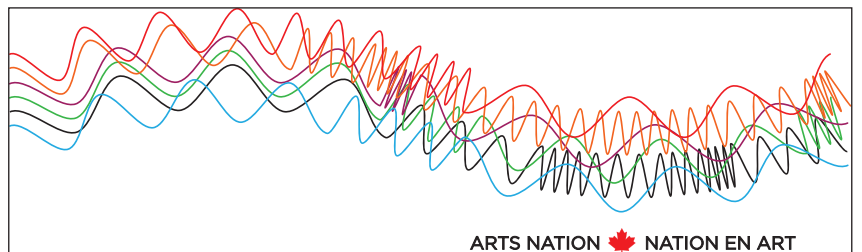
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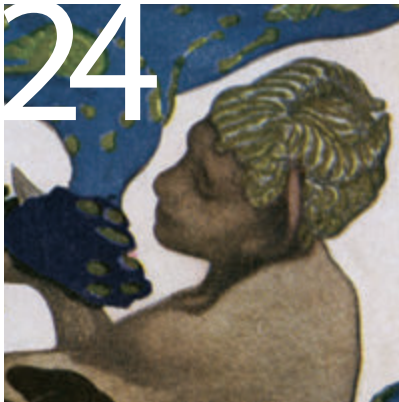


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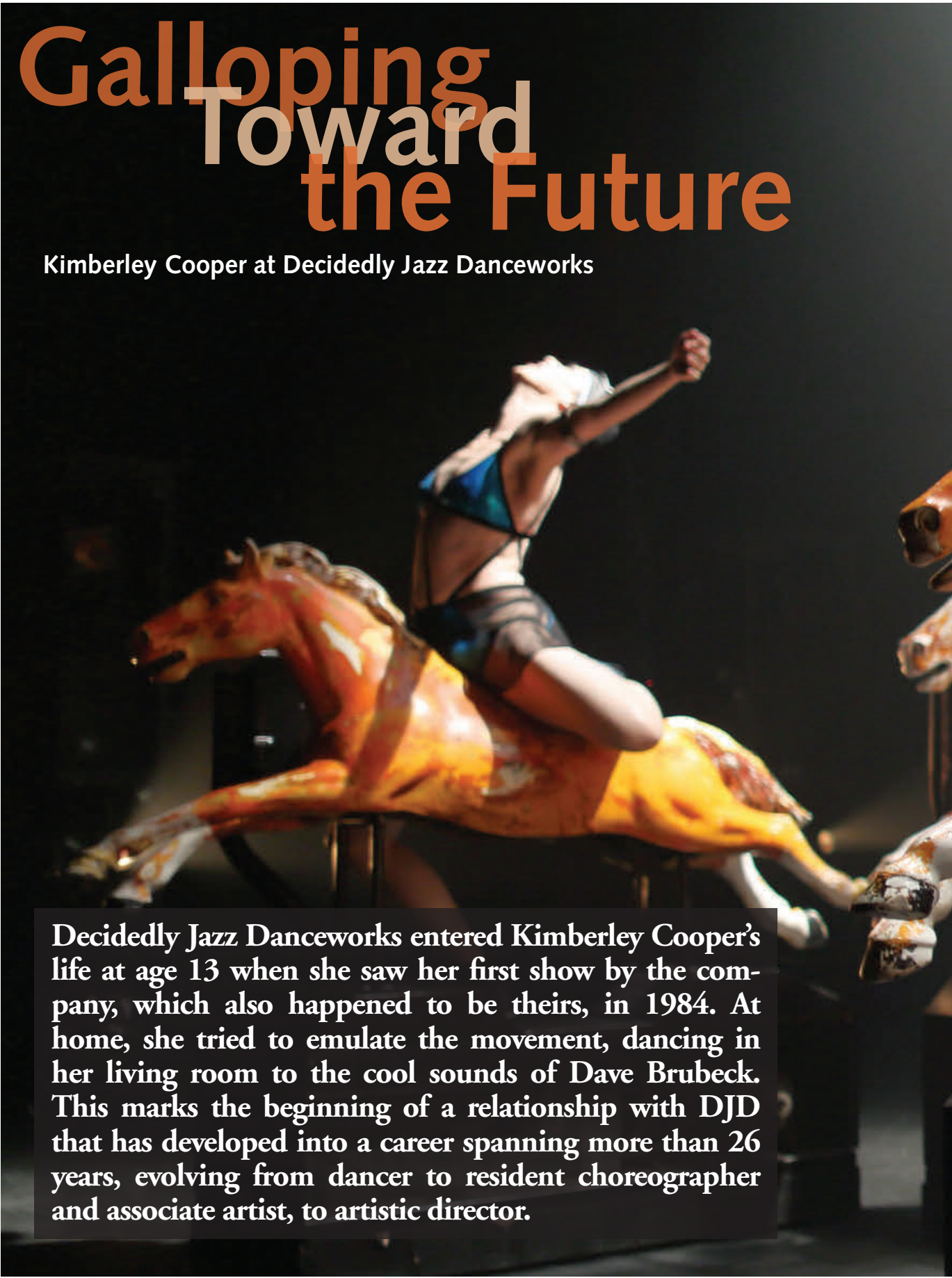
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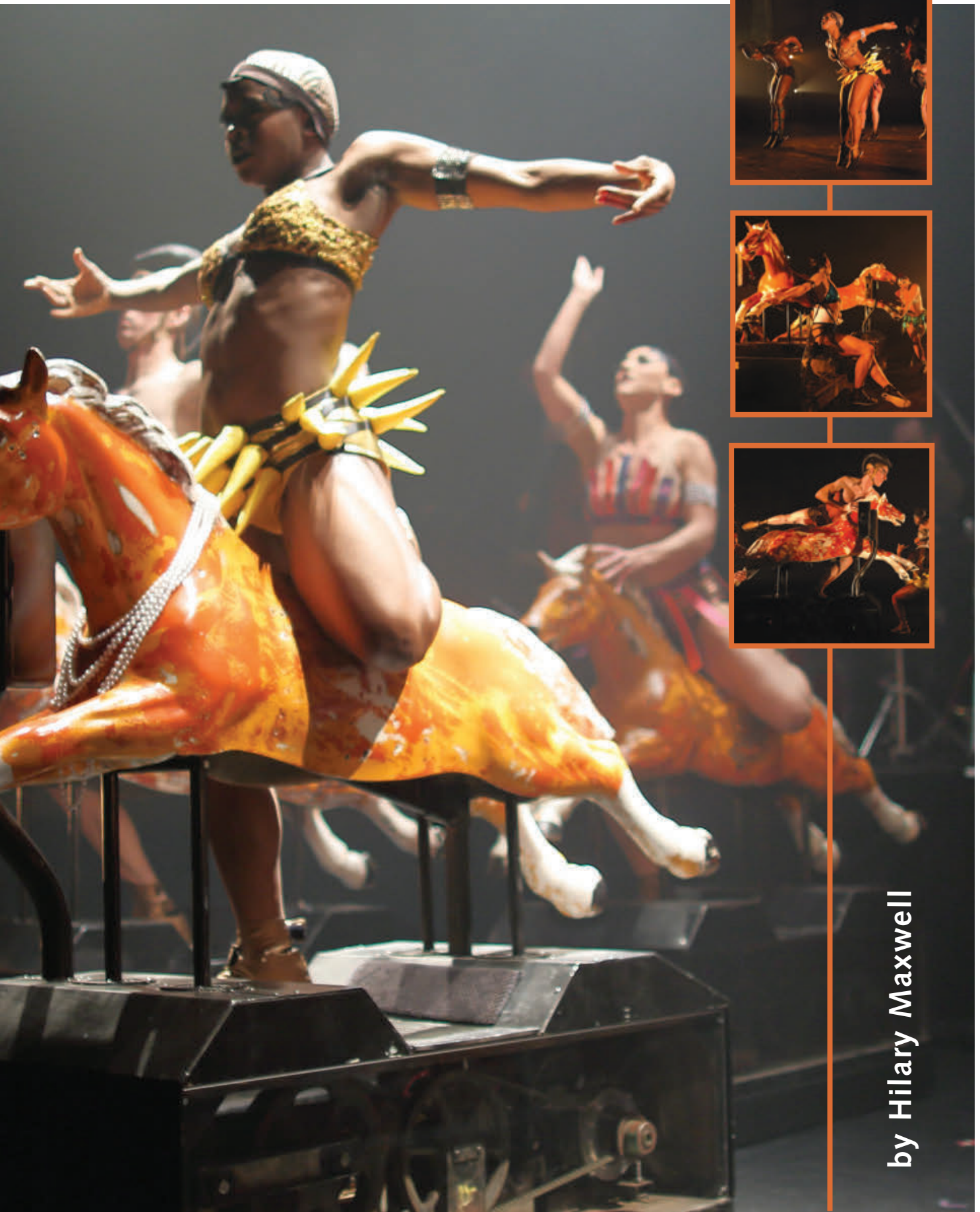
# Galloping Toward the Future

Kimberley Cooper at Decidedly Jazz Danceworks



Decidedly Jazz Danceworks entered Kimberley Cooper's life at age 13 when she saw her first show by the company, which also happened to be theirs, in 1984. At home, she tried to emulate the movement, dancing in her living room to the cool sounds of Dave Brubeck. This marks the beginning of a relationship with DJD that has developed into a career spanning more than 26 years, evolving from dancer to resident choreographer and associate artist, to artistic director.





by Hilary Maxwell

Main photo: Catherine Hayward, Natasha Korney and Dinou Marlett-Stuart

Inset Top: Marc Hall and Natasha Korney  
Middle: Catherine Hayward and Audrey Gaussiran  
Bottom: Shayne Johnson



Marc Hall and Dinou  
Marlett-Stuart in *Wilds*  
Photo: Noel Bégin

As Decidedly Jazz Danceworks, often known simply as DJD, comes of age — having just celebrated its 30th anniversary and scheduled to move into the brand-new Decidedly Jazz Dance Centre in downtown Calgary, Alberta, in 2016 — Cooper leads the group into a new era of possibility.

Cooper joined DJD just five years after co-founders Vicki Adams Willis, Hannah Stilwell and Michèle Moss embarked on their journey to reclaim jazz and form a dance ensemble. Willis was artistic director until 2013 when she stepped down and became founder in residence, handing over the directorship to Cooper. “For the first six months, when I introduced myself as artistic director, I expected people to say ‘No, you’re not,’” Cooper admits, referring to how Willis was the face of the company for so long. But Cooper has long been intimately involved from the inside and has influenced the artistic direction for numerous years as resident choreographer.

Cooper has already rebranded the company’s image, reflecting a sexier, edgier and innovative look. This year she kicked off the season with her own bold premiere, *The Year of the Horse*, which took DJD into provocative territory with erotic subtleties, including nudity. “She’s putting a whole new spin on jazz,” says company dancer Catherine Hayward, who is in her eighth season. “Kim takes risks and tries new things. She is very passionate, with a strong vision, and you want to get behind someone like that.”

A city in the Canadian Prairies known more for oil and cowboys than jazz culture may be an unlikely place to find a roots-of-jazz dance company. Yet DJD has made a successful home for itself in Calgary, building on its co-founders’ mission to revive the spirit of jazz by honouring its African-American origins and evolving the medium forward. The professional concert jazz company and school that has emerged is the only one of its kind in Canada and one of a handful in the world.

With Willis at the helm, the company had developed an extensive repertoire specializing in the roots, staying true to the traditional values of the form in which jazz music is inseparable from

the dance. Their productions were known for incorporating live music, anchoring the movement and giving life to their trademark style: swing-based, hunkered over, rhythmic, serpentine and up-lifting. While Cooper is grounded in the DJD aesthetic, she has a contemporary take on the form, and is pushing the boundaries of their signature vernacular, redefining the company’s identity.

Even in her early years, she demonstrated an ability to make dances from a distinct artistic point of view. “Cooper was a particularly quiet and introverted, rather intense young dancer,” remembers Willis. “When we presented our first dancer-choreographed show, that intensity manifested itself in work that was raw but intriguing. It excited me from the get-go.”

Cooper has also forged a successful career as an independent choreographer and dancer. She pursued opportunities to travel and study other forms, and to work with diverse artists, expanding her choreographic voice and approach to dance making. “Kim has always had a strong point of view, one that is not afraid to delve into darker territory,” says choreographer Jason Stroh, a former company dancer. Cooper’s aesthetic contrasts the celebratory spirit for which DJD’s productions were previously known.

She designs visual landscapes, often whimsical and otherworldly. Her vision integrates a blend of artistic disciplines, as seen in her 2008 *wowandflutter*, which featured visual effects by Canadian contemporary artist and illusionist David Hoffos, who created surreal interactions between the live dancers and their projected images. Her ability to develop scenic environments is also evident in *Wilds* (2011), in which she animated the space with rows of suspended, upside-down aspen trees, devised to move up and down with the dancers gliding and weaving between the branches.

Cooper draws inspiration from art, film, people in the street and, hugely, from music. “Maybe that’s what keeps me in the realm of jazz so much: my intimate connection with music and dance,” says Cooper. Music is a key player in her works, and, if it’s live, the musicians are usually close at hand, sometimes sharing the space and connecting physically with the dancers.



# Cooper draws inspiration from art, film, people in the street and, hugely, from music.

Traditionally, jazz dance is driven by the music, but that is not always Cooper's impetus.

For instance, *The Year of the Horse* came to life as the result of a strange collection of images and ideas. She had a desire to make a piece about iconic Josephine Baker, an African-American dancer whose heyday was in 1920s Paris. Baker is famously known for her *Danse Sauvage*, performing in nothing more than a skirt of bananas. As Cooper dreamed of Baker, a visual artist friend showed her a collection of 30 stationary coin-operated horses of various sizes, some weighing hundreds of pounds, dating from as early as the 1940s. Cooper's imagination was set free and she began to picture these horses stripped down and sandblasted, looking post-apocalyptic. She thought to herself, "Who would live in a world with these horses? Josephine." It wasn't until this point that she began to think about music.

Researching jazz in all its permutations has been an essential part of DJD's philosophy, which Cooper intends to maintain. The African roots are a primary focus, but the investigation of jazz also extends to other places in the world where Africa and Europe came together as a result of the slave trade, like Cuba and Brazil. Cooper has been researching the fusion of jazz and Brazilian dance since 2011, teaching workshops and studying dance from different regions in the country: she has gone to Crato to learn local traditional dances, to Recife to study the maracatu and to Rio de Janeiro for the samba.

The goal is the creation of a large-scale collaborative production with Cia. Vatá, a dance and music company from Brazil led by Valéria Pinheiro. It will involve a Brazil-Canada cultural exchange including creative residencies, with the ultimate goal a full touring show to premiere in 2017. The next phase is to bring Cia. Vatá to Calgary in spring 2015 where they will share the stage with DJD in a new work, *Ziriguidum*, and then the following year DJD will head to Brazil.

Cooper's direction with the company hinges on their new building. The company's season has typically involved two major productions a year — a traditional jazz show by Willis and a contemporary work by Cooper, plus a biennial dancer-choreographed show. But, as Cooper says, "Once we have the building, the possibilities are endless." The Decidedly Jazz Dance Centre opens up opportunities for studio showings, choreographic labs, residencies and lectures. In addition to housing their recreational school, professional training program and company rehearsals, there is an in-house theatre that will free up their currently restricted performance schedule.

Once a quiet and intense apprentice, Cooper now steers the company forward with a daring and adventurous spirit. She thinks of when she turned the same age, and what that meant. "You're still quite brave, still wild, but in a different way. There is just a kind of confidence and knowing who you are — what you want is so much clearer." Cooper, at 43, is dreaming of possibilities and is going after what she wants. Sitting high atop of one of Josephine's horses, she gallops toward the future. ▼



Photo: Noel Bégin

## what jazz is by Kimberley Cooper

**Jazz loves music. That connection is deep, and heavy, and ancient. That's why we perform with live music whenever possible.**

**Jazz loves gravity. It doesn't try to pull away from it; it embraces it, and gets lower. It might lift out of it, leap, kiss the clouds, but it's happiest when it's low, close to the ground.**

**Jazz needs rhythm. It loves to sit in the groove, but also to be off balance, to push and pull time, in between beats, syncopated and free until it falls back into whatever that groove may be.**

**Jazz uses the torso, which is the endless source of our movement. It comes right from the centre of the chest, the place where you feel, ache, burst. The place where "cool" lives in your body.**

**Jazz loves to improvise. Your body is your instrument: you must know how to play it, you must be able to have conversations with it, to make it say what you want to say, how you want to say it, and also how to make it listen.**

**Jazz is personal, it needs you to be you. It's about people with personalities and intelligence and life. You are going to feel this think this dance this maybe a little differently than me because you have had a different experience than mine, and jazz thrives on that.**

**What Jazz Is was posted on Decidedly Jazz Dance-work's website in 2013 and is reprinted with the permission of the author. It has been edited for Dance International.**

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# Beautiful Feet

by Gigi Berardi

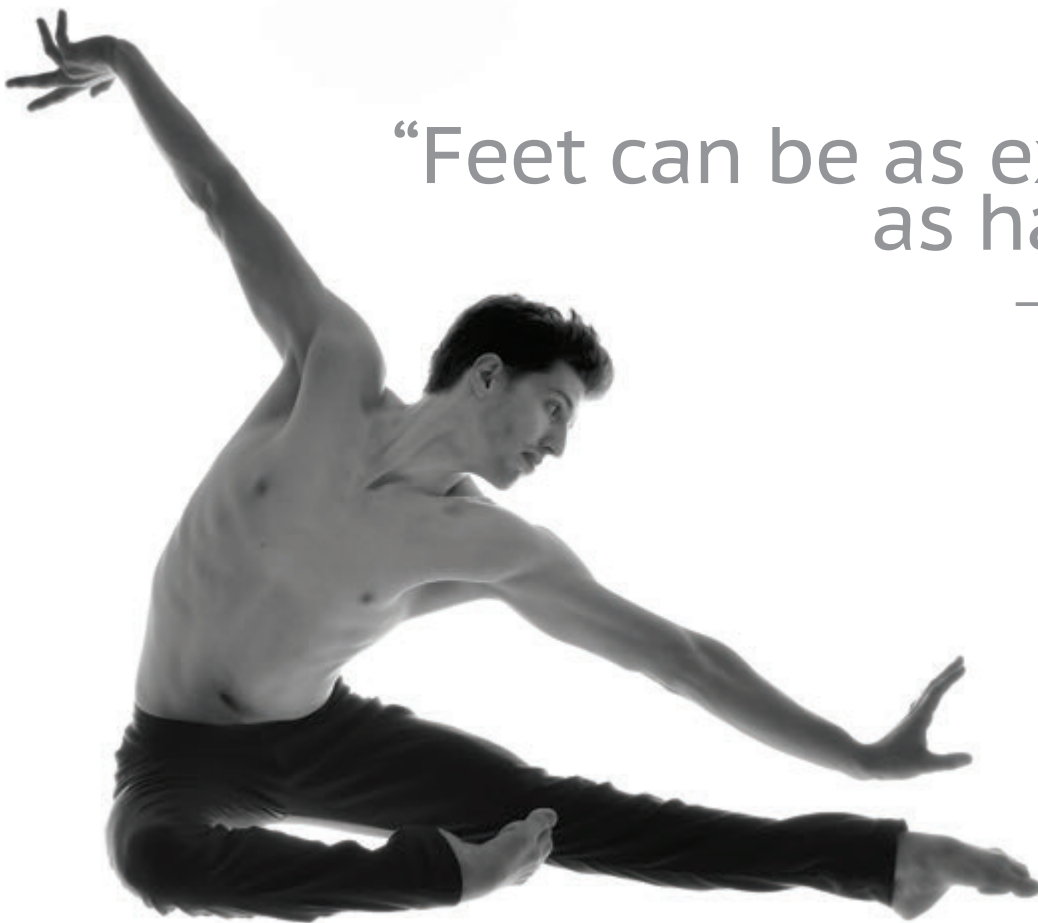
Insider insights into this hard-working part of a dancer's body

**D**ancers' feet provide the foundation for the impressive work we have come to expect onstage. Those feet are constantly weight-bearing, and need to be strong and flexible enough to launch the dancer high off the floor. They are also the final visual point of the leg when it is in the air. As audience members, we often pay attention to the aesthetics of dancers' feet, yet many of us know little about the mechanics of this hard-working part of the dancing body. Dancers and artistic directors from three companies — Ballet British Columbia and Montréal Danse in Canada, and Pacific Northwest Ballet in the United States — talk with Gigi Berardi and provide insider insights into the issues and aesthetics of feet.



Above: Rachel Harris and Peter Trosztmer in *The Drift*  
Photo: Merit Esther Engelke

Left: Pacific Northwest Ballet's Lesley Rausch in Ulysses Dove's *Red Angel*  
Photo: Angela Sterling



“Feet can be as expressive as hands.”

— Andrew Bartee

In a real sense, feet are more gendered in classical ballet than in other dance forms. Typically, women have more flexible ankles and higher arches than men. The high arch in ballet is prized for its delicate aesthetic, allowing the dancer to balance seemingly effortlessly, but it comes with a cost. High arches are rigid and less shock absorbing; injuries can result. They need to be balanced with strong ankles and toes, especially for pointe work. Irrespective of dance style, all dancers must keep their ankle joints loose so they can achieve a deep plié in order to cushion their landings from big jumps. That same deep plié is needed from those preparing to be lifted.

