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What is it about a room full of working dancers that is so uplifting? At The Dance Centre in downtown Vancouver where the magazine has its home, I often pass by one particular studio where a group of traditional Hawaiian dancers rehearse. When I hear their music through an open door, I always pause to peek in and admire the fluid arms and hips, and the splash of colour from the full red-patterned skirts. For a moment, I feel what it's like to do their dance, but then it's back to the office!

One recent afternoon, I was invited to watch a contemporary class downstairs in the black box theatre. **After a somewhat frustrating morning, I knew I needed this moment to sit down and get some dance in my soul. Sure enough, as I watched the young dancers find their way across the floor in a series of chassés, I relaxed and breathed a little more deeply.**

The teacher, visiting from New York, began to work on the transitions between movements in some tricky floorwork. As the students invested themselves more fully in each moment, big and small, their dance became richer and more and more alive. "This is what we call dancing, not positioning," he said, pleased.

It's like that with writing, too, which is also about personal investment, bringing something to every paragraph, every word. In this issue of *Dance International*, both skills come together in dancer and journalist Jillian Groening's first feature for us. In it, Jillian brings her work in the studio onto the page, giving a dancer's-eye view that connects us in a different way to the art of dance.

This issue is also about saying goodbye, as Linde Howe-Beck sends in her final Montreal report. A fine and passionate writer, Linde is stepping off the treadmill of regular deadlines, but we expect, and hope, to hear from her now and then.

Kaija Pepper
editor@danceinternational.org

Santee Smith of Kaha:wi Dance Theatre in Smith's *NeolindigenA*
Photo: David Hou



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Dance International



DIMagazine



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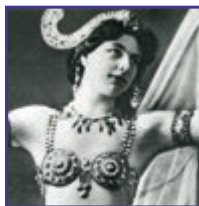
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Re-inventing BalletMet



BalletMet company dancers perform
Edwaard Liang's *The Art of War*
Photo: Jennifer Zmuda



Photo: Zaire Kacz

Edwaard Liang finds his way forward

by Steve Sucato



Adrienne Benz in the title role
in Edwaard Liang's *Cinderella*
Photo: Jennifer Zmuda

On an unseasonably warm afternoon last December at BalletMet's studios in Columbus, Ohio, artistic director Edwaard Liang is teaching three male/female couples a pas de deux from his 2008 ballet *Age of Innocence*. Liang quickly demonstrates a series of steps, but when he sees the men having trouble with a particularly difficult lift, he steps in. The 41-year-old, a former dancer with New York City Ballet and Nederlands Dans Theater, moves as if he could still have danced the work with relative ease. Liang's focus these days, however, is not on performing, but rather on turning BalletMet into an internationally recognized, great American ballet company.



Liang was born in Taiwan and raised a Buddhist, which is where he says the two “a’s” in the spelling of first name came about. His parents took him as an infant to a monk who calculated his Chinese to English name and told his parents that having an extra “a” would be more fortuitous and would guarantee he lived beyond age 13. “It looks like a typo and I was teased about it growing up,” says Liang. For a time he dropped the second “a,” but when he joined the Screen Actors Guild, there was another Edward Liang so he went back to using the original spelling.

Liang’s family moved to Marin County, California, where he says his type A parents involved him and his sister in horseback riding and martial arts. He even tried violin lessons, but had to quit after he insisted on holding the instrument like an upright base. He began his dance training at age five as a punishment for scorching the lobby wall of his sister’s dance school while playing with a magnifying glass. While his sister eventually stopped taking ballet, Liang fell in love with it and decided to make dance his career. At age 13, he moved to New York to study at the School of American Ballet and by 16 became an apprentice at New York City Ballet.

Like his introduction to dance, Liang says his introduction to choreography came about as a sort of punishment when a choreographer at Nederlands Dans Theater called him out for being too chatty in rehearsal and dared him to enter an NDT 1 choreographic workshop. “I was so focused on dancing, I had never thought about choreographing before,” says Liang. “When I finished my piece, *Flight of Angels*, it was a bit of an epiphany. I liked it and got bit by the choreography bug.”