Pacific Northwest Ballet principal Laura Tisserand explains, “Many dancers just happen to be born with naturally high arches and flexible feet. Unfortunately, if you’re born with rather flat feet, there is not a lot that can be done to change this. But learning how to use them in the most beautiful way possible can help disguise a less flexible foot.”

Tisserand’s feet are more on the flexible side and in the past she has suffered ankle sprains due to overly loose ligaments, which can give way when off-balance. While removing a bone spur (a bony protrusion usually found at the edge of a bone), a doctor noticed her ligaments were stretched out as a result of the sprains, so he tightened some of the ligaments in her ankle. She spent the last several years strengthening her feet and ankles and now rarely has an injury.

Lesley Rausch, also a principal with Seattle’s Pacific Northwest Ballet, has always had a lot of differentiation in her foot, as well as a high arch with a break higher in the foot, toward the heel. This gives her feet a long, tapered look. Her arch and foot flexibility come from her ankle joint rather than from the mid-foot. “It’s a blessing

and a curse,” says Rausch. “I need stability and strength to manage my flexibility, and finding that stability is a challenge. Yet it’s essential for receiving the feedback I need to maintain balance.” What Rausch is describing is the phenomenon of proprioception, literally, an awareness of one’s own position in space, and therefore an ability to balance. Strong tendons and ligaments are an important part of this system of feedback; these are often compromised in the hyperflexible dancer.

Rausch’s challenges include stabilizing the ankle’s lateral, side-to-side movement. Key to achieving this are strengthening exercises and the therapeutic use of balance boards that allow for a multi-directional seesaw-like motion in many directions, thus improving balance. Such work helps Rausch build a strong, receptive core to counterbalance her ankle’s mobility. She also darns her pointe shoe tips in order to slant the front of her shoe to make it easier for her foot to pull back, thus restricting the foot’s mobility. It gives her more tactile feedback so as not to go too far over her foot in a balance.

“Finding balance has to be second nature so I am able to have freedom in expressing what I want,” says Rausch. “It’s a constant struggle, and I approach class and rehearsal with the goal of better alignment and control, but, really, the most important thing is the artistic integrity of what you’re doing.”

Pacific Northwest Ballet artistic director Peter Boal acknowledges that although a high-arched foot is more or less standard for women in ballet, the strength that Rausch is trying to develop is as important as the look. A former longtime principal at New York City Ballet, Boal also knows the challenges typically facing men. “The line of the foot really needs to extend the line of the shin, but this requires control, and not just powering through an extension,” he says.



During their early training, and throughout their careers, men typically are working more on stamina, power and fast extensions, which serve them in jumping, rather than a particular “look” or positioning of the foot. They most often need to work more on articulation, and their often less flexible feet makes achieving and maintaining a high demi-pointe challenging.

Pacific Northwest Ballet soloist Benjamin Griffiths is one of the relatively few men with a very high arch, so his challenges stem from tight muscles and tendons in the bottom of his feet. He conditions with stretching exercises, and believes exploring how his feet work is necessary in expressing himself as an artist.

“When I’m dancing,” says Griffiths, “I’m constantly thinking about how I’m shaping and placing my feet. Not only are the feet one of the main choreographic focal points (we refer to choreographic phrases as steps for a reason), but they can also be very expressive, particularly in relationship to the floor. When dancing Oberon [in Balanchine’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*], I try to have my feet point and leave the floor rapidly, whereas for the solo in *Agon* I try to use my feet to get into and massage the floor. In one role they’re lightning bolts and in the other they’re like suction cups.”

Contemporary dance may have a somewhat different perspective on feet than classical ballet, focusing more on contact and connection rather than articulated positions. Montréal Danse’s artistic director Kathy Casey imagines ballet “as an art form in which dancers first touch the ground with their toes, whereas in contemporary works, we tend to like the heel or full foot to touch the floor first and ground the body.”

Adds Harris: “I love to move barefoot outside and I try to carry that feeling into the studio and on to the stage, as if the floor were a different texture than smooth wood or Marley. It seems that once my feet are nimble and open, then I am pretty much ready to go; conversely, if the bones in my feet are not moving smoothly, I can be as warm as can be and still feel stuck in my body.”

For Ballet BC artistic director Emily Molnar, irrespective of the dance form, “the feet are a reference point for the maturity of an artist, how experienced the dancer is, how nuanced are his or her moves.” Molnar notes that a lot of training in dance tends to be devoted to the arms, the port de bras. Rarely are feet considered as separate from the whole aesthetic of the visual picture.

Ballet BC’s Andrew Bartee looks for ways in which to work that confer some freedom in movement while also strengthening his feet. “I especially focus on how I use my feet on the floor — I always wear socks for barre because it allows my metatarsals to spread and I can articulate through my foot. This kind of focus has helped me to be more aware of my feet as part of my whole body and I would even say has heightened my body awareness as a whole. Feet can be as expressive as hands.”

Dancers rarely have a “perfect” foot, but they learn to adjust. “I used to be really self conscious about having small feet,” Bartee says, “but I think I have learned to create the illusion of length, for instance, with a higher sock height, so that it’s less noticeable. Before I really learned how to control my plié, I had terribly painful talar impingement [pain at the front of the ankle, especially in

**“The line of the foot really needs to extend the line of the shin, but this requires control, and not just powering through an extension.”**

**— Peter Boal**

Casey wonders if the curve of the foot is somewhat fetishized in ballet, especially in pointe shoes. Is the beautifully arched foot in a pointe shoe a perfect emblem of a type of femininity — ethereal, sensual, both strong and fragile? Casey is interested in a more pedestrian foot. In the work of Montréal Danse, a non-pointed, semi-pointed, internally rotated or twisted foot is probably used more than the pointed or flexed foot.

“Most of the dancers we work with have quite articulate feet,” says Casey. “Yet the articulation is not necessarily about how pointed the foot is, but how the foot can correspond to the rest of the body’s actions and intentions. It’s more about how weight is transferred through the foot, how tactile and sensitive it is with the floor.”

When dancer Rachel Harris finished her training and began to work professionally in the 1990s in Montreal, most choreographers were working with shoes — army boots, runners, street shoes. Now, as a member of Montréal Danse, she dances barefoot much of the time. Harris says, “I do enjoy the aesthetic of a nicely pointed foot, especially if I feel the point is an extension of the energy of the leg.” She believes a certain amount of arch in the foot as opposed to a flat foot allows more adaptability in how contact is made with the floor.

“My interest in my own training, and also for many of the choreographers I work with, is in finding deep pathways inside the body,” says Harris. “I use somatic tools to get there: Body Mind Centering, Qi Gong, Continuum, to name a few. In this world the feet become an energetic pathway, a channel between the body and the ground.”

deep plié]. I’ve also had several sprains in both ankles and in my toe joints, which has changed how I work on demi-pointe.”

Bartee conditions his body daily. “The different strengthening exercises and stretches I do for my feet are specific to the history of my feet,” he explains, “and so is the work I need to do with them from day to day. The exploration never stops!”

Molnar feels strongly that exercising feet is a critical part of daily conditioning because, she says, “we bear weight on the feet, we use them all the time.” As well, the groundedness of the feet is a direct link to confidence, to stability. Molnar believes, “If they are not constantly examining the relationship to the floor, a dancer cannot be coordinated.”

It is wonderful to see a beautiful body with a beautifully arched foot, Molnar acknowledges, “but the strength of the body, its power, nuance and musicality, is suggested not so much by the arch of the foot, but by how articulate is the *entire* foot.”

Molnar admits that, as a dancer, when she started being less concerned with what her feet looked like and more with what she was saying with them, she was much happier. Tisserand expresses the same sentiment: “For me, the most beautiful foot does not have to be the one that points like a dagger and has a huge arch. The foot with the most impact is the one that is so finely articulated you find it hard to take your eyes off it. I believe feet can be as expressive as the upper body, and when a dancer uses their feet fully the dancing really shines.” ▼







# ST. PETERSBURG'S "Other" Company

THE MIKHAILOVSKY BALLET  
JOINS THE MAJOR LEAGUE

When the Mikhailovsky Ballet embarked on its very first tour of the United States last November, it was as the ambitious maverick of Russian ballet. Since Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev's stormy transfer from Moscow's Bolshoi brought the Mikhailovsky to the attention of the wider world in 2011, St. Petersburg's "second" company (after the Mariinsky) has been eyeing a breakthrough to the major ballet league.

The Mikhailovsky's renaissance dates back to 2007, when Russian tycoon Vladimir Kekhman took charge as general director. Behind its unassuming façade a few steps away from Nevsky Prospect, the Mikhailovsky Theatre was in dire need of renovation, and Kekhman injected enough money to restore it to its former glory. Seen today, it is smaller yet more modern than the Mariinsky across town (which is set for a renovation of its own very soon). Audiences are different, too, with a nouveau riche feel; extravagant dresses are easily spotted in the foyer; sponsors' promotional material is on display.

BY LAURA CAPPELLE

Angelina Vorontsova and Friedemann Vogel  
in Mikhailovsky Ballet's *Swan Lake*  
Photo: Stas Levshin

Natalia Osipova and Leonid Sarafanov  
in Mikhailovsky Ballet's *Giselle*  
Photo: Paul Kolnik

Money means little in dance without artistic credentials, however, and the unlikely duo Kekhman forms with ballet master in chief Mikhail Messerer is largely responsible for the company's current promise. The two men couldn't be more different: while Kekhman famously made his fortune in the fruit trade, earning the moniker "Banana King," Messerer is heir to a storied ballet dynasty, the son of Bolshoi ballerina Sulamith Messerer and nephew to the pedagogue Asaf Messerer, with Maya Plisetskaya as cousin. Mikhail Messerer is as placid and understated as Kekhman is brash, and, as a result, the company offers a unique blend of tradition and business acumen.

The Mikhailovsky has admittedly benefited from the troubled waters that Russia's top companies, the Mariinsky and the Bolshoi, have found themselves in. Its recruitment policy has been aggressive: as well as Osipova (still on the roster in addition to her full-time position at London's Royal Ballet) and Vasiliev, many of the young stars come from one or the other company. Leading principal Leonid Sarafanov left the



Mikhail Messerer in studio during rehearsal  
Photo: Stas Levshin

Mariinsky at the top of his game, citing his unhappiness and desire to work with choreographer Nacho Duato, the company's former artistic director; Victor Lebedev, arguably the most gifted man to come from the Vaganova Academy in years, upon graduation chose the Mikhailovsky over the Mariinsky.

Angelina Vorontsova may be the most famous name on the list. She joined the Bolshoi in 2009 as a young prodigy from Voronezh, with just one finishing year at the Bolshoi Academy under her belt, and her rise in the company seemed a foregone conclusion. Director at the time Yuri Burlaka soon gave her key roles, including the lead in his reconstruction of the Grand Pas from *Paquita*. In the wake of the acid attack on Bolshoi director Sergei Filin, however, her then-boyfriend Pavel Dmitrichenko was accused and charged with ordering the crime, and his unhappiness over Vorontsova's less prominent casting under Filin was cited as a potential motive. Vorontsova's low-key move to the Mikhailovsky a few months later in 2013 was hardly surprising in that context. After tryout performances in Messerer's

new production of *Flames of Paris*, in which she danced both Diana Mireille and Jeanne, she was offered a position as prima ballerina, a major step up.

She has been dancing quietly in St. Petersburg since then, and seemed happy to have thrown all her energies into work when I met her in a studio at the Mikhailovsky Theatre last September. The childlike candour of her early interviews at the Bolshoi has been replaced by a more mature outlook; she refuses to discuss the aftermath of the acid attack and will only say that she is very happy at the Mikhailovsky, where she has access to the entire repertoire and has found relative peace.

Her new position says much about today's Mikhailovsky. Shortly after our interview, Vorontsova was guileless and beautifully secure in a *Giselle* rehearsal with former Mariinsky ballerina Zhanna Ayupova, who specializes in the Romantic repertoire. Her womanly curves by Russian standards were derided by some Bolshoi insiders as the reason she wasn't given leading roles, and there is a pernicious truth to their statements: at the uber-competitive Bolshoi and Mariinsky, thinner is considered better. What the Mikhailovsky can do, and has done with Vorontsova, is nurture the talents who don't fit into its bigger rivals' boxes. There is a creamy, lush quality to Vorontsova's movement that is unique, and deserves careful coaching to mature.

**Osipova and Vasiliev may lead the company on tour, but the Mikhailovsky's real strength is in the next generation; with Messerer at the helm, its future looks bright.**

Messerer does much of the work behind the scenes. One morning last fall, most of the principals could be found crammed in his class in one of the Mikhailovsky studios. Instructions were given softly, but the pace was fast, with plenty of petit and grand allegro, though St. Petersburg, home of the Vaganova Academy, has historically been associated with adagio. His brisk, musical exercises were reminiscent of the old school, pre-Grigorovitch Bolshoi the Messerer family has long been synonymous with.

Messerer's teaching style has translated into a hybrid company onstage. Vaganova-style lyricism can be found among the soloists trained in St. Petersburg, especially the princely Lebedev, but by and large the dancers channel the bright vitality of the Bolshoi. It was particularly evident in the premiere last September of *Class Concert*, Asaf Messerer's classroom ballet, which fizzed like champagne, the dancers delighting in its speed and full-bodied style. Larger-than-life bravura was in abundant supply with Osipova, Vasiliev, Vorontsova or Lebedev leading the way; it felt like the Bolshoi at its finest, as when the Moscow company briefly revived this ballet in 2007.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Swan Lake*, presented the night after *Class Concert*, left more to be desired. The production,





new in 2009, is again in the Moscow tradition, with choreography credited to Alexander Gorsky and Asaf Messerer, and designs by Simon Virsaladze, best known for his longstanding collaboration with Yuri Grigorovitch.

The company's dancing, so effective in *Class Concert*, was less convincing in this most lyrical of ballets, with sharp, occasionally stilted arms among the swans. The company improved as the ballet progressed, and shone in the Act III character dances. Lyricism was in short supply, however, despite the excellent performances of Polina Semionova and Friedemann Vogel, both guest principals, who have rare chemistry as Odette/Odile and Siegfried.

On the other hand, the company makes its mark in classical works less associated with the rival Mariinsky. *Class Concert* was performed alongside a revival of the Petipa one-act ballet *The Cavalry Halt*, a rare treat. It is surprising no other company (aside from the Gelsey Kirkland Academy last spring) has taken it on. Created in 1896 for Pierina Legnani and Petipa's own daughter Marie, it boasts two "filles mal gardées" for the price of one.

The story focuses on the rivalry between a classical ballerina (Maria) and a character dancer (Teresa) who are in love with the same boy. The bickering is disrupted by the arrival of a cavalry regiment, whose three officers instantly fall in love with Teresa. She dances a pas de deux with each of them, parodying a different character dance in every one. With its sunny, good-natured characters, the ballet fits the company like a glove, and was well served by Vorontsova and Sarafanov.

Many of Mikhail Messerer's own classical stagings have proved equally successful, and a number are improvements on their Mariinsky or Bolshoi equivalents. Messerer is given a free hand at the Mikhailovsky, and the light touch he favours is a refreshing change from the Sergeev or Grigorovitch

productions that have been performed for decades elsewhere. He handles classical choreography with rare clarity and musicality, and there is little ego in the result; his *Flames of Paris* is a delightful restoration of the ballet as his uncle or mother once danced it, straightforward, with greater attention paid to the character dance tradition than in Alexei Ratmansky's version for the Bolshoi. His next project is a new production of *Le Corsaire*, set to premiere this spring.

One question mark is the future of the repertoire created by Nacho Duato, the Spanish choreographer who directed the company from 2011 to 2014. Duato remains on the roster as resident choreographer, but has now taken over Staatsballett Berlin. *White Darkness*, the latest ballet of his to enter the Mikhailovsky repertoire, completed the triple bill presented last September under the title *Three Centuries of Russian Ballet*. Set to a score by Karl Jenkins, it explores the world of drugs and addiction with a leading couple and a small corps, and is one of Duato's most effective pieces.

The Mikhailovsky danced it with complete commitment. Several principals, including Sarafanov and Vorontsova, were part of the corps; Irina Perren, who has long been the company's prima ballerina, gave a seamless, moving performance in the lead role. It was clear in *White Darkness* that Duato's short-lived tenure had a lasting influence on the company's affinity with contemporary repertoire; no other Russian company has approached this level of ease, and the Mikhailovsky can build on it in the future.

Yet Duato's attempt at creating new versions of the classics, including *Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty*, were poorly received, and are unlikely to stay in the repertoire in the long term. No successor has been appointed since Duato's departure, although the company is reportedly looking for another choreographer to take on some of his duties. As ballet



Left: Rishat Yulbarisov and Irina Perren of Mikhailovsky Ballet in Nacho Duato's *Multiplicity*  
Photo: Stas Levshin

Below: Mariam Ugrehelidze of Mikhailovsky Ballet in *Flames of Paris* (Vasily Vainonen, revised by Mikhail Messerer)  
Photo: Paul Kolnik

master in chief, Messerer is the de facto director at present, and had already assumed the daily management of the company under Duato.

In the wake of Duato's departure, the company's roster also appeared to fluctuate from month to month. Kristina Shapran joined as a principal at the start of the year, only to bolt to the Mariinsky over the summer with Oksana Bondareva, who was the company's Jeanne (in *Flames of Paris*) and Kitri of choice. Altynai Asylmuratova's stint as coach and artistic advisor was equally shortlived. Will the Mikhailovsky be able to establish itself durably at the top? The Mariinsky and the Bolshoi have so far retained their aura through thick and thin, yet the "other" St. Petersburg company often seems like the one looking to the future. Messerer famously quipped a few years ago that contrary to his Bolshoi or Mariinsky colleagues, tasked with managing sprawling companies, he at least knew how many dancers he had. Salaries have been raised under Kekhman, and Messerer's hiring policy is inclusive; in recent years he hired an American trained at the Bolshoi Academy, Mario Labrador, as a demi-soloist, as well as a black female dancer, Olympiada Saurat Alfa N'gobi, still a rarity in Russia.

While Kekhman's financial backing made it possible, Messerer is the key figure behind the Mikhailovsky's rise. A soft-spoken, effective leader, he is the company's greatest asset; his dancers deliver with panache in the right repertoire, and Russian critics have commented on the strides made by the corps de ballet in just a few years. He has an eye for young talent, too, as proven by Lebedev and Moscow-trained first soloist Anastasia Soboleva, who was languishing in the Bolshoi corps until she joined in 2013 (she danced the title role in *Giselle* in New York). Osipova and Vasiliev may lead the company on tour, but the Mikhailovsky's real strength is in the next generation; with Messerer at the helm, its future looks bright. ▼







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## Pite's pursuit of student engagement

When Crystal Pite arrived in London at Sadler's Wells last November to begin rehearsals for *Polaris*, an ambitious 64-dancer piece set to the music of Thomas Adès, she had a lot of the choreographic material in hand. Pite had already worked out much of the movement back home in Vancouver, working with her Kidd Pivot dancers as well as students from the dance department at Simon Fraser University and two pre-professional training programs, Arts Umbrella and Modus Operandi.

*Polaris* was one of four dance pieces featured in an all-Adès evening. According to *The Spectator's* Ismene Brown, the non-narrative *Polaris* stood out as the dance premiere of the year, with its "tremendous drama, most of it massed crowd movement in neck-prickling darkness, an abstract clump of black-clad bodies apparently buffeted by Adès' extremes, from euphonium growls to highest bells."

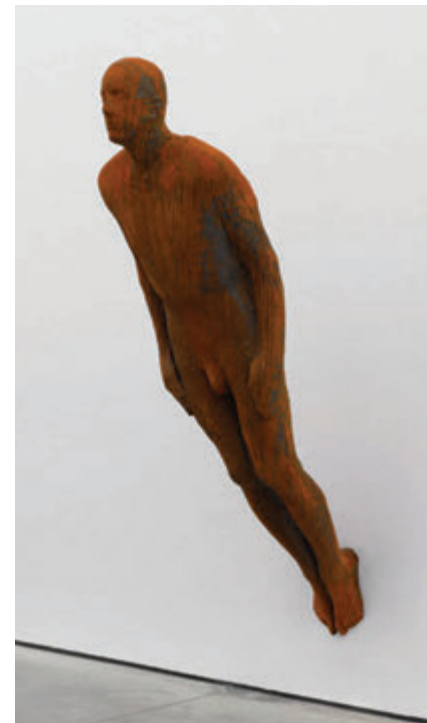
Later in November, Pite was back at SFU with the students, putting together *Singularity*, based on the early material they had created. For the new 15-minute piece, the students were assigned interpretive tasks like "expand" and "attach" when creating *Singularity's* large-scale formations. Assisting Pite were rehearsal director Eric Beauchesne, and a dedicated team of Kidd Pivot dancers referred to as Dance Captains, who were responsible for teams of about 12 dancers each.

*Singularity* premiered at SFU's Fei and Milton Wong Experimental Theatre on a mixed bill appropriately titled EPIC, given the massive number of dancers in Pite's work. Although *Singularity* is similar to *Polaris*, there are differences. One of the most significant is the music: *Singularity* was set to a dynamic and continuously shifting electronic excerpt from an earlier Pite work for Nederlands Dans Theater, *Pilot X*, composed by Pite's longtime collaborator Owen Belton. Yet the themes portrayed in both pieces were consistent, including the tension between the individual and the group as well as the search for unity.

During an interview, Beauchesne commented that working with students is different than working with professionals, explaining he had to develop a "new channel of learning" catered to the intuitive yet still developing emerging dancer. He remarked that the student dynamic was also very touching, referring to the motivation and positive competition that arose from the dancers, most of whom grew up admiring Pite's work.

According to Marla Eist, the faculty member who acted as EPIC's artistic director, Pite fostered a phenomenal learning experience considering the cast's size and the diversity of dancers, who came from three institutions. The atmosphere Pite created stripped down barriers and encouraged inclusivity, leading to a singular group effort parallel to the piece's title, to create a unique collaboration.

— REBECCA KARPUS



Lever II, Antony Gormley, 2012  
Photo: Ben Westoby

## Celebrating Indigenous Culture

The annual Coastal First Nations Dance Festival was held last March at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. Founded in 2008 to celebrate northwest coast art and culture, the 2015 festival featured performances by local groups such as Dancers of Damelahamid, who co-present the Vancouver event, as well as the Git-Hoan Dancers based outside Seattle, Washington.



*Reflet* choreographed by  
Brian Macdonald (centre) for  
Radio-Canada, c. 1955

Photo: Courtesy of Dance  
Collection Danse Archives



Left: Crystal Pite's *Singularity*  
Photo: Jonathan Kim

## Akram Khan at the Lowry

Choreographer and dancer Akram Khan recently curated the exhibition *One Side to the Other* at the Lowry in Salford, England, the second in its Performer as Curator series.

For the November to February run, Khan brought together a personal selection of artistic pieces that have inspired him in his work, including sculptures, paintings, photography, films and live installations. The exhibition explored the notion of contrasts: traditional and contemporary, youth and experience, light and dark, and truth and fiction, through the work of artists that included Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, Nadav Kander, Darvish Fakhr and Serena Smith.

"Art has always been a great source of nourishment for my mind, my body and my heart. Its form is irrelevant, whether it be painting, dancing, singing, acting, because in the end, all forms of 'art' are primarily about connecting, communicating, telling stories, emotionally provoking the other," says Khan.

At set times, visitors to the exhibition could experience a unique guided tour that included performances, choreographed by Khan, within the gallery space.



## Brian Macdonald 1928-2014

Iconic Canadian choreographer Brian Macdonald, whose work traversed stage, television, musical theatre, opera and ballet, passed at the age of 86 in Stratford, Ontario, on November 29. Among the first recipients of the Order of Canada in 1967, Montreal-born Macdonald accumulated numerous arts awards during his career, from the Gold Star for Choreography at the Paris International Dance Festival (1964 and 1970) and the inaugural Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts (2001), to the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement (2008).

While studying for his bachelor's degree in English at McGill University, Macdonald began ballet training with Gérald Crevier and Elizabeth Leese. Soon after, in 1951, he became a founding member of the National Ballet of Canada. Only a couple of years later, he stopped dancing due to a severe arm injury, but his true career in dance was just beginning. In 1956, he founded Montreal Theatre Ballet, a short-lived endeavour. The next year, he directed the now legendary McGill satirical review, *My Fur Lady*, which toured across Canada, with more than 400 performances.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he was resident choreographer with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, helping to raise its international profile. Macdonald's *Rose Latulippe*, set to an original Harry Freedman score and choreographed for the Winnipeg company in 1966, was the first truly Canadian full-length ballet.

Macdonald was artistic director of the Royal Swedish Ballet (1964-1967), New York's Harkness Ballet (1967-1968), Israel's BatSheva Dance Company (1971-1972) and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal (1974-1977). He was at the helm of the Banff Centre Summer Dance Program in Alberta from 1982 until 2001, remaining artistic advisor until 2007.

Some of his best known ballets include *Time out of Mind*, *Aimez-vous Bach?*, *The Shining People of Leonard Cohen*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Double Quartet*, *Adieu Robert Schuman*, *Tam ti Delam* and *Requiem 9/11*, his last major choreography.

The versatile Macdonald directed 19 musical theatre and operetta productions for Ontario's Stratford Festival, including five Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Perhaps the best known is his *Mikado*, which earned a Tony nomination in New York and a Dora Mavor Moore Award in Toronto.

He also directed 15 operas, including *Così fan tutte*, *La Traviata*, *The Rake's Progress*, *La Sonnambula*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Tosca* and *Cendrillon*. This past October, the Canadian Opera Company presented his production of *Madama Butterfly*. Macdonald directed the restaging, despite suffering from cancer, and was there on opening night.

He is survived by his wife, former prima ballerina Annette Paul, and son, Wyatt.

See Michael Crabb's Notebook on page 32 for more on Brian Macdonald.



# Dancing in the Digiverse

Convergence art and technology summit

by Kaija Pepper

**T**he human body was very much at the centre of Convergence, a summit on art and technology held at the Banff Centre in Alberta in late November. Much of the art on display depended on human interaction, such as *Akousmafflore* by France's Anaïs met den Ancxt and Grégory Lasserre. Their hanging, musical plant installation needed people reaching up to touch the leaves, or just to move their arms close by so their body's electrostatic aura could be transmitted through the plants, to activate sensors that triggered sound. And though it was possible to simply sit back and watch one of the National Film Board of Canada's offerings, an active human was needed to mouse over and click on the interactive screen, allowing — or forcing, depending on your point of view — the viewer to choose the order in which a film would unfold.

The body was also very present simply because of what was for many of us challenging winter weather. The Banff Centre sits atop Sleeping Buffalo Mountain, where it was minus 35 Celsius one morning, and the need to dress warmly and fuel up with hearty food drew attention to our relatively fragile embodiment.

Éric Fournier of Moment Factory, the high-tech Montreal company behind Madonna's half-time show at 2012's Super Bowl and the Los Angeles International Airport media installations, provided a warm, philosophical keynote. "Moment Factory is about sitting around the campfire," Fournier said, referring to the basic need even in today's individually wired world to socialize. "We hijack technology to create an event where collectively we can have a great emotional experience."

Japan's Hiroaki Umeda managed exactly that in his *Holistic Strata*, a solo dance cum visual art installation presented one evening at the Margaret

Greenham Theatre. The piece is a meeting of man (Umeda) and machine (Umeda's computer), during which Umeda seemed alternately master of, and servant to, forces greater than himself.

Myriad pinpoints of light were projected onto a white floor and backdrop, with a soundscape of disturbing swooshes, hums and buzzes, and comical squeaks and plunks, together creating an epic universe of mysterious digital dimensions. Umeda, in grey pants and top, with black runners, stood alone in the middle of *Holistic Strata's* rapidly changing environment. In apparent reaction to the engulfing blizzards of light and sound, he valiantly braced himself, or hunched over in submission, or swayed in response and even harmony.

At times, Umeda's movement, the light and the sound were so intertwined it seemed as if all three were parts of the same system or organism. At other times, he seemed to be reacting to them. This tension between control and subservience said much about our complicated relationship with the rapidly developing digiverse.

We might well be in the dawn of the datazoic era, as John Sobol, manager of brand and content strategy at the Canada Council for the Arts, stated. Yet however omnipresent the digital world of endless data becomes, there will always be compelling low-tech communication. This is something puppeteer Clea Minaker reminded us of in the final, whimsical, event, a collaboration with fellow Canadian, composer/musician Antoine Bédard. In an ordinary lecture hall, Minaker manipulated everyday materials like tulle and marbles on an overhead projector to create imaginative shadow play.

Similarly, the beauty of *Holistic Strata* was the way Umeda's body provided a satisfying sense of the familiar, offering scale and contrast to the work's hard digital glitter and opening up a rich stream of visceral presence.





## Hiroaki Umeda and the poetry of the body

I sat down with Hiroaki Umeda in front of a fireplace at the Banff Centre's hotel the morning of his show. A shy, intense 37-year-old, Umeda was born in Tokyo, a megalopolis with what he describes as a noisy, constantly changing environment of buildings, advertising, commercials and fashion. Part of the wired generation who grew up using computers, technology seems natural to him in life and art. He studied photography at Tokyo University, and only came to dance at age 20, when he sampled a mix of ballet, modern and hip-hop, training for about a year, then founding his company, S20. These days, Umeda engages in athletic pursuits like football and swimming to stay in shape.

Clearly, he is not a dancer in the usual sense of having mastered a complex physical vocabulary. In *Holistic Strata*, this hardly matters: Umeda expresses a physical poetry of the ordinary man. His small, modest figure is of sweet Chaplinesque dimensions, an Everyman who provides a familiar reference point into the show.

"I'm not acting," he says about his performance. "I'm not interested in being someone else onstage. I am Hiroaki Umeda, but I do have a different state of mind." He tries to begin with a calm mind so he can be in touch with his body at a deep level.

In 2013, Umeda created something choreographically quite different from his usual work: *Interfacial Scale*, set to an orchestral score, for Sweden's Göteborgs Operans Danskompani. He began rehearsals by teaching the 11 dancers his Kinetic Force Method, which in a nutshell is about standing in a neutral position to find balance; using tension and relaxation to generate movement; and sensing and responding in depth to existing natural forces. The dancers then made movement based on this system. "We used only the normal technology of the theatre in this piece," says Umeda, specifically video and lighting.

Though the physically astute and flexible dancers inspired him, Umeda tells me frankly, smiling, "I don't need to dance, and I don't watch very much dance." It was only when his second major commission — *Peripheral Stream* for Benjamin Millepied's L.A. Dance Project — was presented at the 2014 Lyon Biennale de la Danse that he saw his first William Forsythe piece, *Study #3*, built on extracts from older work; Umeda was "impressed with [Forsythe's] movement systems." Though it is not his guiding principle, Umeda does believe that "dance can give rich information to people."

Umeda is concerned that the technical environment is not allowed to grow at the expense of artistic vision. "My art is not technologically driven," he insists. Indeed, his visually overwhelming show does not take a large team to present; he travelled alone, with his computer, to Banff, where a few house technicians helped him set up. Before the show, Umeda attached sensors to his body, which provided real-time physical data that influenced the sound and vision, then pressed a key on his computer and walked onstage. ▼

— KAIJA PEPPER

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# Stories of Encounter

## Creative connections in the world of dance

Dance International asked a range of contributors to share a story about a past encounter with someone from the dance world that resonated with them afterward. Their memories of encounters — real and, in the case of Serge Bennathan and Nijinsky, beautifully imagined — follow.

**M** Auburtin, my teacher for three years from the age of six, was a man, a rare event in 1963. He was around 30, but, even if his face is slightly blurry now in my memory, he is someone who accompanies me and to whom I say thank you regularly in my life.

I remember the first time I saw him, my father and I opened the door of the dance studio of the Conservatoire of the City of Metz, and in the middle of the room stood a man who gestured for us to enter. That is what M. Auburtin was for me, an invitation, a door opening itself and letting the light pour in, the light of life.

Then, there are his hands that in such a simple gesture of invitation were charged with an exquisite grace.

It is this magical man who introduced me, through some old pictures, to my first true artistic encounter: Nijinsky. I looked at this dancer in the costume of Prince Albrecht, from the ballet *Giselle*. He is standing, he seems to be in movement, maybe is he coming toward us with a light jump — to be precise and a bit technical, I would say with a little *temps levé*, a light push of the foot that sends you off the ground. In this physical gesture, I see the faint sketch of an arabesque, with the left arm shyly drifting off the body and the right arm delicately rising up.

All gestures I would try to mime a thousand times.

But it is the extraordinary grace of his hands that says it all; relaxed, barely opened, they talk to us about truth. Here is the common thread, the truth

of the hands of M. Auburtin, Nijinsky and, later, of Nureyev. But at that moment, Nijinsky, with his hands gracefully retracted, revealed to the young dancer that I was all his truth, his difficulty of being, which is simply desire. Is that not what we are speaking of all the time, constantly: desire, our own desires?

One day, I hold in my hands pictures of him in *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. Already, within me, I understood why he chooses to be the faun. His hands tell us his animal desire, but a pure desire since it is accompanied by a profound laughter. And whose laughter is it? His or that of the faun? At the end of his choreography, Nijinsky makes love not with a nymph, but with the veil that one left behind, which means with the dream she offers him.

Nijinsky. Me, in my imagination, at my young age, I see him on the stage of the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. I am not in the audience, but in the wings. I see him from the side, his side. Maybe it is because of those imaginary moments that, even now, I never watch my own choreography from the audience but only from the wings, to be close to the dancers, and admire them.

Nijinsky, I see him be, and me, too, I am.

— SERGE BENNATHAN, CHOREOGRAPHER

*This excerpt from Serge Bennathan's dance and theatre piece, Monsieur Auburtin, has been edited for Dance International. Monsieur Auburtin premieres at Vancouver's Chutzpah Festival in March 2015. ▼*

“Look out on the people being framed by the window. We could take what we see and stage it as a ballet.”

**A**t the end of the sixties, I moved from my home in Oslo to Stockholm to begin a contract dancing with Cullberg Ballet, where Merce Cunningham was staging his piece *Summerspace*. I had never done too much thinking about the word choreography, and what that could be. For me then, it was the steps given to me to be executed.

After a long day rehearsing, Merce and I went out to have a drink and some food. We got ourselves a table by the window, with a splendid view over Stureplan, one of the busiest squares of the city. “Fredrik,” Merce suddenly said, “look out on the people being framed by the window. We could take what we see and stage it as a ballet. People enter in different tempos, some go straight through and disappear, others stop to window-shop, some seem to have forgotten something and turn around, disappearing the same way they entered. This is just as good as any choreography.”

I will never forget that moment; I was young and it was an eye-opener.

— FREDRIK RÜTTER, CRITIC

The great ballerina Lynn Seymour coached me in one of her signature roles in my final season with the National Ballet of Canada in 2008. During rehearsals of Ashton's *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan*, we spent a lot of time crafting the punctuation and pacing, focusing on dramatic intentions, in order to make me appear to be the "author" of the dance. For example, to capture the effect of spontaneous inspiration, Lynn suggested I hold an end pose long after the note had subsided and that only when I had changed my focus and conceived an idea to lead me into the next waltz could the pianist, who would be onstage, start playing.

Lynn spoke constantly about how a dancer had to really see and focus on everything onstage in order to be co-ordinated, and to let the audience see their eyes in order to reveal the soul. At one point in the dance, she had me ask myself an existential question — first introspectively and then more emphatically looking directly out to the audience. This became one of my favourite moments because of its daring intimacy, and it was almost entirely "danced" with my eyes.

Why is it that, unlike the amount of time spent on the nuts and bolts of ballet technique, the craft of communicating through dance is rarely discussed? Perhaps coaches prefer a dancer's theatrical expression to develop on its own and worry excessive attention to stagecraft will make them self-conscious and false. Yet Lynn showed me that the more conscious I became about expressing myself to the audience, the more of myself I felt in the work. Theatricality does not need to stand in opposition to authentic expression, but can be a tool to find and communicate the essence of the dancer and the work to those watching.

—JENNIFER FOURNIER, FORMER DANCER



It began in the back of a taxi, in Victoria, British Columbia. Crystal Pite said, "I'd like to work with Lynda Raino."

Lynda Raino is loved like Oprah in this town. She brought modern dance to Victoria almost 40 years ago. Her adults-only school was *the* centre of dance for decades. In addition to being a generous teacher, she was a prolific choreographer and performer making very human, very funny works that were presented widely in the region.

I said, "Dance Victoria will commission that," like it was something we did every day. To be honest, I wasn't even sure what I meant. I was still pretty green.

I set it up so Crystal and Lynda could talk. They liked each other. Remarkably (since Crystal is from here, too) they had never met.

Once the commission was set up, I fretted. Crystal founded her company, Kidd Pivot. She continued as resident

Left: Lynda Raino and Crystal Pite in a promotional shot for *A Conversation*  
Photo: Bruce Zinger

Above: Jennifer Fournier with Lynn Seymour in rehearsal for *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan* (2008)  
Photo: Bruce Zinger, courtesy of the National Ballet of Canada



In April 2012, I was commissioned to present a duet. As I am a Bharatanatyam soloist, this was an interesting challenge. I reached out to Rahul Acharya, an Odissi dancer from Bhubaneswar, India, who I did not know personally but whose work I respected. Since I was based thousands of miles away at my home near Washington, D.C., over the course of the two months in which we had to prepare, Rahul and I spent many hours talking on Skype over an unreliable internet connection and with a 10-and-a-half-hour time difference. Rehearsing together was a mental process rather than the usual physical one: we only actually danced together for two days before the premiere.

Working with Rahul on that first duet — which we called *Samaavesha*, a Sanskrit word meaning “divine union” — inspired me professionally and personally. As a solo dancer, I am usually alone with my thoughts and ideas; here, our back and forth added an exciting new dimension to the artistic journey. I found there’s nothing like working with someone who understands you at a deep artistic level; it brings joy to the process of creation. Although our styles differed, we were able to speak a common language — dance.

The success of the production, which had been such a challenging and unique process for me, proved to be an impetus to broaden my horizons from the traditional repertoire I was comfortable with to create works that explore different ideas, languages, poetry and artistic disciplines. On a personal level, I gained a friend who will see me through the ups and downs of a dancer’s life.

— JANAKI RANGARAJAN, DANCER

As a solo dancer, I am usually alone with my thoughts and ideas; here, our back and forth added an exciting new dimension to the artistic journey.

choreographer at Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal. She was launched. As far as I knew she was hardly ever here.

I kept checking in with Lynda.

“I talked to her on the phone,” Lynda would say.

Someone smart said, “Stop fretting. Raino and Pite are pros. They’ll pull it off.”

That person was right. When *A Conversation* premiered three years later in 2004, it stole people’s hearts.


Crystal had worked for the very small fee we were able to offer. It would have been easy for her to phone one day and say, “I’ve got this thing with Robert LePage, or Cedar Lake, or NDT and I can’t do the Dance Victoria project.” But she didn’t.

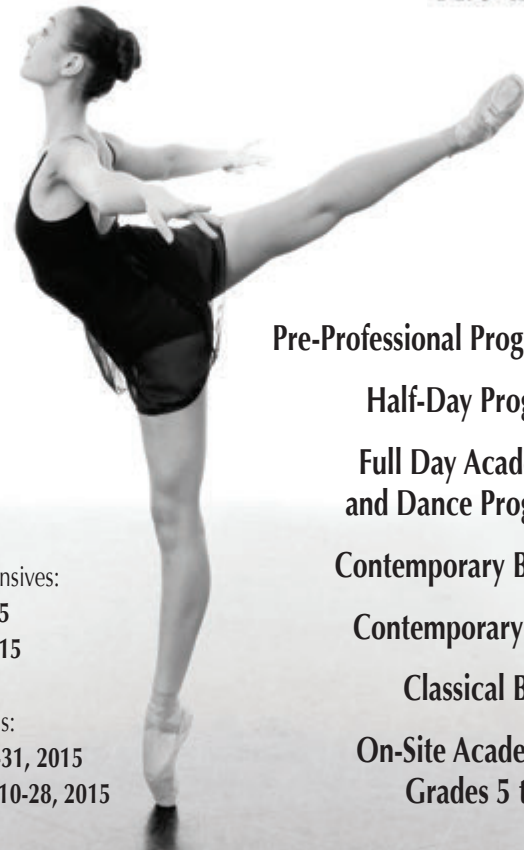
What Crystal and Lynda created together, which was about one generation passing the gift of creativity to a new generation, was amazing.

— STEPHEN WHITE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, DANCE VICTORIA

Dancer: Jodie Herron — Genee Finalist 2013

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# A Dancer's Ambitions

**Brent Parolin**  
at the  
**National Ballet  
of Canada**

by Gary Smith

**“As a dancer one of my favourite things is learning the steps, putting it all together. I know I love to teach. I’m already doing it at the National Ballet School and it gives me such joy.”**



**B**rent Parolin was born in Prince George, a small town in northern British Columbia, in 1987, moving to Toronto, Ontario, the big city he called Oz, when he was 14. “I fell in love with that place instantly. I was a student at the National Ballet School, and felt so free and happy. I was this kid from the sticks. I couldn’t believe it. There was everything in Toronto.”

When Parolin was six, he danced around the living room, so his mother took him to dance class. “I loved it. I even liked the discipline.” He soon had a big poster of dancers Rex Harrington and Karen Kain on the back of his bedroom door. Now, here he was, moving in the same orbit as the Canadian stars he idolized. “I was no longer the kid who worshipped a poster,” Parolin says. “I was in the picture.”

However, when it came time to audition to get into the company, Parolin didn’t make it. “When the audition was over, they didn’t call out my number. I was in shock. I walked over and got my stuff from the corner. Karen Kain, then artistic associate, came to me and said, ‘Please stay, there’s been a mistake.’” There wasn’t. Parolin never knew why he was passed over, but Kain’s words were a powerful message that he remembered.

Unhappy but undaunted, Parolin did a year at the John Cranko School in Stuttgart. He was determined to make it into Stuttgart Ballet.

“Brent was unusual,” Reid Anderson, Stuttgart’s artistic director, said recently. “We all agreed he wasn’t right for us, then we looked at each other and said, ‘We have to have him regardless.’ We had to encourage what was there. We needed to find a place for him in the company.”

Parolin, who has an enigmatic quality and strength of personality, made it to second soloist in Stuttgart, though he danced a number of principal roles. In Marco Goetze’s *Orlando*, the gender-bending Virginia Woolf ballet, Parolin’s visceral energy burned a patch off the stage. He has an elegance, too, that made him a stand-out in *Das Fraulein* by Christian Spuck. When Parolin walked across the stage in an aristocrat’s coat, it was as if to the manner born.