After leaving the stage as a dancer, Liang became an award-winning freelance choreographer. His some 40 works have been performed by the Bolshoi Ballet, New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Hamburg Ballet, Mariinsky Ballet and others.

In 2013, he took over the reins at BalletMet Columbus, his first directorship, succeeding Gerard Charles (now a ballet master at Joffrey Ballet). Liang became the company’s fifth artistic director in its 42-year history, continuing a tradition of doubling as company choreographer. Now entering his third season, he has put his stamp on the 26-member, unranked group, raising the level of dancer artistry and technique. He has also created buzz by bolstering the repertoire with a bounty of new classical and contemporary ballets from Christopher Wheeldon, Gustavo Ramirez Sansano, James Kudelka and Ma Cong.

“We want to be a very strong boutique ballet company,” says Liang. “We want to be an innovator of dance and be a part of the bigger dance conversation.” Liang recognizes that with a modest \$6 million annual operating budget, the company can’t lead the

conversation as American Ballet Theatre, San Francisco Ballet and other larger companies do, but he feels BalletMet can eventually make its own mark on the global dance scene.

Entering year one of a seven-year plan to grow and move the organization forward, the company began this season by re-branding itself with a new logo and marketing strategy. The logo dropped “Columbus” from the name, reflecting Liang’s less provincial outlook. Their website was updated to be mobile-device friendly and to take advantage of the latest metrics to gage audience numbers and responses to marketing and programming efforts. Also as part of this growth, Liang founded BalletMet 2 in 2014. Its six young dancers aged 18 to 22 from BalletMet’s Dance Academy are the face of the organization’s outreach efforts. He also upped the number of company trainees from 10 to 25, making it easier to do larger story ballets.

For many ballet companies, repertoire is what defines their identity. Certainly, Liang’s many choreographer friends and the works he has acquired and commissioned from them in the past two-and-a-half years have played a big part in defining BalletMet’s identity, but it is Liang’s reputation in the dance world that

BalletMet’s David Ward and Caitlin Valentine-Ellis in Jimmy Orante’s *The Great Gatsby*
Photo: Jennifer Zmuda

“Being an artistic director can be an experiment in terror. You don’t turn off and are working 24/7. But the rewards make it worthwhile, like when you believe in a dancer and see them flower into an artist and still be hungry for more.” — Edwaard Liang



appears most responsible for shining a spotlight on the company, attracting larger audiences to its productions and ensuring dancers want to join.

One new recruit is New Jersey native Caitlin Valentine-Ellis, who joined in 2014. The petite company star had worked with Liang when he set a ballet on Colorado Ballet, where she was a soloist at the time. “He is bringing great rep here,” says Valentine-Ellis. “It’s kind of a dancer’s dream to get it all — classical, modern and contemporary.”

Liang’s reputation and the lure of having it all is also what drew Pennsylvania native Grace-Anne Powers, formerly with La La La Human Steps, to BalletMet. “I think he wants to push the limits of what the company does for the dancers and local audiences,” says Powers. “He has a clear direction and vision and is really good at taking steps to get there.”

Both dancers characterize the atmosphere around the studio as having a good energy with a sense of teamwork by dancers and staff to help realize everyone’s best efforts. That sense of wanting to be a part of the team is something Liang looks for when hiring. “I am not interested in ego,” says Liang. “Dancers have to work well together and play nice.” Liang also looks for dancers with strong classical technique who are “really monsters at moving in a range of styles and able to tell stories onstage.”

Ballet mistress Susan Dromisky says, “He wants dancers who are open, trusting and fearless.” A native of Thunder Bay, Ontario, and a former soloist with the National Ballet of Canada, Dromisky, who has been with BalletMet since 1998, says she has already noticed a change in the company. “The calibre of every performance is better. The repertoire Edwaard is bringing in is extraordinarily challenging, demanding a lot more from every dancer.”