Eight seasons later, in 2014, Parolin left Stuttgart Ballet. “I needed to expand my dance world,” he says. “I’m 27. If I was ever coming back to Toronto, it was time. I never saw myself living in Germany forever. I just didn’t belong in the culture there, marvellous as it was. At some point you have to see what’s going to happen to you after dance. And every time I came back to Toronto for a visit, I knew this was where I had to end up.”

There was something else, too. Parolin wants to become a ballet master. He’s already had a taste of it. “I was ballet master for two of Louis Stiens’ Stuttgart works. I wanted to see what it would be like to run a rehearsal, to be responsible for someone’s ballet. I loved it.”

Last year, Parolin auditioned again for the National Ballet of Canada. “It was winter in Toronto. I walked in the snow and thought, ‘I haven’t been this happy for a long time.’” Parolin joined the Canadian company in August 2014, though there was a trade-off. “I’m a member of the corps de ballet,” he says. “Well, everything has a cost. This wasn’t a lot to pay.”

Yet watching Parolin dance in the corps of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in New York last autumn was a little heart-breaking. He was capable of so much more. Of course, Parolin expects more will come. He expects to move up.

**“You need to want the dancers to grow and develop. You need to take joy in watching them make discoveries.”**



## The Ballet Master’s Job

**Mandy-Jayne Richardson at work**

**by Kate Stashko**

**M**andy-Jayne Richardson, who is one of two senior ballet masters at the National Ballet of Canada, describes her role as sometimes under-appreciated but rewarding, providing essential support to the company’s dancers. She and colleague Peter Ottmann typically rehearse the dancers, and coach them in nuance and detail. They also act as liaisons between the artistic director and the dancers, and Ottmann teaches company class.

Becoming a ballet master requires several years of experience performing with a professional ballet company. A knack for remembering choreographic detail is essential, but a ballet master must also be able to communicate this subtle information verbally. Richardson describes it as a nurturing role, and ballet masters need to be ready to share their knowledge in order to support the growth of a new generation of performers.

Continued on next page



**Brent Parolin in studio before company class at the National Ballet of Canada**  
**Photo: Matt Barnes**

He also hopes he will be permitted to shadow ballet masters at the company and learn the art of managing a choreographer's work. "Lindsay Fischer and Rex Harrington were both star dancers, now Harrington is artist in residence and Fischer is a ballet master at the National Ballet. Senior ballet master Peter Ottmann, also an ex-dancer, is another person I can watch. I can learn so much from these men."

It's not unusual for a dancer to move to the role of ballet master. In Stuttgart, Tamas Detrich went from principal dancer to ballet master and then assistant artistic director. At New York City Ballet, Peter Martins was a dancer and ballet master, and is now director and leading choreographer of the company. Tara Birtwhistle has transferred her great sense of drama and daring to the role of ballet master at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, as has Johnny Chang. The move to the other side of the footlights is obviously possible for someone with the right set of skills. Parolin thinks he has them.

"As a dancer one of my favourite things is learning the steps, putting it all together. I know I love to teach. I'm already doing it at the National Ballet School and it gives me such joy."

Kain, asked to comment on Parolin's entry into the corps de ballet and on his aspirations to become a ballet master, says only, "We are happy to welcome Brent into the company. He has gained experience in Europe and I look forward to getting to know his skills and strengths in the studio as well as onstage."

Parolin says he has no expectations. "I'm just here to work hard like everybody else. I just want to open some new doors. That's what creativity should be all about, shouldn't it?" ▼



**Mandy-Jayne Richardson and Lindsay Fischer in rehearsal at the National Ballet of Canada**  
**Photo: Aaron Vincent Elkain**

### **Ballet Master's Job** **continued**

Richardson danced with London's Sadler's Wells Ballet (now the Royal Ballet), the Dutch National Ballet and New York City Ballet before taking time away to raise her family. When she returned to dance, it was with the National Ballet of Canada, where she has been ballet mistress since 2005. (The choice to use "master" for both men and women, or to differentiate gender by also using "mistress," is specific to each organization.)

Throughout her performing career, she noticed a talent for remembering choreography, and found herself coaching others. She also began teaching early, when she was 12, while studying at the Royal Ballet School. She advises anyone considering this role to gain experience coaching colleagues during their own performance career. "Ask your fellow dancers if they'd like you to provide feedback. Dancers are usually seeking that kind of attention, and you can hone your eye and your skill."

Although there is no one rulebook describing the role's qualifications, Richardson says, "You need to have an eye for detail. You need to be able to read how the dancer can receive information. You need to be able to verbalize movement. And you need to have had a really satisfying performing career, so that you can let that go and move on to a position in which you can coach others who are now in the prime of their career."

There are inevitably challenges in this role, because it is essentially one of providing critical feedback. Richardson notes that dancers aren't always ready to receive the information she provides. "If they can't reflect, they deflect," she says. When dancers become frustrated during rehearsal, sometimes it is easy to blame the ballet master. But despite this difficulty, Richardson insists her role is incredibly rewarding. "It's a bit like parenting," she observes. "You need to want the dancers to grow and develop. You need to take joy in watching them make discoveries."

There is no room for ego, and generosity is key. "It's not about you," says Richardson. "It's about the dancers. It's their time. You have to want to see them take off." ▼



be a mountain  
with that much presence  
be a river  
with that much flowing  
be a bird  
with that much freedom  
be a deep dancer  
I have no words for that.

From *Slow Words Dancing* by Patricia Beatty  
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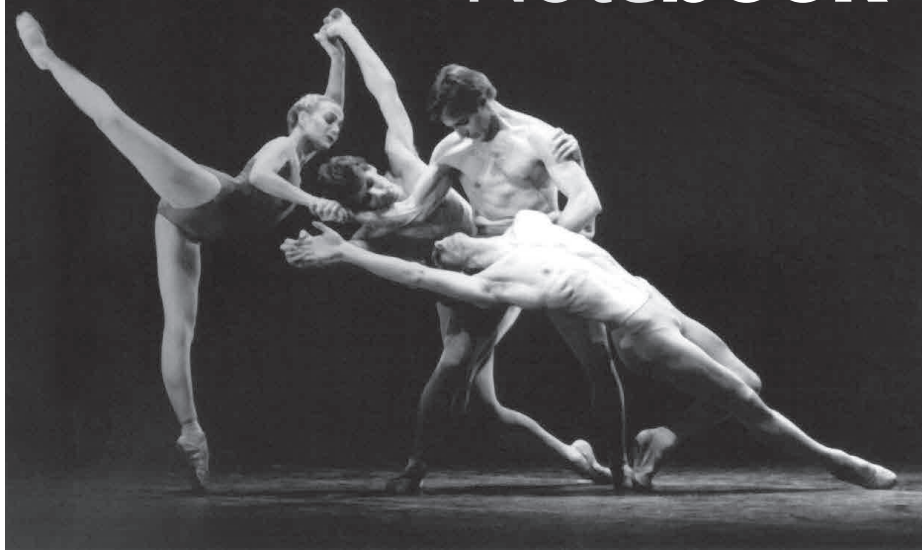
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## Michael Crabb's Notebook



The death of Brian Macdonald in late November robs us of one of Canada's true theatrical trailblazers. Whether as a choreographer or stage director, he challenged convention, took big risks and was never afraid to ruffle a few feathers along the way.

Macdonald could do "high art" ballet with the best of them, but as a true man of the theatre felt an obligation to entertain. He liked making audiences think, but he also liked to make them laugh.

He put classical steps to pop music and jazz. He felt free to use the spoken word as a stimulus for movement. He had a canny knack of tapping into contemporary tastes and anxieties. As an admirer of American musical theatre, it was no wonder Macdonald revered Balanchine, a choreographer who conquered Broadway as well as the world's greatest opera houses. Like Balanchine, Macdonald would not have considered the word "showman" a demeaning term.

Much has been made, and rightly, of Macdonald's staunch artistic patriotism, championing Canadian composers and designers; but he was hardly a chauvinist. One of his most successful early ballets, *Time Out of Mind*, from 1963, used the music of American composer Paul Creston. Macdonald's most successful and extensive design collaboration was with British-born Susan Benson,

especially at the Stratford Festival, where in the late 20th century they together gave the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas new life. His last major ballet was set to Verdi.

Macdonald was the first Canadian choreographer to establish a significant international profile. By virtue of his association in the sixties and seventies with the then world-travelling Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Macdonald's works have probably been seen in more cities globally than those of any other Canadian choreographer, before or since. He directed ballet companies in Stockholm, Tel Aviv and New York, before returning home to Montreal to resuscitate Les Grands Ballets Canadiens after it had overindulged in *Tommy*, its popular but artistically questionable rock ballet.

Macdonald was justly proud of his versatility and eclecticism. He disproved the old adage "Jack of all trades, master of none." Macdonald mastered virtually everything he turned his hand to. Despite being a late starter in ballet, there's no saying where his dancing might have taken him if he hadn't incurred a serious arm injury in 1953.

Macdonald suffered his inevitable share of professional disappointments, but enjoyed more triumphs than any one mortal could reasonably hope for — even in a career spanning more than six decades and a wide range of performing arts.

Impatient with sloppiness or laziness, Macdonald could be a hard taskmaster, but he never demanded more of others than he did of himself. Even last fall, as the cancer he'd been fighting for at least two years was about to exact its final toll, Macdonald summoned the will to return to the Canadian Opera



Company to supervise, from his wheelchair, the most recent company revival of his acclaimed 1990 production of *Madama Butterfly*. A photo of a gaunt but keenly focused Macdonald, taken during rehearsals by Korean-born tenor Julius Ahn, the opening night's Goro, aptly captures the man's inner resolve.

Less obvious than his justly celebrated ballets and musical theatre and opera productions was Macdonald's important role as a mentor to young artists, particularly during his long association with the Banff Centre in Alberta, where in 1982 he established the professional level division. Macdonald had a sharp eye for talent and a gift for spurring young people to exceed their own expectations. His own fieriness could ignite others.

For example, at Banff's summer dance program in the mid-1990s, Macdonald spotted choreographer Peter Quanz's potential while he was still a teenager at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School. How fitting that early last year, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet appeared at the Banff Centre's Eric Harvie Theatre dancing a mixed bill that included works by both Quanz and Macdonald.



Years earlier at Banff, Macdonald had given Prairie lad Johnny Wright the self-confidence he needed to pursue a professional career. Wright, who now lives in London, England, was unable to attend Macdonald's December 6 funeral in Stratford, Ontario, but the moving tribute he had earlier posted on Facebook was read during the ceremony.

"I have yet to find words," he wrote, "to express what this man meant to me, as a friend, choreographer, director, father-figure and artist (along with what he taught me: respect, ethics, professionalism, risk, discipline, integrity, passion and determination) ... Brian, you were a force, a pioneer, a larger-than-life, creative and extraordinary artist. Thank you. You will be missed, but your teachings remain imbedded in myself, and many other 'disciples' who were fortunate enough to work and learn from you, who continue to remember and pass on your lessons to future aspiring artists." ▼



# QUOTABLE

## Excerpts from *Roadshow! The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s*

By Matthew Kennedy  
Oxford University Press  
[www.oup.com](http://www.oup.com)

### On Francis Ford Coppola's *Finian's Rainbow* (1968)

“The biggest production crisis [with *Finian's Rainbow*] came with the dancing. [Choreographer Hermes] Pan felt the ... forest set was unsafe for strenuous dance numbers requiring sprung floors and level surfaces. Warner Bros. refused to budge, as did Pan, leaving [director Francis Ford] Coppola in the middle. Pan found Coppola to be ‘a real pain ... He knew very little about dancing and musicals. He would interfere with my work and even with Fred's ... These schoolboys who studied at UCLA think they're geniuses, but there is a lot they don't understand.’ Coppola decided to fire Pan and go it alone. After Pan, ‘there was no planning, no set choreography,’ he said. ‘It was a matter of doing what seemed right at the time.’ Coppola made anti-choreography, resorting to high crane, helicopter and tracking shots from cars and horses in an effort to distract the viewer from the chaos on the ground. ‘Move to the music,’ he told the crowd.”

### On Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972)

“[Director Bob Fosse] told the chorus of ‘Kit-Kat Girls’ to gain weight and let their underarms go hairy. The cabaret stage was built at a realistic but cramped 10 by 14 feet, while its rag-tag orchestra was made of women and others of unspecified gender. Fosse tried to ‘make the dances look like the period, not as if they were done by me, Bob Fosse, but by some guy who is down and out.’ As she proved with *Sweet Charity*, Fosse's wife Gwen Verdon was a good sport and real trouper in her uncredited assistance with costumes and props. Fosse made sure each song commented on the political, social, or sexual metaphors of their characters, and Berlin of the time. From the beginning and without compromise, Fosse labored to make the first musical intended wholly for adults.”

# Mediawatch

## Balanchine: New York City Ballet in Montreal

Vol. 1: 59 mins, Vol. 2: 69 mins, Vol. 3: 74 mins,  
Vol. 4: 65 mins, Vol. 5: 70 mins

Video Artists International, [www.vaimusic.com](http://www.vaimusic.com)

Many dance fans might be surprised to learn that between 1954 and 1978, New York City Ballet made regular forays to Montreal to tape sessions for CBC/Radio-Canada TV broadcast. Some of these sessions are available for the first time on DVD in a splendid series, *Balanchine: New York City Ballet in Montreal*. Ten works by Balanchine and one each by Jerome Robbins and John Butler can be seen on five DVDs released so far.

Rehearsed by Balanchine himself, New York City Ballet's men and women shine in ensemble numbers in *Serenade*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Pas de Dix*, *Four Temperaments*, *Ivesiana* and *Agon*. Filmed in 1960, just three years after its premiere, *Agon* features several of its original cast, including Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams, who are seen enjoying themselves hugely in a sprightly duet. African-American Mitchell waited another five years before American TV was ready to show him dancing with white ballerina Adams.

Balanchine insisted that New York City Ballet was not a star-based company, but some dancers definitely had star power. Maria Tallchief was hypnotic in *Swan Lake* excerpts from the first Montreal taping in 1954. André Eglevsky threw off 10 successive pirouettes in *Coppélia* excerpts taped a few months later. His *Coppélia* was Balanchine's fourth wife, Tanaquil Le Clercq. She was the slim-legged, fleet-footed Balanchine ideal when Radio-Canada filmed *Concerto Barocco* in 1956. Only a few months later, she contracted the polio that ended her career. Le Clercq originated the female role in Robbins' famous 1953 *Afternoon of a Faun*, a role she filmed in Montreal two years later with Jacques d'Amboise as her virile yet tender faun. Bravo to the cameraman for sensitively closing in on the faun's celebrated parting kiss.

Hooray to Radio-Canada as well for capturing d'Amboise's beautifully unmannered performance in the complete *Apollo*, filmed in 1960. One can almost sense his brain ticking away as he corrals his three muses. Less impressive is the *Apollo* excerpt with d'Amboise filmed in colour in 1963 for the Bell Telephone Hour. An intrusively roving camera, garishly coloured set and inappropriately timed lighting spoil the artistry.

In contrast, Karinska's Japanese-inspired costumes look splendid in the 1978 colour telecast of Balanchine's curious homage to Japanese dance, *Bugaku*. Soloists Patricia McBride and Jean-Pierre Bonnefous execute the quasi-Japanese marital duet with suitably restrained yet unabashed ardour. Filmed in the larger studios of the Maison de Radio-Canada, where Radio-Canada moved in 1973, *Bugaku* regrettably marked the end of New York City Ballet's trips to Montreal.

The fuzzy black-and-white picture and signs of tape deterioration, such as streaks and "snow," bear witness to both TV technology of half a century ago and of the passing of time. Although high-definition aficionados might be displeased, best to consider the low-tech images as a window in time allowing us to imagine how audiences first reacted to Balanchine's sleekly performed abstract style. It serves to remind us that Balanchine was as freshly innovative back then as Wayne McGregor is to us. And thankfully, throughout the years, Radio-Canada knew enough to film the dancers in long, uninterrupted sequences. Editing is spare and intelligently done.

Bonus material includes three interviews with Balanchine in French, one conducted by pre-Parti Québécois journalist René Lévesque, cigarette in hand. "Ballet," Balanchine tells him, "is like a restaurant serving different dishes."

Bon appétit!

— VICTOR SWOBODA





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# INSIDE ED

## Labels don't dance by Chantale Lussier

words, one is not the same dancer (or person) at age 15, 27 or 41, and yet we tend to see identity as static and permanent.

A group of bilingual dancers at the School of Dance in Ottawa offered insight into the dynamic nature of identity in dance. When introducing themselves in English, they told me, they would say, "I am a dancer." However in French they were more likely to state, "Je danse" (I dance). Using an active verb instead of a descriptive noun to identify one's self may appear to be a matter of semantics, but reflects deep psychological implications.

A fluid perspective of our existential self, our identity, can serve to bolster our mental and creative resilience during the many changes we will experience as humans and art-makers over the course of a lifetime. Each time we label ourselves, we limit ourselves. This self-defining process often becomes a psychological landmine when we come to realize that we have boxed ourselves into a very narrow identity, for example, when we state definitively: I am a ballet dancer or I am a commercial dancer or I am a contemporary dancer.

It is the attachment to and static nature of this kind of identity that can become problematic. Given the transitory nature of dance careers and of life, how differently might dance artists experience their art, and creative working lives, if they embrace becoming as a journey? How much more resilient, joyful and creative dance artists may feel if we help them break open these narrow boxes of "I" identity?

Carol Anderson's book, *Unfold: A Portrait of Peggy Baker*, contains a great piece of advice: "Dance who you are today." It really is about the dancing. And we are meant to bring the fullness of who we are to the experience.

Who is an artist? Am I an artist? When did I become an artist? For many, when and how one becomes a bona fide artist and/or dancer appears to be a great source of psychological and existential anxiety.

According to UNESCO, any person who creates, or gives creative expression to, or re-creates works of art; who considers their artistic creation to be an essential part of their life; who contributes to the development of art culture; and who asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not they are bound by any relations of employment or association, is by definition an artist. Being an artist in many respects also involves claiming and defending a professional status, which is only possible through the construction and maintenance of an artistic identity.

Adding to the challenge of identity is that we are daily faced with an ocean of myths and stereotypes about who an artist is, and what an artist does. Some of these myths can be negative, as for example when creative genius is portrayed as necessarily leading to manic or depressive behaviour. Such stereotypical ideas can be emotionally toxic and do not help to sustain an artist's creative and mental wellness over time.

Another issue with identities is that they refer to one temporary moment, to one point of attachment and position. In other

*Chantale Lussier, Ph.D., is the founder of Elysian Insight ([www.elysianinsight.ca](http://www.elysianinsight.ca)), a mental performance consulting company based in Ottawa, Ontario. These ideas are extracted from Lussier's opening address at the 2014 Healthy Dancer Canada Annual Conference.*

References: Alison Bain, "Constructing an artistic identity," in *Work, Employment, and Society* (2005); Maxine Greene, *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change* (1995); Katarzyna Kosmala, "The identity paradox? Reflections on fluid identity of female artist," in *Culture and Organization* (2007) ▼

# Global REPORTS

## Vancouver

by Kaija Pepper

Ballet BC looks freshly minted in its 29th season, with five new dancers and four new apprentices joining the troupe of 18. The present incarnation has already cohered as a team, and Emily Molnar is proving a formidable artistic director who knows the company identity she wants and how to manifest it onstage.

The three works presented in the fall at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre were very much about the ensemble. In the remount of *A.U.R.A. (Anarchist Unit Related to Art)* by Jacopo Godani (the Forsythe Company's new artistic director), 15 dancers crashed gracefully through the flashy attack of this popular, high-alert ballet.

The inspiration for Fernando Magadan's *White Act* was *La Sylphide*, one of many Romantic ballets with a white act about ethereal, unattainable women. In this one-act premiere by Spanish-born Magadan (a dancer with Nederlands Dans Theater), nine men in dark pants, T-shirts and socks yearned through long, muscular stretches; nine bare-legged women in lacy cream tunics and pointe shoes bourréed ethereally one at a time across the stage or on the spot. The perhaps too-emphatic movement didn't quite evoke the conflicted dramas at the heart of the great Romantic ballets, despite

careful scene setting, as in the video projection of a forest and clouds of dry ice.

*An Instant*, a reworked 2012 piece by Lesley Telford (an ex-NDT dancer and returning Vancouverite), featured a warmer human dimension, with 11 dancers frantically grouping and regrouping throughout. There were poignant moments, for example when Alexis Fletcher and Gilbert Small created a mysterious still point between them as they pulled away from each other in perfect balance. And when tiny, dark-haired Emily Chessa partnered with much taller and more muscular Scott Fowler, their interplay of physical force and dramatic energy was engrossing.

Vancouver hosted three international dance festivals — two featuring South Asian dance (Gait to the Spirit and the Undivided Colours symposium) and one, flamenco (Vancouver International Flamenco Festival). The masterly Pichet Klunchun, who was here in 2009 with Jérôme Bel, gave a slow motion, minimalist display of Thai classical dance at the Roundhouse on Undivided Colours' single performance bill showcasing five male Asian artists. Given the symposium's interest in gender diversity, and despite two of the men's superb embodiment of women characters (Canada's William Lau and Indonesia's Didik Nini Thowok), I wondered why no female Asian artists were onstage.

Spain's Joaquín Grilo, with singer José Valencia and guitarist Juan Requena, was a standout Flamenco Festival headliner for the formal but intimate Playhouse stage. The super-sleek machismo of Grilo's taut thrusting lines gave way at times to lightness (soft, floating hands) and whimsy (a duck-footed walk, or when he dragged his leg as if old and infirm). I wasn't entirely convinced by Grilo's use of tick-tock arms — stretched out like the hands of a clock, they moved in time with the sound of the singer's knuckles rapping on wood. But, with his mastery of flamenco form, Grilo has earned the right to experiment. For over 90 minutes, these three men in black created a wealth of magnificent rhythmic and emotional colours that included a generous dose of sheer fun.

A week later on the same stage, Israel's Sharon Eyal — also in black, in the form of a pleather body stocking — opened *House* with a sleek solo rendition of the jerky body tics and deep, pelvic-splitting lunges that are keynotes of her choreographic style. Then came the cavalry: two women and four men, all with scarlet lips and wearing pale body stockings, who cavorted like insectoid robots at a late-night club, driven by the compelling beat of Ori Lichtik's live mix.

Eyal's dancers looked ungainly at times, their bare feet and heads sticking out of thin, rib-exposing unitards, and yet they were convincingly cool, their zombie-disco moves driven by some aesthetic compulsion of the choreography. The fascinating piece kept its integrity even when Lichtik's soundtrack took over with its dominant beat.

*House* was commissioned in 2011 by Batsheva, with whom Eyal has a close association. Here it was performed by her company, L-E-V, founded in 2013 with Gai Behar, her constant co-creator. It was Vancouver's second sighting of an Eyal/Behar work: their *Corps de Walk* was performed by Norway's Carte Blanche in 2013, part of the DanceHouse series that also brought *House*. Live-dance touring is an expensive undertaking, and Eyal was joined by only six dancers; two were cut from the piece due to financial constraints. ▼



Canada's oldest modern dance company, Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers, kicked off its 50th anniversary season with the premiere of Ming Hon's *Forever in Blue Jeans*, at the intimate Rachel Browne Theatre in October. The 40-minute trio was featured as part of this year's Prairie Dance Circuit, a collective of presenters who together fund an annual touring production. The work by local freelance choreographer Hon, a 2007 graduate of the School of Contemporary Dancers, toured to Edmonton, Regina and Calgary throughout the fall.

Inspired by the now defunct penny, Hon's volatile work explores the idea of "labour." Company dancers Natasha Torres-Garner, Ali Robson and Kayla Henry, dressed in Tony Chestnut's faded blue jeans, jackets and white tank tops — the "Canadian tuxedo" — perform a series of short vignettes. They take turns crawling, contorting, falling and flailing mostly in silence, punctuating their gestural choreography with laughs, gasps and grunts.

A few fleeting images particularly resonated. Robson's tossing coins at Torres-Garner, who sat onstage encircled by a ring of pennies, for one. Or the copper rounds strewn like confetti during a mock wedding. Pennies are hurled like dice of chance, passed through fingers like water and, most viscerally, "vomited," creating potent, albeit sometimes overly cryptic stage pictures.

During the final scene, as the dancers pile loose jeans into the middle of the white box stage starkly lit by Dean Cowieson, pop singer Neil Diamond croons the 1978 ballad *Forever in Blue Jeans*, extolling the virtues of a simpler, denim-clad life. This becomes a logical ending for the abstract work that overall felt underdeveloped and might not have been the ideal choice to represent the company for its 50th. Still, the ensemble performed with impressive conviction.

The program also included the company premiere of Hon's 2012 duet *The Exhibitionist*, first performed at the University of Manitoba's ARTlab space, with Hon in the title role and artistic director Brent Lott as the Office Assistant. Hon presents herself as a preening, peacock-esque business executive in power suit and stilettos, as much in love

with her own graven image as the whirling photocopier manned by Lott. The fantastical work with increasingly absurd imagery includes a loudly orgasmic love scene between Hon and the Xerox machine, leading to her "impregnation" and birthing of a litter of paper babies that ultimately become shredded into a nest.

Hon is a masterful mover, easily alternating between convulsive shakes, fluid body isolations, birdlike struts and stealthy feline glides. Her provocative duet, equally performance art and contemporary dance, speaks to the culture of narcissism with its dark flip side of self-destruction.

Before our eyes, she magically creates an interactive dancing band of toothy skeletons, as well as a chorus of swirling neon ribbons recalling the 1940 Disney animated film *Fantasia*. The gifted artist deconstructs movement right down to its very bones — literally — with special lighting effects illuminating her own physical frame. This eye-popping show presented a high level of artistry, imagination and skill.

Finally, Winnipeg's newly minted independent modern dance troupe Sawdon Dance presented its inaugural show, *Surfacing*, a collection of solos performed by artistic director Rebecca Sawdon, another graduate of



by Holly Harris

Inter-media artist Freya Olafson reprised her visually stunning 2013 solo *HYPER\_* during WNDX (Festival of Moving Image) in September at the University of Winnipeg's Asper Centre for Theatre and Film. Comprised of a series of interconnected solos exploring the limits of perception, Olafson seamlessly melds 3D technology and fluid, gestural choreography. The 60-minute solo also featured Hugh Conacher's razor-sharp lighting and strobe effects, set to an electronic pastiche score.

Olafson incorporates complex video projections not as an end in itself, but truly in service to her creative vision.

the School of Contemporary Dancers (in 2010). In the eclectic program at the Rachel Browne Theatre in October, Sawdon displayed a chameleonic ability to quickly morph between dances. The program also served as a showcase of western Canadian choreographers, from Lott's gravity defying *bridled*, to Davida Monk's *Fabulous Beast*, inspired by netsuke (tiny, three-dimensional figural sculptures traditionally used in Japanese attire) to Odette Heyn's architecturally styled *Benched*. Constance Cooke's ritualistic *Surfacing* ended the evening with the character's transcendent metamorphosis. ▼

Recent visits by two renowned companies made Montreal dance history. For only the second time — and the first in almost half a century — the Paris Opera Ballet appeared in October with a classic never seen before in North America, presented by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens after almost 20 years of organizing. A month later, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch paid a rare visit with its monumental *Vollmond*.

Sandwiched between the two legends, Britain's Akram Khan Company, one of the world's foremost contemporary dance groups and a Montreal favourite, brought Stravinsky-inspired *iTMOi* (*in the mind of Igor*) fresh from New York, where it received a 2014 New York Dance and Performance Award (Bessie) for outstanding production. It was, like the others, presented at Place des Arts.

Inspired by Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Khan explores the composer's thought process, though *iTMOi* bursts with the choreographer's own turmoil. Brutality, allegory and surrealism crowd in. Three contemporary composers — Jocelyn Pook, Ben Frost and Nitin Sawhney — provide contrasting, overlapping layers of sound, as a controlling monster, a bride and her alter-ego little bride thrash through scenes delivering complicated messages. Khan's view of Stravinsky's mind is convoluted: sometimes touching, even elegant, always darkly imprinted with a primal sense of sacrifice. *iTMOi* entralls with mystery and horror and we squirm helplessly waiting for the worst to happen.

Although excerpts from *Paquita* are frequent gala and competition staples, the Paris Opera Ballet is the only company in

the world performing the mid-19th-century work. Created in Paris by Joseph Mazilier during the Romantic period, *Paquita* is a ballet-pantomime. When French dancer Marius Petipa — yes, THAT Petipa — moved to St. Petersburg the next year, he took the ballet to Russia where it enjoyed its greatest success after he reworked the second act into stunning divertissements, forecasting his role as the father of Russian classical ballet.

This change transformed *Paquita* into a post-Romantic ballet. It also gave it a decidedly split personality since the first act told the story of a gypsy girl who was revealed to be of noble birth, while the second was a technique showcase. Pierre Lacotte spent 13 years meticulously reconstructing the ballet according to the Russian model for the Paris Opera Ballet.

The production was impeccable. Harmoniously staged with painterly, evocative sets and gorgeous costumes in unusual colour combinations, *Paquita* is known among dancers as a killer ballet with intricate, bouncy steps that keep dancers jumping (think Bournonville). Newly crowned étoile Amandine Albisson, as Paquita, bloomed from reticent, to spunky and finally into firebrand. Her splendidly arched feet flicked through devilish series of combinations like kittens at play.

The famous Paris Opera Ballet style blazed through the evening. Among its 200 participants, its famously rousing corps and soloists executed technical feats rarely seen. The mime, too, was impressive. Stodgy 19th-century mime can poison a classic for a contemporary audience, but *Paquita's* flowed like good conversation, illuminating like an inspired tweet.

Nothing prepared me for the onslaught of Pina Bausch's *Vollmond*, which stands alone as one of Bausch's grandest and most emotionally riveting pieces for the company she founded, Tanztheater Wuppertal, and which now bears her name.

The late Bausch was a true genius who mined her dancers for ordinary emotions portrayed in extraordinary settings in a dance form that came to be known as dance theatre. She had enormous influence on dance. We have long been accustomed to spinoffs of her ideas, so quickly absorbed and utilized, especially by contemporary dance. But we must remember that before Bausch, dancers did not often talk, sing or act, or portray actual people, except in musicals. Bausch's dancers always represented real characters with real — and often confusing — needs that audiences could relate to. She gave dance permission to be utterly human.

*Vollmond* is a beautiful, faithful interpretation of her philosophy. The dozen dancers, all members of the original 2006 cast, swam, leaped, yearned, mourned and played in 8,800 litres of water that literally rained down on them almost continuously for two-and-a-half hours.

The company arrived in Montreal with four massive containers full of huge water heaters, dozens of slinky costumes, the enormous boulder on which they climbed and slid, and other equipment needed for this gargantuan undertaking. The result was a sensual deluge of heroic proportions. With its perfectly rendered imperfections, its duration, its splendid staging and execution, *Vollmond* ranks with *Rite of Spring* (which had tons of peat moss flung all over the stage) as one of Bausch's most sensational celebrations of desire, especially the lust for life.

Three major awards were presented in December. American Meg Stuart received the \$15,000 Grand Prix de la danse de Montréal for her outstanding contributions to dance. A frequent collaborator with Stuart, Montreal's Benoît Lachambre was awarded the \$10,000 Prix de CALQ (Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec) for the best choreography of the year by a Quebec artist, *Prismes*, made in 2013 for Montréal Danse.

The Regroupement québécoise de la danse celebrated its 30th anniversary by inaugurating Le Prix du RQD – Interprète. The \$10,000 award was presented to Carol Prieur, a longtime dancer with Compagnie Marie Chouinard, for her artistry, execution and commitment to choreography and the dance community. ▼

Catherine Schaub Abkarian and Denis 'Kooné' Kuhnert (background left) in Akram Khan's *iTMOi*  
Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez

# Montreal

by Linde Howe-Beck





It's a brave artistic director who puts principle before profit to present a season of ballets only the most knowledgeable fans will recognize. That's what the National Ballet of Canada's Karen Kain did this past fall, offering her hometown audiences Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* and John Neumeier's *Nijinsky*. Both are sterling dramatic ballets with lots of dancing. What they lack is title recognition, and in these days of shrinking public subsidies, if you want to maintain a large classical ensemble, selling tickets is a non-negotiable necessity.

It's easy to forget that Toronto, although Canada's most populous city and home to its largest ballet company, is not blessed with a particularly sophisticated dance audience. The National Ballet is an estimable troupe of talented artists. Its repertoire is rich and diverse, but essentially it's the only game in town. Visits by other major ballet companies are extraordinarily rare. In comparison, audiences in Ottawa, which has no resident ballet company, and Montreal, whose smaller Les Grands Ballets Canadiens gives much shorter seasons of neoclassical or contemporary repertoire, fare much better in this regard with regular appearances by visiting troupes.

The National Ballet's dominance of the Toronto market might seem an advantage, except that the subscription audience the company strives to maintain is not enough to populate fully the number of shows the company mounts; and when it comes to single-ticket sales, known titles are what count. Thus neither *Manon* nor *Nijinsky* was a box-office star. At some performances whole sections of the Four Seasons Centre opera house were not even put on sale, which is sad because both works are really juicy.

The National Ballet had programmed the three-act *Manon* just once before, in 1996. It was not a runaway hit then either. Perhaps this is understandable, given its torrid and implicitly misogynistic story — the scandalous handiwork in 1731 of French writer the Abbé Prévost. At the centre of it all is a young woman cursed by poverty and her own sexual allure. Instead of accepting her unlucky lot in life, Manon wickedly brings down two men, the somewhat callow student Des Grieux and her own brother, Lescaut, who just can't resist exploiting his sister's beauty by pimping her to the highest



bidder. It's the femme fatale trope all over again and, as is customary in patriarchal cultures, Manon is made to pay dearly for her sins. *Manon* is emphatically not a family-friendly ballet!

Yet, hateful as is the subject matter — almost too enthusiastically embraced by MacMillan in his portrayals of sexual licence, rape and murder — *Manon* does contain several marvellous pas de deux and a range of dramatically substantial roles, including its title character.

Of the three ballerinas cast as Manon, ranking principal dancer Greta Hodgkinson was the only one to have danced the role in 1996. Of the debuting casts, Jillian Vanstone tapped a vein of naïve innocence without which it's hard for an audience to develop any sympathy for the character. She was aided in this by 23-year-old Harrison James, a New Zealand-born corps member with a considerable talent who arrived at the National Ballet in 2013 via Béjart Ballet Lausanne and, before that, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Vanstone and James radiated the special chemistry that galvanizes audiences — and brought the house down in the process.

Another *Manon* debut of note was that of 22-year-old corps member Francesco Gabriele Frola as Lescaut, dancing with easeful grace and, when necessary, athletic power. Frola never saw David Wall, the original Lescaut at the Royal Ballet in 1974, yet somehow he brought the same sunny, carefree nonchalance to the role that can make Lescaut, for all his moral flaws, almost likeable.

Frola made another major debut soon after in the title role of Neumeier's *Nijinsky*. The National Ballet first danced this two-act work in 2013. It's still relatively fresh in memory for the dancers and their enthusiastic audiences, and, yes, those who came to *Nijinsky* clearly adored it.

Repeated viewing certainly helps sort out the often confusing array of characters inhabiting Neumeier's "choreographic approach." Yet, in his defence, this confusion is surely intended as a way of representing the hallucinatory turmoil of Nijinsky's mind.

The first act, where Neumeier imagines the scene of Nijinsky's last public appearance in 1919, is clearly still the strongest. The second act's longueurs are, perhaps, partly accountable to Neumeier's need to fill his chosen Shostakovich score. At times he lets the great surges of music do the emotional heavy lifting while the choreography too often surfs the wave.

Still, it's a great title role and, as in 2013, proved a wonderful showcase for the National Ballet's senior male principal, Guillaume Côté. The 33-year-old dancer has never had a problem in the charm department. *Nijinsky*, in contrast, revealed his ability to probe deep, complex and unsettling emotions.

Sadly, at the start of the National Ballet's annual *Nutcracker* season in December, Côté badly tore his knee during an Act II solo. He could be out for as long as nine months. Côté's many fans will be counting them off anxiously and expectantly. ▼

# San Francisco



by Allan Ulrich

The dance season started on an exhilarating note in September with the premiere of *The Luminous Edge*, a full-evening work created by the San Francisco choreographic team of Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton. This was a big piece; it enlisted six principal dancers, an 18-person “movement choir” and an onstage ensemble of seven musicians. It all looked like a beehive on the stage of the Yerba Buena for the Arts Theater, a new venue for this long-running team.

Many years ago, Moulton, then based in the east, earned a place in modern dance history by creating *Nine Person Precision Ball Passing*, which became something of a classic. It was like synchronized swimming in dry dock. Those regimented bodies moving and gesturing in unison on bleachers were a tasty exercise. Now, for *The Luminous Edge*, Moulton has expanded those persons to 18, dressed them in black, augmented their duties and brought them centre stage.

Divided in two, the “choir” members parade across the space, interlock and march to the other side of the proscenium like a phalanx of warriors. Three pairs of barefoot dancers enter from rear centre. The duets highlight arms that reach, balances that waver, torsos that squiggle and attacks that seem more amicable than confrontational. There’s a feeling of ritual here and the relationship between soloists and choir soon acquires complexity. We see the principals surrounded by their colleagues, we see their trajectory impeded by the choir and we see the lead dancers menaced by a collection of furies. David Robertson’s superb lighting fixes the audience’s gaze.

On first look, *The Luminous Edge* seems a brilliantly constructed essay of bodies moving through space. The duets gradually become emotionally tinged and unstable

in tone. What was playful in the skittering bodies soon assumes an air of mortality. Suddenly, the music is Mahler. There’s a moment when one dancer lays another across his knee, and if the tableau suggests the *Pietà*, so be it.

Everything about *The Luminous Edge* seems considered and executed at the highest level, starting with Mary Domenico’s costumes (red for the women, blue for the men). As usual, Garrett + Moulton (as they title themselves) accompany the dance with live music (a seven-member ensemble), mostly fragments of original work by music director Jonathan Russell and Marc Mellits. The dance opens with a vocal excerpt by Hildegard von Bingen and closes with the final song in the Mahler cycle. It’s just enough to break your heart.

Garrett + Moulton should be better known in the dance world at large. So, as far as North America is concerned, should the Australian Ballet. In October, the troupe returned to the San Francisco Bay Area for the first time in 43 years, preceded by a four-hour preview on the day-long, streamed World Ballet Day TV project. One’s admiration for the company, surely one of the world’s leading classical institutions, and one with a vast repertoire, was complicated by its material.

George Balanchine suggested that anything called *Swan Lake* will find an audience, and this version, made for the company in 2002 by Graeme Murphy (late of Sydney Dance Company), and a huge hit at home, bears out that thesis. The audience who packed Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall on October 16 went slightly mad for this chic and ridiculous reworking.

Now a whole generation will know the Australian Ballet from this Edwardian-era, tabloid-headline reduction of the 1895 Petipa/Ivanov classic. In the scheme by Murphy and creative associate Janet

Vernon, Siegfried has been transformed into a clone of England’s Prince Charles; Princess Diana has become Odette, an approximation of the white swan. Charles’ mistress, Camilla Parker-Bowles, is Odile, the black bird, here renamed, without much subtlety, the Baroness von Rothbart.

What we are given is a series of traumatic triangulations that reduce an enduring tragedy to absurdist nonsense. Even if you forget the historical models, you’re still left with a hero forced to choose between a schizophrenic fantasist and a possessive predator of a woman. Some choice.

Odette goes mad in a sanatorium and dreams of herself as a swan. Bird-like, she turns up later at the Baroness’ party and they all tussle again in a fourth act. Murphy’s choreography is less than inspired during these confrontations. You get tired of women clinging to Siegfried’s back at the slightest provocation.

Still, the company affirms its classical chops in a relatively traditional Act II (no feathered birdman Rothbart of course; the Baroness awakens Odette from her reverie). Murphy’s revision of Ivanov’s choreography favours fluid, often inventive combinations, as the swans arise from a Bayreuth-style raked disc and fill the stage with alluring patterns. The Australians are at their best here. Under different circumstances, the pointed, lyrical style of Amber Scott’s Odette might have seemed even more poignant. Adam Bull moved like a true cavalier and he brought a measure of gallantry to the prince.

What seals the doom of this *Swan Lake* is the manner in which Tchaikovsky has been cut, rearranged and sufficiently repurposed to enrage anyone who believes in the harmonic and structural integrity of the score. One hopes to see the Australian Ballet in more substantial fare before another 43 years elapses. ▼



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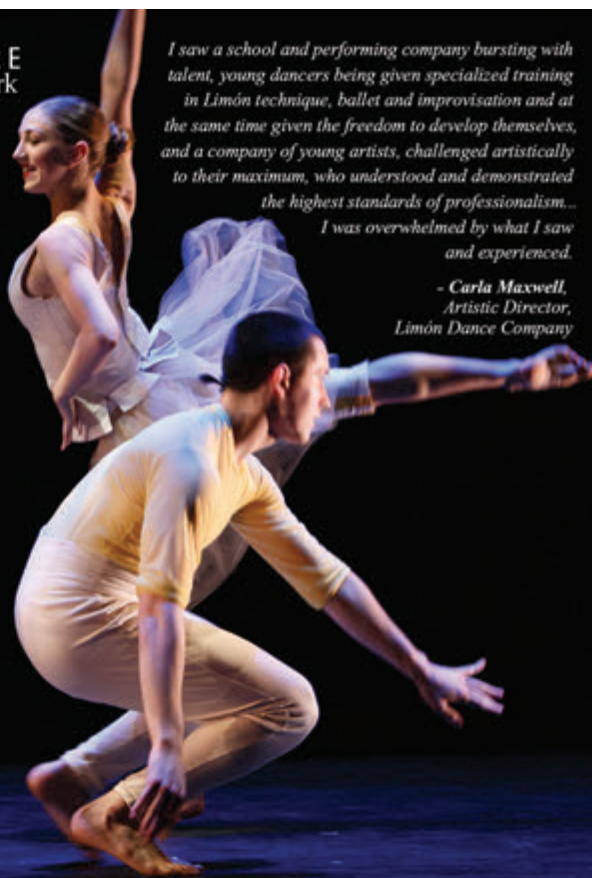
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photos by David Hux of dancers, Deborah Lundmark and Carter White in Development by Deborah Lundmark

# NEW YORK

by Robert Greskovic

Among the pleasures of having an artist as imaginative and unpredictable as choreographer Alexei Ratmansky in our dance world is the way his ballets prompt renewed understanding into the subject matter and music that fire his dancemaking. His ambitious recent creation for New York City Ballet, unveiled in October at Lincoln Center, is but the latest example.