Because BalletMet has no ranking structure, “a lot of dancers get an opportunity at roles,” says Valentine-Ellis. “We have to be at the top of our game all the time. It’s also a challenge when getting a leading role and knowing the next day you will need to jump back into corps roles. It can be tiring, but we get to dance a lot and that’s why we’re here.”

As with many regional groups, Liang sees an ebb and flow with regard to dancer quality: the better ones stay less time, he says, moving onto opportunities at larger companies, but he is happy with the dancers he has. Powers and Valentine-Ellis both see Liang as an insightful and sympathetic coach and mentor. “I think he

likes to nurture his dancers and really help them to be their best, which is something you don’t always get with an artistic director because they’re not always in the studio,” says Valentine-Ellis.

For Liang, demands on his time are one of the most challenging aspects of his job. Part of coping is curtailing his freelance choreography. He has also changed in his approach to new works for the company, he says, coming at them with a strategy in mind, such as positioning a piece as a program opener or closer, or to fit a certain program theme.

“Having my own dancers has completely changed the name of the game for me as a choreographer,” says Liang. “I thought it would be even more intimate now, but it’s changed the way the dancers look at me. I am no longer this collaborator/choreographer, I am their boss. It was heartbreaking in the beginning.”

While the process for Liang may feel different, Valentine-Ellis sees the same magic in his creative process. “I love his pas de deux work,” she says. “It might be tricky to get at first, but the end product always feels right on your body and is just beautiful to watch.”

Columbus audiences will continue to get a full helping of Liang’s choreography, including a premiere this May of his *Sleeping Beauty*. In 2016-2017, Liang’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *Murmuration* will feature along with new works from Val Caniparoli, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Matthew Neenan and others. Talks are underway for a future joint production with Tulsa Ballet loosely based on L. Frank Baum’s *Glinda of Oz*, Book 14 of the *Wizard of Oz* series, with sets and puppets by 2015 MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant recipient Basil Twist.

Liang will continue the company’s local collaborations with music and opera groups, and, on the domestic front, says that he and partner John Kuijper have settled nicely into the pace of Columbus. They have a house with a garden they share with their 12-year-old pug, Spanky, and Liang says he jumped for joy at owning his own washer and dryer, something he never had living in Chicago and New York.

While he is enjoying mid-west living, work is never far from Liang’s mind. “Being an artistic director can be an experiment in terror. You don’t turn off and are working 24/7. But the rewards make it worthwhile, like when you believe in a dancer and see them flower into an artist and still be hungry for more. That is incredible to me.” ^{DI}

Flamenco's New Tide



by Victor Swoboda



Myriam Allard and La Otra Orilla make waves

In a remarkably short time since its founding in 2006, La Otra Orilla (The Other Shore), the Montreal contemporary flamenco troupe, has risen to lofty heights. Twice it has performed at Jacob's Pillow, most recently in 2015, and three times it was invited to appear as part of Montreal's Danse Danse series that features celebrated domestic and international troupes. Its 2016 March tour included a first appearance in New York at the World Music Institute, as well as shows at the Off the EDGE Festival in Atlanta, four towns in Quebec and stops in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

La Otra Orilla's founders, Quebec dancer Myriam Allard and French-born singer Hedi Graja, present a decidedly iconoclastic take on flamenco, hence the troupe's name. "It refers to the other side of the Atlantic," says Graja, speaking in the troupe's studio and flamenco school in a residential area of Montreal near the Lachine Canal. He explains they wanted to create some distance from flamenco as it's traditionally perceived in Europe.

Although classical flamenco vocabulary remains the starting point of their work, Allard and Graja imprint it with the investigative spirit of contemporary dance. *HomoBLABLAtus* (2013) examined the effects of mass media on human communication (one of its three dancers, Spanish performer Antonio Arrebola, appeared only on video). *El12* (2010) looked at the inexorable force of time and its division into hours. *Moi & les Autres* (2015) used the interaction of dancer and musicians to comment on the state of contemporary human relationships.