This time it was Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* from which he took his inspiration and title. The 1874 16-part solo piano composition, which has been characterized as lengthy and fiendishly difficult, is most likely best known under such rubrics as "favourite, Russian classics" on any number of "greatest hits" compilations. Leave it, though, to Ratmansky, to remind listeners perhaps over-familiar with performances of Mussorgsky's suite in lush and sonorous orchestrations from the likes of Rimsky-Korsakov or Ravel (created after Mussorgsky's death), that the composer's intentions are best found in the plain piano rendering. At New York City Ballet, this was played with marvellous colour and animation by Cameron Grant, one of NYCB Orchestra's pianists.

Further freshness came, as has become usual with Ratmansky's work, from visual design. Framing the 35-minute ballet, with its cast of five women and five men, are projections by Wendall K. Harrington based on a theme of Wassily Kandinsky's *Color Study Squares with Concentric Circles* from 1913.

Harrington's colourful free-form geometrics, effectively made aglow from Mark Stanley's marvellously changeable lighting,

were quite likely at odds with what many listeners of Mussorgsky's music might imagine as visual accompaniment. Matter-of-factly, our thinking might turn to the little known representational efforts (a grinning dwarf, hatched eggs, rough-hewn huts and ornate gingerbread architecture) of Viktor Hartmann, the artist responsible for the pictures Mussorgsky knew in the mid-1800s and for whom his music was composed as a memorial. But, Kandinsky? What's he got to do with this music?

After a bit of research, I discovered that, in 1928, in Dessau, Germany, the great Russian non-figurative painter chose to present Mussorgsky's music, played on piano, in a theatrical setting fixed with visual, projected images of his own creation.

If, like me the first time I saw Ratmansky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, viewers approached the ballet with Hartmann's graphic images in mind, the choreographer's variously acrobatic, energetic, playful and stately dances against expanses of colour and freely drawn shapes might throw them for a loop. Expectations about finding historic references, say to a grotesque wooden nutcracker, which apparently inspired Hartmann's Gnome, the suite's first picture, would be dashed. Ratmansky's Kandinsky-inspired ballet takes off on flights of fancy all its own.

Adeline Andre's costuming, pale, neutral, gauzy affairs with sometimes bold shapes of pure colour on them, gave the alert and eager cast a look suggesting saltimbanques from Picasso's pink period. The players are presented in the individual, duet and group focus of the choreography in various "acts," each duly identified in the program according to Mussorgsky's titling,

such as Gnome, Old Castle, Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks, Catacombs and Great Gate of Kiev.

As the sections of the dance played out, some of the physicality rendered by lifts, as well as related, partnered poses, put me in mind of another dance historical reference, especially in the case of those struck by the lean and linear Wendy Whelan (who has been a special inspiration for Ratmansky's work with New York City Ballet and who retired at the end of the fall run offering *Pictures at an Exhibition*). I recalled a story about Martha Graham, who saw, early in her career as a choreographer, unfamiliar paintings by Kandinsky. Taken by some strokes of colour, she was inspired to think: "One day, I will make a dance like that." Moments for Whelan had a brush-stroke vividness, like that in the Kandinsky paintings that fired Graham's imagination.

Another key player in Ratmansky's ballet was Sara Mearns, who after Whelan has become another muse for the choreographer. Mearns' fierce and unabashedly weighty activity in a solo to Gnome and as part of an artfully hectic, driven quartet in Baba Yaga burned its impact in one's memory. Likewise, standing out and shining like a beacon of physical finesse and expertise, was Tiler Peck, who had the stage to herself for Tuileries. Evoking the elegant air of a formal, French garden, Peck had a perfectly poised moment of shimmering, multiple, en dehors attitude turns that took one's breath away as she breezed through them.

Eventually, *Pictures at an Exhibition* arrived at its climactic point. A measured parade of the full cast initiates the Great Gate of Kiev, which took shape as a group configuration, full of animation, including wheeling, spread-eagle lifts that tell of fireworks in the sky.

Coming to Ratmansky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* with Hartmann in mind and then leaving with an unexpected Kandinsky dimension, felt as mind-boggling as it was eye-opening. In the case of the actual Hartmann pictures, some of which have long disappeared, their content can only be guessed at. With regard to the 1928 Kandinsky staging, which has become little more than a memory in the great abstractionist's influential career, we can only imagine how that one-time-only event looked. With New York City Ballet's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Mussorgsky's music has a new life, and should feed the company's dancers for some time to come. ▼



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# London



by Kathrine Sorley Walker

A wide range of ballets from the past and present made the later London season an intriguing medley of styles and ideas. Nothing could be farther apart than Frederick Ashton's delectable, pure-dance *Symphonic Variations* and Liam Scarlett's ambitious new attempt to choreograph W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, both staged on different evenings by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden.

The Ashton program also included his sparkling *Scènes de ballet* to Stravinsky, the divertissement *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan* and *A Month in the Country*. This last work, a coherent, imaginative and witty dance-drama based on Turgenev's play, is an example of Ashton's versatility.

Scarlett, in *The Age of Anxiety*, concentrated on Auden's quartet of characters and their random meeting in a New York bar. He used the Leonard Bernstein score choreographed by Jerome Robbins in 1950, but had new, atmospheric designs by John Macfarlane. Theatrically effective, the work was devotedly danced by Laura Morera, Steven McRae, Bennet Gartside and Tristan Dyer. Scarlett, however, failed even to suggest the important multiple outside pressures and problems dealt with in Auden's exceptional poetry.

*The Age of Anxiety* was flanked by two ballets with music by Benjamin Britten — Christopher Wheeldon's distinctly sombre *Aeternum* (2013) and Kim Brandstrup's *Ceremony of Innocence*,

created in 2013 by Royal Ballet dancers for the Aldeburgh Britten Centenary Festival. A delicate and entirely rewarding ballet about a man's memories of his childhood and its surrounding adults, *Ceremony of Innocence* was admirably cast with Edward Watson as the lead, Christina Arestis as the young mother and Marcelino Sambé as Watson's youthful alter ego.

Birmingham Royal Ballet at Sadler's Wells in October included a triple bill that opened with Kenneth MacMillan's *La Fin du jour* (1979), an ingenious ballet for two principal couples and a small ensemble set to Ravel and amusingly designed, from costume photographs of the 1930s, by Ian Spurling. The program ended with David Bintley's 1985 *Flowers of the Forest* that manages to follow cheerful Scottish reels with solemn mourning for the country's ancient defeat at the battle of Flodden.

Scotland was also the setting for the revival of Robert Helpmann's 1944 *Miracle in the Gorbals*. (The Gorbals was a notorious slum area in Glasgow.) It was a highly unified work, and the splendid score by Arthur Bliss and designs by Edward Burra were properly in place, though, unfortunately, the original action and choreography were never completely recorded. Gillian Lynne's dedicated staging, however, even if there were errors over dance and characterization details, did justice to the emotional essence of the story about a Christ-like stranger resurrecting a young woman from suicide and later being killed

himself by a gang of thugs. The narrative unfolded with complete clarity through Helpmann's choreography.

Rambert, in November, brought a triple bill to Sadler's Wells that offered too many stylistic similarities in choreography but compensated for that by the overall excellence of the performances. Ashley Page's *Subterrain* (2013) was, judging by program notes, very much a co-operative creation of music, dance and design. *Terra Incognita* (music by Gabriel Prokofiev), a world premiere, was a well-constructed piece by Shobana Jeyasingh, notable in Britain for her group's linking of Indian Bharatanatyam and Western contemporary dance.

Rambert's artistic director, Mark Baldwin, contributed his very enjoyable *The Strange Charm of Mother Nature*, set to mixed music that included Bach and Stravinsky as well as young British composer Cheryl Frances-Hoad. The work was apparently the result of considerable enthusiastic galactic and gamma ray studies; fortunately, Baldwin simplified his research for non-scientific viewers by creating attractively diversified choreography.

Two other Sadler's Wells evenings have been memorable. In October, Matthew Bourne's New Adventures brought *Lord of the Flies*. Since 2013, this male company of differently aged professionals and non-professionals has been very successfully touring Great Britain with this staging — choreographed by Scott Ambler and directed by Ambler and Bourne — of William Golding's famous novel about the activities, good, bad and horrifying, of a large group of boys stranded on a desert island. With multi-layered designs by Lez Brotherston and music by Terry Davis, it is an intense and vibrant gymnastic spectacle.

A totally different experience came in November when Akram Khan and Israel Galván put on *Torobaka*, an admirably constructed show for two very divergent talents. Khan is rightly acclaimed for his special mix of Indian kathak and contemporary dance, while Galván is a flamenco artist from Seville. From meetings in Paris, they have developed a fruitful partnership of compatible equals backed by a small group of musicians (four men and one woman) drawn from Indian and flamenco traditions. *Torobaka* is definitely something no dance theatre connoisseur should miss. ▼



**B**enjamin Millepied, the Paris Opera Ballet's new artistic director, says he wants to start a revolution. Does that mean heads will roll? One already has. Laurent Hilaire, former étoile from the Nureyev era, who in 2011 stepped into the shoes of longstanding ballet master Patrice Bart, is gone. Clotilde Vayer, a former première danseuse with the company, who once won gold at Varna yet never made it to étoile, now holds the position and will be assisted by none other than étoile Aurélie Dupond when she retires later in the season.

Traditionally sniffed at by the French school, in-your-face virtuosity may be more sharply encouraged under Millepied according to various reports. One of the most outstanding representatives of such pyrotechnics is 20-year-old premier danseur François Alu, a laddish guy with compelling stage presence and super pirouettes and jumps. Alu, who once preferred football and hip-hop to entrechats, in spite of having a ballerina as a mother, caught the ballet bug when he saw Patrick Dupond on TV.

More shaped for the role of Basilio in *Don Q* than the Prince in *Swan Lake* — a role he is to christen in 2015 — Alu recently declared on French TV that he believed a dancer should adjust the choreography to his specific skills. That is something for which, he says, he was severely admonished by ballet master Hilaire when, as a sujet, he was asked at the last minute to stand in for an injured étoile in the role of Basilio. He apparently did take a few liberties with Nureyev's choreography to enhance some of his technical fortes. Which is what he confesses he did again, to the audience's delight, in Jean-Guillaume Bart's *La Source*, created in 2011 and re-run at the Garnier as a full-length Christmas piece opposite *Nutcracker* at the Bastille. Very much a stickler for pure École Française, Bart, once one of the most precise and distinguished danseurs nobles at the Paris Opera, unearthed the old ballet created by Saint-Simon in 1866 and delivered a visually stunning version thanks to clever, contemporary sets by Eric Ruf, who shied away from period reproduction, and luxurious Cossack costumes courtesy of Christian Lacroix. His ballet, however, does not escape the vices of 19th-century pieces, i.e., a flimsy storyline drawn

out over nearly two hours and interspersed with chi-chi divertissements.

Bart has a flair for beautiful, flowing movements and came up with some raw Cossack dancing. Yet it took the powerful pizzazz of Alu as Djémil, a poor hunter, and the classy hauteur and mysteriousness of première danseuse Eva Grinsztajn as Noureda, the Cossack princess he falls in love with, to really spice things up.

At the Bastille, Nureyev's grim and stylish *Nutcracker* may have disappointed children expecting more colourful fun — here, the Land of Sweets is out of bounds for little Clara. It was, however, graced by an elegant Drosselmeyer-cum-Prince, étoile Mathieu Ganio, and a swift and scintillating Dorothée Gilbert as Clara.

As one of the most original neoclassical choreographers in France (who are fairly thin on the ground), Thierry Malandain, director of Ballet Biarritz,

dancers to serve one's work. His highly trained and youthful company of 22 needs no artifice to flesh out his compelling choreographies, as was demonstrated again at the premiere of *Nocturne* and *Estro*.

*Nocturnes*, sans décor but with clever lights by Jean-Claude Asquié, is like a fresco come alive to the wistful score of Chopin. Everyone can read their own narrative into the ever-changing flux of dancers, who appear as mere men and women in the street (the clothes were bought at the local Oxfam), meeting randomly, going their separate ways or lingering a while in a brief embrace. This is perhaps one of the softest moonstruck pieces by a choreographer more identified with earthy moves. Its mysterious immateriality, its "life is but a dream" dimension, makes it one of the most moving as well.

To a combination of Vivaldi's *Estro armonico* and extracts from *Stabat Ma-*



presented two new creations in November in San Sebastian, in the Basque Country near Biarritz. Malandain has often said he made the choice to employ full-time dancers rather than spend money on sets, which has proved to be a blessing in disguise. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, and it has worked brilliantly for him so far. Besides, it also helps to have regular

*ter*, *Estro* was the pièce de résistance more emblematic of Malandain's vivacious dancing, with the excellent Arnaud Mahouy at the centre of this grand pagan feast, fraught with both uplifting flights of joy and solemn gravitas. As sole props, makeshift lanterns bring out both the esoteric dimension and the village-fair spirit of this superb new piece. ▼

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# Madrid



by Justine Bayod Espoz

Above: Esteban Berlanga in Ricardo Cue's *The Swan*

Right: Mar Aguiló, Lucio Vidal and Dean Vervoot in Tony Fabre's *Violin d'Ingres*

Photos: Jesús Vallinas



The Spanish National Dance Company's 2014-2015 season is its proud 35th, and to celebrate, a two-day commemorative anniversary gala was held in Madrid. The Spanish capital's Teatros del Canal was packed to the rafters on opening night, October 19, with a veritable who's who of Spanish dance world glitterati, including dancers, choreographers, directors, critics and politicians.

During a lovingly crafted four-hour celebration, pieces from each period of the company's repertoire were restaged, interspersed with video montages of performances under each of its six directors, and an exhibition of costumes placed on display in the lobby.

Director José Carlos Martínez believes that the gala — which included performances by the Spanish National Dance Company, as well as by Victor Ullate Ballet and the National Ballet of Spain



(all three are sister companies that receive national funding) — gave him the opportunity to “build bridges of collaboration with our country’s dance collectives and defend synergy as the best way in which to fight the economic crisis, so as to continue joining forces and making this anniversary a celebration for all.”

With the recent passing of two members of the company, the anniversary also served to pay homage to their legacy. Tony Fabre passed away at just 49 in late 2013. After dancing for Maurice Béjart, the Sadler’s Wells Royal Ballet and the Basler Ballett, Fabre joined the Spanish National Dance Company in 1991 and remained as a principal dancer until 1997. In 1999, he became assistant artistic director of CND2, the secondary ensemble that trains young dancers and serves as a springboard to the primary company.

For the gala, Fabre’s *Violon d’Ingres*, premiered by CND2 in 2005, was restaged, a work inspired by Paganini’s, Bach’s and Vivaldi’s compositions for strings. In French the term violon d’Ingres refers to a hobby and, in a program note, Fabre explains how he envisioned the dancers as personifying violin chords whose hobby wasn’t music but rather dancing. The bare black stage is like the body of a violin upon which strings dance, while the large-scale fingerboard and scroll that lay upstage provided a creatively employed piece of staging as dancers lay across the fingerboard or curled into the arches and angles of the scroll, sometimes vibrating as though plucked and at other times springing forward as though snapping from being wound too tight. The piece is clever, and Fabre’s analogy is clear, but there isn’t sufficient variation to keep the piece from ultimately feeling just a little too long.

The second homage was in memory of María de Ávila, whose impact on classical and Spanish dance in Spain spanned three quarters of a century, ending with her passing last February. However, her legacy lives on today, notably through her professional dance conservatory in Madrid and dance academy in Zaragoza.

Ávila became the prima ballerina of Barcelona’s Ballet del Liceu in 1939 at 19 years of age, later dancing in the Ballet de Barcelona and the Spanish

Company of Ballet. As a teacher, she is responsible for having trained some of ballet’s most important Spanish dancers, including Victor Ullate, the Spanish National Dance Company’s first director. Four years after Ullate’s tenure, in 1983, Ávila was not only named Ullate’s successor, but also the director of the National Ballet of Spain.

The National Ballet of Spain performed one of its most emblematic pieces, *Ritmos*, choreographed by Alberto Lorca under Ávila’s direction and premiered in 1984. Shunning fast and complex movements, the vibrancy of *Ritmos* is provided by José Nieto’s stunning, almost epic musical score. The restrained sobriety of the choreography seems at odds with his impassioned score, but this contrast and the lack of flashy choreographic flourish allows one to concentrate closely on the intricacy of the company’s impeccable timing and the ease and grace with which such a large body of dancers glides together and around one another without

missing a step, a bow of the arm or a twist of those impeccable Spanish hands.

In a statement for the gala’s program, former National Dance Company director Ray Barra pointed out that under Nacho Duato’s 20-year directorship, the classical repertory that Barra and Ávila worked so hard to establish was replaced with contemporary dance works, but that now under Martínez, “I have the impression that the classical repertory is returning and that the [National Dance Company] could once again become one of the great European classical companies.”

If the gala is any indication, with its varied pieces by such disparate choreographers as Petipa and Ohad Naharin, the National Dance Company has a talented enough ensemble, a strong enough directorship and a long enough history that it can tackle anything, from the most traditionally classical to the most experimentally contemporary, without breaking a sweat. ▼

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# COPENHAGEN & MALMØ I



by Anne-Marie Elmby

In October, artistic director Nikolaj Hübbe's new staging of *La Sylphide* for the Royal Danish Ballet involved some radical changes. August Bournonville's steps were still danced with ease and accuracy to Herman Løvenskiold's score, but the ballet was presented in a very different setting. Hübbe's collaboration with scenographer Bente Lykke Møller stripped away the colours of the Scottish location. Instead, the events took place in a space of black, white and shades of grey, with similarly coloured costumes in an early 20th-century peasant cut. One influence was Danish author Hans Kirk's descriptions of the tough fisherman's life on the Danish west coast, which involved a serious outlook on life. At least the sylphides still had their white tulle dresses and wings.

There was incongruity when the sprightly Scottish reel was danced by stern-faced couples, who afterward watched the solos of the principal characters with the men standing straight-backed behind their seated women, like in old photos. No wonder a dreamy James would feel maladjusted in this



austere milieu. Also, in Act II, an empty space framed by white walls should illustrate James' state of mind, while the sylphides swirl around him.

In the Royal Danish Ballet tradition, the role of Madge has been portrayed by both men and women, but always as a female character. Hübbe turned Madge into a man, although in one cast danced by a woman. This Madge is an elegant player, who can spot James' longings and

dreams that are of a different nature than marriage to the sweet peasant girl Effy.

The idea that James and Madge have a shared history has been hinted at in previous stagings, but here it became definite. To some extent, the *Sylphide* was reduced to being Madge's instrument to destroy James, underscored when her dead body was carried out by Madge's four male helpers and not by her fellow sylphides.



Hübbe gave his two fellow interpreters of Madge, Maria Bernholdt and Sebastian Haynes, a free hand to form their final moments of the ballet. Hübbe's features distorted in anguish as he bestowed a deathly kiss, after which James collapsed; Bernholdt folded James' corpse around herself; Haynes, with a vacant look of bereavement, stepped over his dead body.

Hübbe admits that this Madge may spring from his personal desire to finally quench his thirst for a role he will never dance again. James was his first role as a professional dancer, and the one he chose for his farewell performance in Copenhagen in 2008, and the role followed him throughout his career.

An audience that has never seen *La Sylphide* before may not have reservations about these changes, and it is remarkable that an old classic can be twisted into a whole new place within the choreographic frame. For this critic, Hübbe's staging evoked interesting thoughts, but it also made the ballet lose its Romantic mystery and joy, presenting a one-track interpretation of the drama. Former stagings are documented on film in the Royal Theatre archives, and a planned centre for Bournonville knowledge in Copenhagen will be a source for future stagings to return to. Bournonville will survive.

*La Sylphide* was double-billed with Harald Lander's *Études*, staged by Thomas Lund (who also staged it for the Paris Opera Ballet in September). American-born soloist Holly Jean Dorger was new in the role of the ballerina, with a clear-cut technique in the revealing variations and a sweet smile for her gallant partners Ulrik Birkkjær and Marcin Kupiński. Jonathan Chmelensky contributed to the true Romantic atmosphere in the pas de deux in which Lander included choreographic quotes from *La Sylphide*.

Not many ballet companies can boast of having a 40-year dancer jubilee. On December 14, the incomparable Lis Jeppesen celebrated her splendid career with the Royal Danish Ballet. A child of the theatre, she became a member of the corps de ballet in 1974 and advanced to principal in 1980. Since 1997 she has been a character dancer with the company. As vivacious as ever, during her jubilee evening she portrayed the adorable troll Viderik in Bournonville's

*A Folk Tale* in Hübbe and Sorella Englund's 2011 restaging of the ballet. She received a standing ovation from audience and colleagues, and the director of the Royal Theatre presented a large wreath.

On a clear Copenhagen day, one can see across the strait of Øresund to Malmö in Sweden. In October, I drove there to see Skånes Dance Theatre in its annual performance at Malmö Opera House with *DOUBLEtake*, a first-time collaboration with renowned Finnish-Swedish choreographer Kenneth Kvarnström. After innumerable prestigious posts, Kvarnström, in 2014, was chosen as head of the dance unit of Kulturhuset Stadsteatern (Culture House City Theatre) in Stockholm.

In Act I, dancers from K. Kvarnström & Co (recently reconfigured with six new dancers) were accompanied by the musical "curator," as he is called in the program, Jonas Nordberg, who was also the sole musician playing French and German music on baroque lute, theorbo (a 16th-century bass lute) and guitar.

In an intimate atmosphere, he moved among the changing groups of dancers, who became the poetic embodiment of Kvarnström's great gift for finding the musicality of the movement. The music inspired fondling touches and trusting lifts, but also strong, expressive hands and undulating movements that passed through the group.

Act II expanded on all levels, when the 15 dancers of Skånes Dance Theatre took over with the full Malmö Opera Orchestra placed upstage behind the dancers, who wore black and white sculptural costumes by fashion designer Astrid Olsson. Choreographic themes developed in dynamic interplay with Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, as well as excerpts from a Mozart symphony, a Beethoven piano concerto, a Ravel string quartet and, finally, the grand sound palette of contemporary Swedish composer Magnus Lindberg's *Arena*. Jens Sethzman's architectonic light design sent beams across the stage that reflected onto a six-metre high, removable wall with faceted, metallic planes. ▼

When Oslo Danse Ensemble passed its first two decades, the company wanted to create a celebratory evening as a gift to its enthusiastic followers. Twenty years is quite

a long time to survive within the Norwegian dance scene, and not many manage to stay strong and keep up the energy it takes. Even if it is possible to gain economic support from the government, companies can, in most cases, only apply from one project to the next. Continuity is not a word those working outside major institutions know very well, but Oslo Danse Ensemble has from its very first performance in 1994 convinced the Arts Council Norway to support them each year. They are still producing great shows, with jazz dance as their speciality.

The celebration took place in November on Oslo Opera House's second stage, and it was simply called ODE — 20 years. One of the company founders, Tony Ferraz, was responsible for the first number, *Ever*, with hats and umbrellas; it was great to see excellent classical jazz choreography again.

Second out was Jo Strømngren, who has also worked with the group from the beginning. The title of his premiere, *Ringen (The Ring)*, refers to the scenography: the stage is covered with a mat shaped as a ring. The music was by Luis Mariano, an old-fashioned crooner, which gave the dancing colour and atmosphere.

The last piece, *Jiggy*, was by a duo, Karl-Erik Nedregård and Knut Arild Flatner, calling themselves Subjazz. The 11 dancers were all strong technically, and they had enough energy for double that number.

In Oslo, there are some private theatres that mostly produce musicals. Last autumn, *Billy Elliot* was the big hit; Norway was the first country in Europe allowed to stage it after London. This had a lot to do with young 11-year-old Kevin Haugan, who was perfect for the role. His parents run a dance studio in Oslo that has produced a great

number of musical artists of high quality during the last 20 years. Kevin is no exception. He charmed nearly 50,000 audience members as the production toured Scandinavia, where it was extremely well received.

The Norwegian National Opera and Ballet has had an extremely co-operative relationship with Nederlands Dans Theater for many years. That is one reason the Norwegian company has so many ballets in its repertoire by choreographers typically seen on Dutch stages. It has also opened up the opportunity for guest visits by the two Nederlands Dans Theater companies. Recently, NDT 2 brought a program to the Opera House's second stage that included works by two Swedes, Johan Inger (*I New Then*) and Alexander Ekman (*Left Right Left Right*), as well as *Postscript* by the artistic leaders of the main NDT company, Sol León and Paul Lightfoot. In all three, the young dancers were lovely to watch with their energy and strong stage presence.

Another play by Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, was transferred to dance by Norwegian

National Ballet and choreographer Cina Espejord. To help her build the dramatic work, Espejord had one of the best theatre directors by her side, Marit Moum Aune. That is quite an unusual way to create a ballet performance, but the result worked very well. Osvald, the son, was danced with sensitivity by Andreas Heise. Camilla Spidsøe took the role of his mother, Mrs. Alving, portraying the character with strong emotions and a wide spectrum of feelings as her son became weaker and weaker.

New music by one of Europe's finest trumpeters, Nils Petter Molvær, which he played live onstage, brought a great atmosphere to Espejord's *Ghosts*.

British choreographer Michael Corder created his *Romeo and Juliet* in 1992 for Norwegian National Ballet. This is an extremely clean and correct version of the drama, and it needs dancers who can bring life into the characters. The first night, November 8, Romeo was danced by a new member of the company, Cuban-born Osiel Gouneo. He is a lovely dancer with a strong technique, long lines and presence. The lack in his performance of Romeo was the acting. That wasn't the case for his Juliet, Eugenie Skilnand. She manages to take over the role so one believes she is falling in love, and feels the desperation when she discovers what life is about to bring her. In another cast, Leyna Magbutay and Andreas Heise were good, but it was easy to see the shortcoming that exists in Corder's choreography — the lack of passion. When the dancers do not have it either, the ballet just doesn't work.

In December, in addition to 19 sold-out performances of *Nutcracker* danced by Norwegian National Ballet, *ICE HOT Nordic Dance Platform* presented companies and choreographers from all over Scandinavia (that is, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and Norway). More than 40 choreographers and nearly 250 dancers were featured, and about 350 international organizers came to view what the Scandinavian scene has to offer. ▼



Eugenie Skilnand and Osiel Gouneo of Norwegian National Ballet in Michael Corder's *Romeo and Juliet*  
Photo: Erik Berg



# REGGIO EMILIA



by Silvia Poletti

Until a few years ago, northern Italy's Reggio Emilia was considered the country's capital of dance. For more than 30 years, its three theatres welcomed the most important ballet and dance companies, and were home to unforgettable tributes to dance personalities, such as Martha Graham, William Forsythe, Jirí Kylián, Mats Ek and John Neumeier, in festivals attended by people from all over the country. But, after the economic crisis and with programming by a new group of theatre managers less committed to dance, the town lost its powerful appeal for dancegoers. Yet something special can still happen here, though this fall it took place not in the central town square that houses those three glorious theatres but in a new venue: Fonderia, an ancient factory renovated to become Aterballetto's home, as well as a theatre and arts centre.

Indeed, Aterballetto is still the glory of the town when it comes to dance. Not even former director and choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti's decision to remove his ballets from Aterballetto repertoire seems to cloud the bright state of the company. Freed from the former director's particular style and vocabulary, which greatly determined Aterballetto's previous programs and aesthetics, the dancers can now show their own bravura and versatility in different styles of contemporary choreography.

One of artistic director Cristina Bozzolini's priorities is to make the "company" the foremost reason to attend

performances; whatever Aterballetto perform, the dancers have to shine and display their individual personalities and skills.

Another priority is to explore different contemporary choreographic expressions, especially by Italian dancemakers. The latest Italian creating for Aterballetto is Michele Di Stefano, a clever exponent of the radical dance research inspired by postmodern conceptualism, who last summer was awarded the Silver Lion for Dance at the Venice Biennale. His body language is dynamic and fluid, and his patterns are influenced by architectural ideas, so the movements in space have a clear structure. So does his *Upper East Side*, to an original score by Lorenzo Bianchi Hoesch, for nine Aterballetto dancers, which premiered in October at Fonderia.

The geographic nature of the title is reflected in the dancers' movement — in groups and one by one, they always move to the right upper side of the stage. Still, the long queue the dancers form at the end of each sequence is ready to split apart any time in any part of the space. The basic sequence performed by one dancer is taken up by the others, who explore variations on their own bodies and in the space itself. The dancers are so powerful and magnetic that I found myself wondering: is the dance making them beautiful or are they making the dance beautiful?

Di Stefano and the Aterballetto dancers were surely thrilled by the presence of a special guest in the audience: Kylián.

The maestro was back in Reggio Emilia for a new tribute to his overwhelming creativity. Any time he returns, it is not simply an event, but an intimate way to confirm his ties with this city where he had promised to never come back, after a dancer in his company committed suicide here. He has decided to face the ghosts of his past and to accept the love people here feel for him.

Kylián came not only as one of the most admired choreographers of his generation, but as a film director and special guest at the opening night of the Reggio Emilia International Short Film Contest, which took place at Fonderia the following day. Introducing his work to the Reggio Emilia audience — *Car Men* (2006), *Between Entrance and Exit* (2013) and the world premiere of *Schwarzfahrer* (*Fare-dodger*, 2014) — Kylián told us how, in the last few years, he has been more and more attracted by the possibilities of video techniques. Intrigued by the impossibility of stopping the time of our lives, through video he has found a way of fixing the moment of a face or an emotion (above all, it became apparent, that of his wife and muse, dancer and actress Sabine Kupferberg).

He also underlined how visions determined the style and atmosphere of his enigmatic movies. In *Between Entrance and Exit*, an old apartment full of ancient furniture suggested a meditation about how many people had lived, loved, suffered and, after the final exit, left traces of their emotions inside the walls. Scraps of Mahler's elegiac Adagio from his unfinished Tenth Symphony, mixed with electronic sounds, created melancholic moods. Two ancient lovers — Kupferberg and David Krügel — appear in different situations, now funny, now erotic, now romantic.

The theme of memory and of life as a trip "you do not have to buy a ticket for," as Kylián put it, is the emotional plot of *Schwarzfahrer*, set in an old coach in a Prague tram. The claustrophobic space compels the camera to use close ups and the dancers to use minimal movements to create the intense emotional relationship between a mature woman (Kupferberg) and the memory of an old love (Patrick Martin), set to the wonderful Schubert lied *Night and Dreams*. In this different medium, Kylián's mysterious dreamy world is still alive, unquiet and moving. ▼



Swee Boon, an ex-principal dancer at Madrid's Compañía Nacional de Danza. Staged as part of the M1 Contact Contemporary Dance Festival, *Organised Chaos* sprang from a dialogue between Kuik and the group's South Korean resident choreographer, Kim Jae Duk. In this full-evening creation by Kuik and Kim, the inner gears of the human condition found expression in fraught relations with sound — the dancers jabbing a microphone into their torsos or feuding over who could gabble into it — and in the compulsive tremors, counting aloud and pounding of feet. By the end, not even the flat-out dancing could save *Organised Chaos* from tedium.

The Contact festival overlapped with another, Kalaa Utsavam, held annually to coincide with Deepavali, a Hindu holiday. On tour with their ensembles to the Esplanade Theatre, two major performers of Indian classical dance — one in Bharatanatyam, the other in kathak — expanded the borders of what began as solo art forms, yet kept within the frame of tradition. Leela Samson bookended *Disha — A Vision* by pulling south Indian Bharatanatyam from its narrative roots, polishing its codified geometry and gestural rigour in plotless group dances. In between, Samson planted it back into the rich soil of Hindu mythology and joined her dancers in re-enacting tales of triumph over evil, and of gods and goddesses tangled in spiritual union.

In *Within*, Aditi Mangaldas offered two shades of north Indian kathak. The first half featured a spare, strident take on classical kathak steps; a forceful urgency powered the footwork and turns. She played an enigmatic figure wandering among the dancers — now nervous passerby, now squirming on the floor in near-darkness — her terra-cotta robes shining like blood against their sombre grey ones.

In the second half, the stage was burnished with warm light and live music, the dancers clad in matte-gold costumes. They unveiled their cloth-wrapped faces as a metaphor for their awakening, stirring up churning waves of movement. Mangaldas' shimmering solo against an amber-lit cyclorama crowned the evening: a bright balm to the winter blues. ▼

Dancegoers in Singapore had much to see as the year drew to a close. Before winding down with Cynthia Harvey's staging of *Don Quixote*, Singapore Dance Theatre debuted some new one-act works and acquired *Swipe*, by Val Caniparoli, for its repertoire. But it was a September restaging of *Fearful Symmetries*, which Dutch choreographer Nils Christie made for Ballet Mainz in 2004, that showcased one of the company's strongest performances during a triple bill at the University Cultural Centre Hall.

John Adams' locomotive score of the same name inspired a landscape of shapes and images that shifted constantly as the dancers worked on and off 15 square-edged hourglass stools, arranging them into rows, arcs and oblongs, or piling them into a heap. White light against a downstage scrim covered each scene change with little break in the pulse of action, which unfurled from a basic motif of running to suggest the oddball dynamics — a pack of joggers, couples at war — within a group. Christie's *Fearful Symmetries* was the highlight of a program that included Australian choreographer Natalie Weir's *4Seasons*, a pairs-heavy suite set to a condensed remix of the Vivaldi violin concertos.

One of the smaller groups, Frontier Danceland, gave Singaporeans a taste of Gaga, the movement practice developed by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, via the classes and work of Noa Zuk, a former member of Naharin's Batsheva Dance Company. With her husband Ohad Fishof, Zuk created *An Old Woman Picking Up a Stone from the Ground and Carrying It Back to Her House*. It premiered on a double bill with Taiwanese artist Liu Yen-cheng's *A Piece of Temporary Chaos* at the School of the Arts Studio Theatre.

The two works had much in common. Both had a sense of energy being reined in, only to be released in small doses through the limbs. Both tended toward non sequiturs: an episode would be followed by another that had scarce relation to the previous one. And both were eccentric. In *An Old Woman*, a fluid cast of six strung together a series of cryptic duets, trios and quartets before the performers stood around a ring of stones, tying head scarves under their chins. A kind of suppressed hysteria threaded through *A Piece of Temporary Chaos*, as scenes of absurd frenzy cut into more tense, guarded sections.

More turmoil ensued at the Esplanade Theatre Studio in a premiere presented by T.H.E Dance Company, led by Kuik



Anthony Hamilton's fertile, witty mind produced the most exhilarating contemporary dance seen in 2014. *Keep Everything* was a commission for Chunky Move's Next Move program, which gives external choreographers access to the company's resources. Its success at its 2012 premiere led to a remount for a 2014 national tour that included Sydney, which is where I saw it.

Rummaging around in a kind of artistic compost heap, Hamilton hauled out dance material he'd previously discarded and used it to start a process of creation unhampered by too much editing and overthinking. Or that was the idea. While the initial impulse gave *Keep Everything* enormous vitality, Hamilton also had to acknowledge that a level of organization was inevitable. We desire order. Ultimately, *Keep Everything* was anarchic in spirit yet incredibly tightly structured.

Hamilton's breathless race through human history began with emergence from the primordial ooze and passed through a fractured but recognizable present to a mechanistic future and back again. The unbroken thread was how the body breathes, sounds, moves, changes and adapts. Showing superhuman endurance, performers Benjamin Hancock, Lauren Langlois and Alisdair Macindoe were riveting, often working with complex rhythms or durations that had to be calibrated precisely to the micro-second as they morphed from pre-human to beyond human.

The notion of keeping everything took on a multiplicity of meanings: the scattered junk that spoke of our over-stuffed material society; the desire to gather experiences and sensations; the need to keep making a noise, whether grunting, conversing, screaming or spewing strings of numbers. All this happened to a whiz-bang sound design from Julian Hamilton and Kim Moyes (who also work as the Presets), Benjamin Cisterne's exceptional lighting design and Robin Fox's visual design, created with lasers, of an apocalyptic miasma.

Unlike the brilliantly compressed *Keep Everything*, Chunky Move's big new work for 2014 failed to live up to the promise of its title. *Complexity of Belonging* was devised by the company's Netherlands-born artistic director Anouk van Dijk and Falk Richter, director in residence at Berlin's Schaubühne, and belongs to a series of

collaborations in which the two investigate relationships and their broader social context.

The wide Sumner stage at Melbourne's Southbank Theatre was dominated by a huge cyclorama with a photographic image of open sky and low-lying land. This was the vast Australian interior as instantly legible shorthand for feelings of separation, loneliness and otherness — a decidedly European take that felt clichéd. *Complexity of Belonging* was quickly established as being entirely urban, dealing with a set of well-off, articulate but not particularly deep-thinking city-dwellers. There was talk about gay marriage not being legal in Australia, mild observations about race, an unpleasant reference to the first Malaysian Airlines disaster (the one in our hemisphere), easy digs about "no worries" and "howya going" discourse and a sentimental co-option of aboriginal thought regarding the nature of time. At 90 minutes, *Complexity of Belonging* was too long and lacked persuasive integration of movement and text. Depressingly, its discussion of belonging was tedious and simplistic.

Back in Sydney, Andonis Foniadakis' fantastical *Parenthesis*, commissioned by Sydney Dance Company for its Louder Than Words double bill, turned the volume up to the max and then some. Foniadakis is not without wit, and he had the dancers swagger on and off like self-regarding hip-hop stars, undulate like seaweed or sway together like a Busby Berkeley chorus line. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *Gladiator* and *Gold*

*Diggers of 1933* collided in a raunchy Garden of Eden, featuring a curtain of floaty fringes that evoked the sea bed, women's costumes that combined cheerleader sass with hints of Ancient Rome and two dancers in skin-toned bodysuits who brought to mind Adam and Eve.

*Parenthesis*, however, had nothing new to offer on the subject of human interaction, which Foniadakis professed to be his subject. The curtain fell on a writhing clinch for two that may have been meant to look ecstatic, but radiated all the charisma of soft porn, and the whole thing was faintly ridiculous. The strong, mature, give-and-take partnering in the program opener, *Scattered Rhymes*, by the company's artistic director Rafael Bonachela, came up very well by contrast.

A few weeks later, Sydney Dance Company's New Breed program came up with a terrific piece from Gabrielle Nankivell, a 25-minute work for 13 dancers that would sit easily in their mainstage programming. *Wildebeest* unflinchingly showed humankind as pack animals, one-on-one antagonists and vulnerable individuals, the balance constantly and unsettlingly shifting. There was an exceptionally sure feel for mood and structure as bodies came together in formal groups or scattered in eruptions of wild physicality, impelled by insistent cues in Luke Smiles' shivery, thundery soundscape. Often they disappeared into the gloom of Matthew Marshall's brilliant lighting design, which precisely evoked the way dust is suspended in the air after a herd has raced through desolate land. ▼

## Melbourne & Sydney I

by Deborah Jones



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# Cullberg Ballet

The costumes by Ulrika van Gelder — men in suits and women in tight-fitting, little black dresses complemented by skinny heels — help deliver the look: the sassy pose and the strut. The dancers are tremendous, getting under the skin of the characters and revelling in the intense choreography. The storyline moves into duets and ensembles as men and women size up and pair off with an edgy trio of two men and a woman ringing the changes. The women en masse were particularly formidable, a fierce and volatile ensemble. And the work naturally culminates in the inevitable crime passionnel.

Gavin Bryars' evocative score creates the smoky atmosphere, pungent with testosterone and cheap perfume. The lugubrious notes oil the movements and the four splendid onstage musicians become partners in the work. Bryars has written extensively for dance, including several works for Lock, but here he takes a less travelled route and heads for the jazz club, proving his equal mastery in this medium. *11th Floor* proved a winning fusion of dance, music and concept.

Most dancers have an affinity with music and many would like to play to professional standards. In *Tones & Bones*, by Sweden's Stina Nyberg, Cullberg Ballet took the plunge and became both orchestra and dancers. Sadly, this proved a mistake. In the press release, Nyberg states that she consciously questions "ideas about quality and professionalism." The audience were likewise left questioning these issues.

The improvised movement of the dancers, who made a conscious choice to reject any flow or synchronisation, resulted in a crazy patchwork of jerks and thrusts accompanied by the banging of drums and whoops into the microphone. Nyberg's concept of "hierarchies between music and dance" is not one I would subscribe to, but it may well have mileage for studio exploration. However, like all concepts, it needs rigorous and thorough inquiry before it is ready to claim the attention of an audience. Some things are more fun to do than to watch, and this was one of them.

Cullberg Ballet was founded as a platform for cutting-edge dance and new expression, and the need to challenge boundaries remains. Sweden is fortunate in having a comparatively comfortable level of arts subsidy, but the added dimension of the audience in performance art cannot be ignored if dance is to flourish.

— MAGGIE FOYER

## Édouard Lock / *11th Floor* Stina Nyberg / *Tones & Bones*

Dance companies founded by choreographer/directors often face succession issues: consider the Martha Graham Dance Company or Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Cullberg Ballet, founded by the iconic Swedish choreographer Birgit Cullberg, had an heir apparent in her son, Mats Ek, ready, willing and able, who led the company from 1985 to 1993. However, since then the company has had a bumpy ride. Despite a number of successful works, notably from Johan Inger, director from 2003 to 2008, Cullberg Ballet has struggled to carve a new identity.

Current director Gabriel Smeets, who took the helm last May, is an interesting choice. His academic education is in visual arts and journalism, while his most recent post was artistic director of the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam. We will have to wait until next season to see which direction he chooses for the company.

Meanwhile, the commission (by the former director Anna Grip) of a work from

Canadian Édouard Lock was warmly welcomed by Dansens Hus' audience members in Stockholm last November, who were perhaps delighted to find that Cullberg dancers can still dance (as a friend enthused).

I imagine if Damon Runyon, the writer of racy New York tales, had chosen to be a choreographer, he would have created a work like Lock's *11th Floor*. It has the same rapid-fire repartee and sharp put-downs, and the characters are unequivocally guys or dolls and all are larger than life.

In the brief opening clips, Lock's choreography adapts neatly to the film noir concept where speedy delivery counts. On the darkened stage, a spotlight reveals a dancer, her arms flickering like a hummingbird's wings as she semaphores her message of desire before melting into the darkness as the spotlight picks out the next dancer. Their legs speak in the same rapid staccato tones, occasionally contrasted with a sensual move, but the bodies remain taut. The tension is maintained and the limited range of movement is amply compensated by Lock's mastery of structure, although at 40 minutes, some editing down might have been beneficial.



## Liam Scarlett / *Serpent* Russell Maliphant / *Fallen*

Fourteen years after founding England's BalletBoyz, Michael Nunn and William Trevitt have earned the right to a name that better reflects what their company can do. Hung on them by a BBC producer after the two did a video diary on life as principal dancers with the Royal Ballet in 1999, the name is misleadingly vapid. But if they keep producing work like they showed in Victoria, British Columbia, their only Canadian stop of a North American tour this November, they can call themselves anything they like.