La Otra Orilla also presents more conventional flamenco in the cabaret format known as tablao, such as its *Unplugged* (2015), in Montreal's storied cabaret Lion d'Or. In this tablao, Allard and dancer Aurélie Brunelle performed traditional solos and duets accompanied by Graja and frequent collaborators Miguel Medina on percussion and accomplished Quebec guitarist Caroline Planté, whose guitarist father, Marcel, known as El Rubio, was among flamenco's earliest Montreal practitioners. (During a nine-year sojourn in Spain, Planté toured with respected flamenco performer Mariano Cruceta and his group, a rare distinction for a female guitarist and foreigner.)



“If we want to remain in synch with who we are today, it makes no sense to dance flamenco with a flower in your hair. Some flamenco artists whom I adore dance only in that style and I thank them for it because otherwise it would disappear. But to look honestly at our contemporary concerns, we need to create works that are different.” — Myriam Allard

Allard, born in Quebec City, discovered the flamenco world in the 1990s. “My first contact was Claude Lelouch’s movie, *La Belle Histoire*, with flamenco-sounding music,” she says. (The film’s main character is a gypsy.) “There was just one flamenco teacher in Quebec City, Dominique Potvin, and I signed on for a session with her. Then, in 1998, I went to Spain for two months. Maybe there’s a greater tendency to do such things at 19 than at a later age. I was a bit bohemian.”

She landed in the Andalusian town of Jerez de la Frontera, staying in the same inn where, by chance, Potvin once stayed. “I talked with a man on the bus who laughed at me, wondering why a Canadian wanted to learn flamenco.”

Allard and Potvin were following in the footsteps of another Quebecer, Sonia Boisvenu, who had blazed a trail to Spain more than two decades earlier when foreign flamenco students were rare indeed. Graduating from Madrid’s Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático, Boisvenu took the stage name of

Sonia del Rio and forged a distinguished dancing career, performing with several Spanish companies, notably for four years with Luis Mariano’s troupe at Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

In 1975, del Rio opened Montreal’s first flamenco school, École de danse espagnole et flamenco Sonia del Rio, which served as a pioneering beacon. A woman of great charm, del Rio received Spain’s highest honour for foreign artists, the Order of Isabella the Catholic, in 1998. Her school operated for more than a quarter century before she retired to Europe.

Out of the ground that del Rio cultivated — which was fertilized by Carlos Saura’s internationally popular 1995 film, *Flamenco* — three other flamenco schools sprang up in the 1990s that still operate today in Montreal: Julia Cristina’s Centre de danse flamenco, Lina Moros’ Ballet Flamenco Arte de España and Rae Bowhay’s École Flamenco RB. Then came a subsequent generation of Montreal teacher/performers, including Allard.

Returning home after her first trip to Spain, Allard told her parents about her desire to pursue flamenco there. “They didn’t really understand my enthusiasm, which seemed to come out of nowhere. I guess I’d react the same way if my daughter suddenly wanted to learn traditional Chinese music.” Allard agreed to do one year at university first. She studied Spanish, which she didn’t know, and took as many flamenco courses with Potvin as possible.

Then it was back to Europe, where she lived for the next several years, studying flamenco mostly in Seville, but also in Madrid, with an 18-month sojourn in Paris. Her flamenco classes introduced her not only to gestures and steps, but to some of the great personalities who had been shaped by Spain’s flamenco landscape and had shaped it in turn.

“My main teachers in Seville were at the Academia de Manolo Marín,” says Allard, naming a school operated by one of flamenco’s big names. In Madrid, she studied with flamenco legend Ciro Diezhandino Nieto, who as a young man defied his wealthy family, gave up his law studies and devoted himself to dance. He became an international sensation in the 1950s, performing often with another leading figure, Rosa Montoya. “I also studied with younger dancers, but it wasn’t easy to find my ‘master.’ I’m tall and I wasn’t built like my teachers.”

These old-school teachers rarely gave out compliments, but Allard believes she became toughened for auditions. “Nowadays, I find the teachers are more attentive. They see there’s a market for foreigners so they adapt their pedagogy to people in their 20s who haven’t been exposed to flamenco since childhood. The foreign students are lucky because now the teachers show them how to turn, where to place their weight. They furnish them with tools and training methods. This latest generation of teachers is much more informed about their bodies.”

By the age of 23, with only a few years’ training behind her, Allard was auditioning for shows. In a fortunate break, she replaced Spanish star Olga Pericet on a six-month contract with a Spanish group in Osaka, Japan, where they performed two tablao shows daily with just two days off a month. “We lived in a small, crowded apartment. Backstage I heard all kinds of things. I learned as much about Andalusia as I did about Japan!”

By this time, Allard’s own take on flamenco was starting to develop. She was largely influenced by one of her original teachers, Rafaela Carrasco, a firecracker whose unorthodox turns, port de bras and general wildness place her closer to an iconoclast like Israel Galván, whose work also inspired Allard, than to classical flamenco dancers. “I don’t like everything that Galván does, but his

freedom has greatly influenced my way of imagining flamenco,” she says.

Allard is quick to point out that long before Galván, prominent flamenco artists were departing from the elegant gestures that foreign audiences habitually associate with classical flamenco. Two such individualists were Antonio Ruiz “El Bailarín” Soler (1921-1996) and Vicente Escudero (1887-1980), a lover of avant-garde art. “They did crazier things than what you see today.”

In the last 15 years, flamenco artists have demonstrated a vision fused with a wide variety of dance and music. María Pagés introduced Broadway and film tunes. Company Lizt Alfonso Danza Cuba mixed flamenco with mambo, salsa and cha-cha. Last year, Galván and contemporary choreographer Akram Khan, a specialist in India’s classical kathak, premiered a duet. Venezuelan-born star Siudy Garrido staged a flamenco/urban dance confrontation. As skilful as fusion shows often are, many flamenco purists haughtily dismiss them outright as inauthentic — entertainment rather than serious artistic statements. In answer to purists, Allard noted that her generation of flamenco artists is influenced by the same environment as avant-garde contemporary dance choreographers like Canada’s Crystal Pite.

“If we want to remain in synch with who we are today, it makes no sense to dance flamenco with a flower in your hair,” says Allard. “Some flamenco artists whom I adore dance only in that style and I thank them for it because otherwise it would disappear. But to look honestly at our contemporary concerns, we need to create works that are different.” ■

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Spirit in Dance



Three contemporary expressions: Santee Smith, Ronald K. Brown, and Deborah Abel and Lee Perlman

by Kimerer L. LaMothe

n North America since colonial times, many Western scholars and practitioners of dance have regarded religion with suspicion and hostility. That's not surprising. From the 16th to the 20th centuries, Christian missionaries, supported by the empires of Britain, France and Spain, fought to eliminate indigenous dancing from what is now Canada and the United States, especially when that dancing occurred in contexts that appeared to the invaders as "religious."

Nevertheless, through fierce resistance, indigenous ritual dance has persisted. And early in the 20th century, North American modern dancers turned to previously demonized dance traditions from religions around the world and close to home, seeking inspiration in their quest to make significant, effective art for the stage.

New Jersey-born Ruth St. Denis, for example, spent hours in libraries across the United States researching the cultures of India, Egypt and the Middle and Far East in order to make solo works like *The Yogi*, *Incense* and *Radha*. She sought to become "an instrument of spiritual revelation" through dance, rendering visible and visceral an all-embracing love for the divine. Martha Graham found inspiration in the Pueblo Indian rituals of the American Southwest for art that would communicate participation in an "affirmation of life through movement."

Beginning in the 1930s, dancer/anthropologists Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, themselves African American, learned the techniques of African dance traditions to create powerful art pieces that reverberate with African rhythms and religious sensibilities.

Some of these artists also had occasion to take their work to countries whose practices had inspired them. In several cases, as with St. Denis on tour with Ted Shawn in India, their dancing served as a catalyst for those who were seeking to revive their own dances in the wake of colonial prohibitions.