Nunn and Trevitt left the Royal Ballet in 2000 to find new challenges away from the formal structures of classical ballet, where, they felt, the men tend to be mere props for the women. They wanted to see what they could do beyond ballet's traditional boundaries, dancing together and in other dance styles. They also wanted to make dance more accessible to the masses, which, combined with the company's name, sounds a bit like a Simon Cowell-ish recipe for a boy-band. Not so. BalletBoyz is a serious dance company, doing serious work.

After 10 years, in 2010, Nunn and Trevitt took themselves out of the lineup and auditioned young men from all kinds of dance backgrounds, looking for raw talent rather than specific training. The current incarnation, called BalletBoyz: The Talent, consists of 10 men from Britain, Italy and France, including one with no formal dance training who was on the verge of joining the Marines. The mix generates excitement, but is not without its dangers.

The first of two pieces, *Serpent*, was by one of the hottest choreographers in the world today, Liam Scarlett. At 28, he is another former Royal Ballet dancer, just appointed as the company's first artist-in-residence, and you can see how steeped he is in classical ballet forms.

*Serpent* opens with the dancers lying on their sides, apparently nude, legs curled up, backs to the audience, vulnerable. One dancer lifts an arm, hand bent at the wrist, then the others do the same. It's a simple but evocative

action they will return to at the very end, but in between they move up and into a series of ever-changing, sinuous shapes (which is when we discover they are wearing flesh-coloured leggings). The dancers often work in pairs, with cantilevered lifts and leans heavily dependent on perfect balance and counterbalance. These are virtuosic in their difficulty (they are not lifting tiny ballerinas here).

Scarlett is careful not to add sexuality to his duets, which is fine — it's great to see men in relationships not based on sex or warfare — but without that sizzle, they pale a little in comparison to the sections where he uses the 10 men together in flowing, swooning curves. Not all the dancers, however, have quite enough of the classical training Scarlett's boneless, uplifted choreography and the poignant Max Richter score seem to demand. They do not disappoint in their strength and control, but I would love to see them all be as fluid and flexible as Andrea Carrucciu, with his Freddy Mercury moustache. In a stage full of fabulous movers, he stood out for the pure beauty of his lines.

Russell Maliphant's *Fallen*, in contrast, is fully contemporary, with a dash of martial arts, capoeira and even yoga — Carrucciu executed a perfect natarajasana (Lord of the Dance pose). It is a mature piece by a mature

choreographer that at the same time takes full advantage of the dancers' maleness, their youth and their abundant ego and energy.

They start in a circle, one row of dancers resting high on the shoulders of the others, an image of trust and dependence that keeps repeating, in variations, throughout. The circles feel primitive and tribal, even ritualistic, in keeping with the vivid, percussive score by Armand Amar. Dressed in street clothes, the dancers repeatedly touch and explode away, or use each other to climb up, then free fall into passing arms. There is danger here and a feeling of imminent combat, but not with each other. The danger is outside the group; inside, each dancer is separate, yet united again and again within the circle.

Both pieces were performed with no sets, just terrific lighting by Michael Hull. In *Serpent*, against a white backdrop, the lighting washed from one colour to the next as the mood changed; in *Fallen*, with the backdrop gone and the industrial brick wall of the Royal Theatre exposed, a sort of film noir technique picked out the dancers' physiques and added an almost sinister overtone to their movement.

Disregard the name, and go see the Boyz if you can.

— ROBIN J. MILLER



# Tanztheater Wuppertal



## Pina Bausch / *Vollmond*

A huge boulder dominates the stage for the entirety of Pina Bausch's *Vollmond* (*Full Moon*), presented by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa in November. Solid and intractable, it is the antithesis of the other essential feature of *Vollmond* (and several of Bausch's works), water. Over the course of 150 minutes, with one intermission, the 12 remarkable cast members of Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, now directed by Lutz Förster, passionately work both elements to maximum effect.

Framed by veteran designer Peter Pabst's dramatic staging, *Vollmond* speaks to human athleticism and a sense of play, to everyday wit and poetry; at times it's theatre of cruelty meets Saturday morning cartoons. Bausch's work can sometimes feel closer to theatre or performance art than it does to choreography, but *Vollmond* is undeniably a statement in dance.

There are several splendid solos in the first act. For me, the finest is Ditta Miranda Jasjfi's yearning dance as rain starts to fall upstage and around the rock. The choreography is all sinuous arms and ecstatic swirls with some evocative hand gestures (which sometimes seem derived from classical Indian dance). Jasjfi is a concentrated bomb of grace and energy moving to the familiar vocals (from the Wim Wenders' film, *Pina*) of Greek singer Maria Spyropoulou.

Jasjfi basks in the falling rain, worshipping it with all the sensuality in her body. The magic only ends when Jorge Puerta Armenta runs up with a piece of chalk to outline her body as she lies half in and half out of the pooling water.

So begins another Bauschean comic vignette, stitching one scene to the next with a giggle or a smile. Some of these are brief, yet they are always effective and poignant, as when the elegant H elene Pikon stumbles across the stage with a carrot suspended in front of her face and a small hanger in her hand with which she periodically and gently hits herself.

There's quite a bit of hitting in *Vollmond*, and when people aren't smacking each other, they're kissing. Sometimes it's hit-and-run style, but in one extended scene the women are seated on chairs scattered across the stage while the men run at them, jump up on the edges of each seat and kiss each woman in a deliriously rhythmic seesaw of movement.

Bausch's continued fascination for the tension and cruelty found within interpersonal confrontations finds articulation in multiple scenes. The one where Azusa Seyama administers a humiliating lesson in speedy and efficient bra unfastening was alternately amusing and horrifying. Which is actually my typical reaction to many of Bausch's works, more muted here because *Vollmond* is not as harsh as *Kontakthof*, say, or *Rite of Spring*. She often uses what appear at first to be light-hearted games and silly

exercises to illustrate unsettling psychological or emotional ideas. Bausch is content to reveal them briefly, then let them go. We may make of them what we will.

In addition to being a stunning expression of choreographic intent, *Vollmond* is the distillation of an artistic life of rare quality. It is also an elegy of sorts, a tribute to Bausch's longtime agent and advisor Thomas Erdos, who died in 2004 — but also, and although no one would have realized it at the time, an elegy for Bausch herself. The doyenne of dance theatre died suddenly in June 2009; *Vollmond*, from 2006, is one of her last major works. Taking this into consideration makes the waves of sorrow that washed over the auditorium in the second act more comprehensible.

It's not just that the dancers trade their silky jewel-coloured evening gowns and white shirts for black costumes. There's a quality of going on in the midst of despair that marks some of the dancing. Dominique Mercy's solo (he's been with the company for 40 years) is a case in point. Mercy thrashes and grasps his belly, hurls himself to the ground and pulls himself back up, then repeats it all to just past the point where it's comfortable to watch. Feelings of desperation are present also in the scenes in which Jasjfi runs repeatedly away from Armenta, who catches her by grabbing the back of her long black coat. She ends up in the water, flailing. There's a relentlessness on both sides that's chilling. The atmosphere is aided by Romanian violinist Alexander Balanescu's music, a driving but unbearably sad string quartet.

The dark mood doesn't last and the conclusion to *Vollmond* is a joyous moon-drunk bacchanal in the water, with everyone dancing their hearts out, hurling buckets of water around, running full tilt across the stage and doing full body slides through the growing pool. Some of the men perform manic solos atop the rock; others climb on it and then hurl themselves into the water. Everywhere we catch glimpses of movement vocabulary reprised from Act 1. It's a frenzied ode to life, which must, after all, go on. And a fitting swansong for a dance icon who gave so much, left too soon and is still deeply missed.

— KATHLEEN SMITH



## Balanchine, Ratmansky, Robbins, Wheeldon / Press Play

Pennsylvania Ballet is undergoing a sea change: a massive shake-up last spring involved the departures of several of the top artistic and executive staff. Yet the first program under the new leadership, spearheaded by former American Ballet Theatre star Angel Corella, showed much about the company looking reassuringly familiar.

Because of prior commitments, Corella was not in town for his debut season's October launch, a solid program of familiar names presented at the Academy of Music under the title Press Play. The return of Alexei Ratmansky's *Jeu de Cartes* had been planned before Corella's appointment, but Robert Weiss' ballet to Beethoven's *Ninth*

had the style and particularly the musicality, flicking her foot forward and presenting it with a sharp accent. But the nerves showed; Kocak occasionally went blank and Monaco got hands-y when the partnering was fast. The two danced it twice, and deserve a few more shots to master it.

Wheeldon's *Liturgy*, made for NYCB's Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto in 2003, was a stepping-stone in the trio's collaborations. Set to Arvo Pärt, *Liturgy* highlighted Whelan's insectile limbs and Soto's ability to manipulate them. Elizabeth Wallace and James Ihde gave the work a smoky perfume as Wallace wrapped around Ihde. But the duet seemed, even as it did for Whelan and Soto, less a ballet and more an adagio act. The only meaning was in the march from one sleek contortion to another sphinxlike position.

Robbins' *Other Dances* demands big stars;

As Ratmansky usually does, his choreography follows the music. When it changes, he changes.

The opening hugged the wings as three women in purple at one side were replaced by their partners, then another phalanx burst forth from an opening at the centre back. Kocak returned for a turning solo as the men watched from the ramp. Typical Ratmanskyness: the corps was as much there to observe as to create spatial design.

There were hints of competition in a men's quartet. All four did double tours, but two men hit the ground, the other two stayed upright. We also saw Ratmansky's whimsy: in the middle of a duet with Holly Lynn Fusco, Alexander Peters tumbled into a forward roll. The ballet only got harder with a loaded series of beats for the men. By the end, Ratmansky was spiriting quotes from everywhere, including



*Symphony* was pulled. Instead, Corella prefaced the Ratmansky with shorter works by Balanchine, Christopher Wheeldon and Jerome Robbins. It was a statement, but it was also a man hedging his bets.

Unlike other U.S. regional companies that have drifted away from their Balanchine roots, Pennsylvania has clung fast, and there was worry that Corella might abandon the tradition. Starting off with *Allegro Brillante* should calm people's nerves. Set by Ben Huys, a former New York City Ballet principal, Huys' setting recalled the work as it looked during his time at NYCB from 1986 to 1996: tall dancers with long, flattened arabesques gave the work a leggy, angular look rather than the current muscular air it has at NYCB.

Second-cast Evelyn Kocak and Harrison Monaco were getting their sea legs in a famously exposing ballet. Monaco breezed through the footwork and turns; Kocak

the duet was crafted as a gala showpiece for the larger-than-life presence and star technique of Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Lauren Fadeley filled her role with big, cushy dancing, though perhaps too many smiles. Ian Hussey conquered his virtuoso solo with double cabrioles and a course of turning jumps, though not yet with Baryshnikov's ease and swagger.

*Jeu de Cartes* was made in 2005, early in Ratmansky's tenure as artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet. Even after a decade, it's still quintessential Ratmansky; we're seeing the same themes from him now. He scuttled Stravinsky's card-deal libretto, substituting another throughline flavoured with Russian Constructivism. Igor Chapurin's boldly graphic costumes morphed from purple to mustard. The set was made of simple flats and platforms, sharply angled with a ramp to provide arresting places to enter and exit.

in-place jumps straight out of *Les Noces*. But he was merely following Stravinsky, who dropped into his score allusions to Rossini, Beethoven, Johann Strauss and others.

Interestingly, the dancers looked their best in the Ratmansky rather than the Balanchine. Both ballets are equally hard; the Balanchine is more sustained, the Ratmansky faster with sharp direction changes and an even more direct attack. It could merely be that *Allegro Brillante* has been out of repertory longer; *Jeu de Cartes* was set on the company only three years ago. Still, does Ratmansky's vocabulary better reflect how dancers move now?

Press Play seemed meant to pacify a rocky transition, and it succeeded. In a safe but strong program, Corella's first outing gave no cause for alarm, but no real hints for the future.

— LEIGH WITCHEL

## Lander, Forsythe / Mixed Bill

There are multiple impulses for dance, as was highlighted in the Paris Opera Ballet's pairing of Harald Lander and William Forsythe in a mixed bill at the Palais Garnier last fall. The spirit animating each choreographer's vision may come from a different inspiration and time, but classical ballet technique was still at the centre for both the Danish Lander and the American Forsythe (at least as represented here, as the latter's more recent work for the Forsythe Company seems to be coming from a different place altogether).

The program began with Lander's *Études*, created in 1948 for the Royal Danish Ballet, which the Paris company has danced since he passed it on to them in 1952; this was their 277th rendition. The piece, inspired by the ritual of the dancer's daily class, offered a grounding for the two 1999 Forsythe ballets that followed, which had been commissioned by then Paris Opera Ballet director Brigitte Lefèvre.

*Études*, a sweet celebration of classical ballet technique, opens with a dozen ballerinas at the barre, only their long legs — in pink tights and pointe shoes — lit, the rest of their bodies disappearing

in the darkness, as they go through the working routine of tendus, frappés, fondus and grand battements. Later, there are a dozen more women in white tutus, and also a dozen men in white shirts and tights whose centre floor jumps highlight ballon — that virtuosic quality of strength, lightness and elasticity in jumping. Occasionally, a jazzy inflection in the men's flexed wrists breaks the strict classical form, as does the frank dancehall slide into full splits by the women, both adding a cheeky accent that must have felt fresh and modern at the premiere.

It's a somewhat daunting task to make classroom routine come alive in performance, and the elite Paris Opera dancers did not entirely succeed. Every miniscule lapse in timing for the ensemble work of the women, and any too obvious exertion while jumping for the men, destroyed the illusion of a corps of angelic beings and revealed the gravity-bound human body just doing its best. Carl Czerny's piano exercises, adapted and orchestrated by Knudåge Riisager, provided the variety of tempi and accent typical of a class, played live by the Paris Opera Ballet Orchestra.

I saw two casts in *Études*, which provided two slightly different "readings" of Lander's choreography, primarily in the particular physicality and energetic

qualities of the lead ballerina: first Amandine Albisson, a new étoile, and then Dorothée Gilbert, an étoile since 2007.

The regal Albisson was a little sedate for the central role. She over-accented the final poses, bringing a static picture-perfect quality to the ballet. Gilbert, a lighter, ethereal being, brought a warm vibrancy to the flow, adding life to *Études'* period charm.

When, after intermission, Forsythe's *Woundwork 1* unfurled, the weight of the body in space and the stretch of the muscles and sinews inside that body, made a more sensual use of the dancers' classical training. *Woundwork 1* ("wound" as the past tense of the verb to wind) presented a cast of two men and two women, differentiated mostly by Stephen Galloway's costumes: the women in salmon pink skirts wired at the bottom edge to suggest a tutu, the men in grey-blue tights and sparkly shirts. But their movement had the same stretch and pliancy as they worked alongside each other in companionable more than romantic relationships.

In this 15-minute quartet, the dance seems not so much set to the electronic score by Forsythe's longtime collaborator, Dutch composer Thom Willems: both choreography and music seem to just happen at the same time. This is sometimes the case in the 35-minute *Pas./Parts*, which followed, though Forsythe does go for the musical moment here as well. Throughout, Willems' music and Forsythe's dance are endlessly inventive — the music ranges from heavy organ or foghorn chords to a section of silly voices, while the dancers fill the stage with a kaleidoscope of groupings and full body engagement.

In *Woundwork 1*, the dancers' extreme mobility unwinds with a devout seriousness that suggests some tragedy has recently befallen them. *Pas./Parts* shucks off contemporary dance's well-worn angst, instead going for the moment with frank athletic energy and precise shapes and focus, making for supremely engaged and fascinating bodies. *Pas./Parts* takes the viewer on a visceral journey, one that moves faster and faster until, by the end, the stage is filled with whirling, exploding movement full of such power and grace that the sentiment I most remember feeling was joy.

— KAIJA PEPPER





# Work in process

Sandra Laronde / *Backbone*

The backbone of the Americas is a continuous sequence of mountain ranges spanning North, Central and South America, as well as Antarctica. Six indigenous dancers from Canada, New Zealand and the United States powerfully embodied this majestic connection across large masses of land in a work-in-progress production simply titled *Backbone*. Presented in December at the Margaret Greenham Theatre, the venue felt very appropriate: it sits within the Banff Centre campus of Alberta's Rocky Mountains, which form a part of that backbone.

Conceived and directed by Sandra Laronde, at the helm of the Banff Centre's Indigenous Arts since 2008, *Backbone* took shape over a 20-day creation residency. Credited as choreographers are dancers Thomas Fonua and Jera Wolfe, with Jake Frazier, James Jones and Laronde. The finished production will premiere at Banff next August, but, even if we didn't get all the bells and whistles, we seem to have got the heart of the piece: dance by five men (Fonua, Frazier, Dayton Hill, Jones and Wolfe) and one woman (Arlo Reva) that evoked the connection and flow of natural forces and formations, and that offered striking cultural statements of human ingenuity and beauty.

The dancers come from different cultural backgrounds (Samoan/Tongan, Métis, Sami, Oneida and Cree) and also have a variety of dance training, with hip hop, jazz and modern noted in their biographies. Ballet figures strongly, and Jock Soto, a former, high-profile New York City Ballet dancer who grew up on a Navajo reservation, was present during the residency. Soto began working with the Indigenous Arts program five years ago; during *Backbone's* creation period, he gave the dancers class and helped finesse their movement.

Jones, the only traditional Cree dancer



**Banff Centre  
Indigenous Dance  
Creation Residency**

in the group, is also one of the street dancers, which gave an urban edge to his second of two solos (that one-armed cartwheel, for instance). Traditionally costumed in turquoise and orange regalia, Jones' performance resonated with cultural layers that sat nicely next to the more abstract dancescape of the others.

The first time we see Jones, it's briefly near the start, when he crosses the stage in a whirling, stamping grass dance, appearing almost like a phantom. Then, at the very end, after the others have taken their bows, he returns, this time carrying five red and white hoops, and gives *Backbone* its celebratory finale as he sets the hoops twirling, at one point using all five to form a wing span, transforming for a moment into a bird.

Much of *Backbone* was engagingly contemporary, the movement alive with the stuttery hip-hop rhythms that seem to

say so much about our lives today. Much of it was also very graceful, with the attention to line and the control associated with ballet and modern dance, as in the slow, sweet duet — full of curling together and unfurling apart — by Fonua and Reva. At one point, as they lie on the floor, she steps her feet carefully up the pathway created by his spine.

Laronde choreographed this section, which, over coffee the morning after the show, she called a “fossilized love duet,” explaining that human fossils have actually been found together. In the duet, Laronde explores the idea that “love is embedded in the fossil over a great period of time, and then it gets released. And then it finds its way back.”

A primary theme throughout *Backbone*, Laronde says, is slow fossil time, which is deep and patient, and the epic nature of mountains, where fossils can be found, in contrast with fast human-scaled time. The dancers, who for most of the piece are simply costumed in shorts, with Reva in a thin-strapped leotard, often form solid, craggy formations together, which contrast with other sections featuring quick gestures and percussive movements.

Rick Sacks' live drums were layered on top of an evocative recorded soundscape, and Andy Moro's video projections contributed dynamic visuals, ranging from a field of grass to a dramatic red line that skittered across the backdrop, forming peaks and troughs that seemed to be monitoring our collective heart rate.

Dance at the Banff Centre is rapidly evolving under Carolyn Warren, vice-president of arts, who has brought Ballet BC artistic director Emily Molnar in on a seasonal basis to help build a sustained year-round dance presence beyond the long-running summer programming. Warren is also expanding residency opportunities, such as the one that resulted in *Backbone*, which was co-produced by the Banff Centre and Red Sky Performance, a Toronto company directed by Laronde.

— KAIJA PEPPER

# Jean Börlin in *Skating Rink*

Sculpture by Joël & Jan Martel

Courtesy of Dansmuseet

French twin sculptors Joël and Jan Martel (1896-1966) created this sculpture of Sweden's Jean Börlin in the leading role of the Madman in his ballet *Skating Rink*. Based on a poem by Riciotto Canudo, designed by Fernand Léger and set to music by Arthur Honegger, *Skating Rink* was presented by the Ballets Suédois in 1922. The Martel brothers — who worked in ornamental sculptures, statues, monuments and fountains — used the slightly Cubist costume and the curved movement from the choreography to create a striking Art Deco piece.

The Ballets Suédois, which made its debut in Paris in 1920, was founded by wealthy Swedish aristocrat Rolf de Maré, who collected modern art. Several painters in his collection, like France's Léger and Sweden's Nils Dardel, were engaged as stage designers for the company.

— ERIK NÄSLUND  
DIRECTOR, DANSMUSEET

Stockholm's Dansmuseet – Rolf de Maré Museum of Movement houses a large Ballets Suédois collection. As well as painting, sculpture, photography, film, costumes and objects associated with dance and theatre from around the world, the museum also presents dance performance. In keeping with the philosophy behind the Ballets Suédois, Dansmuseet aims to create a meeting place for all the arts. Visit [www.dansmuseet.se](http://www.dansmuseet.se).

Sculpture in polychrome enameled faïence executed in 1924 by the ceramists André Fau and Marcel Guillard in Boulogne-Billancourt, 38 x 28 x 10 cm.

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Misty Copeland and Roman Zhurbin in *The Firebird*. Photo: Gene Schiavone

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