These early modern dancers shared a common mission: to resist and reform the values of Christianity that had justified crusades against the dance traditions by which they were inspired. The ongoing hostility of Christian authorities toward dancing did not deter them; it motivated them. They sought to revalue dance by creating art that was, as Graham de-

scribed, "divinely significant." When the evangelist Dwight Moody told St. Denis that she would be damned for dancing onstage, she retorted that she knew she would not. She and her mother had prayed about it! All of her dances, St. Denis claimed, were "religious."

Toward the middle of the 20th century, subsequent generations of modern dancers rejected approaches to choreography that relied heavily on narrative and symbolic meaning. At a time when indigenous dance traditions had finally secured protection under U.S. law as "religion," the art-dance community was seeking pure movement, stripped of cultural and religious forms. Even so, the vision of "dance itself" that im-

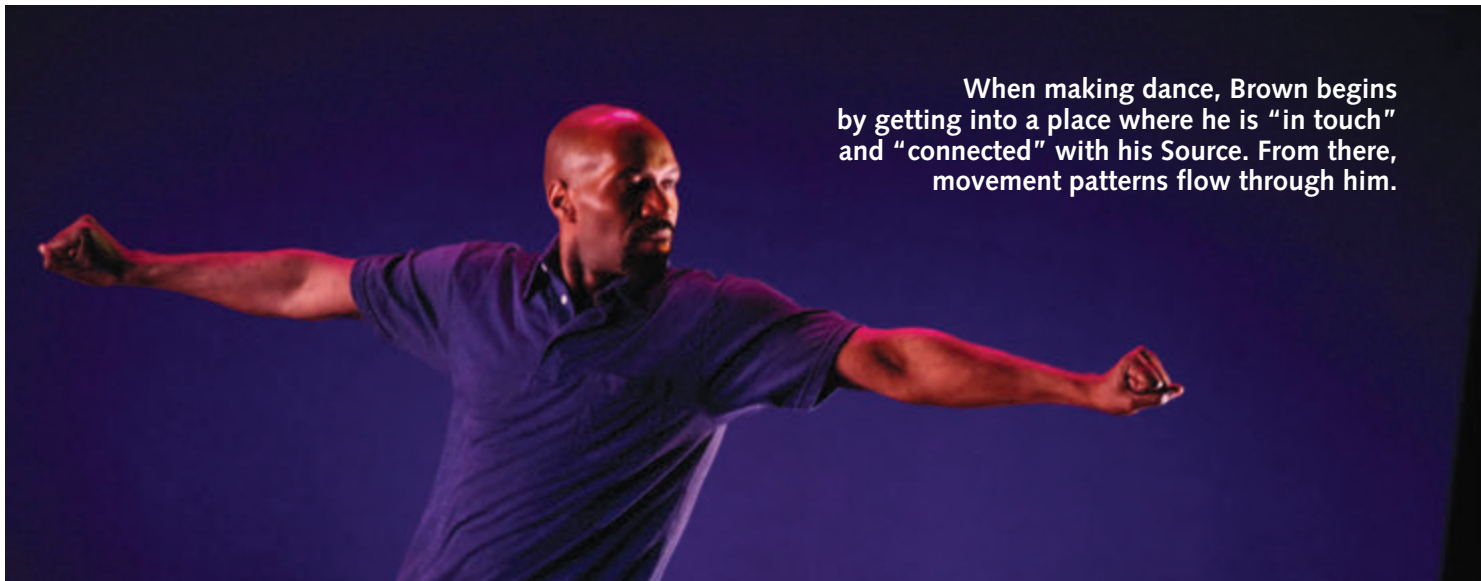
pelled many postmodern artists could hardly disguise its own spiritual impulses. Religion returns to dance and dance returns to religion, with a rhythm as old as humanity itself.

Today, once again, a varied collection of modern artists are drawing inspiration from religious traditions in which dance plays a central role. They are doing so not to document these phenomena as historical artifacts, but to participate in their ongoing life. Choreographers with native roots and artists with years of cross-cultural training are creating pieces that reveal the contemporary relevance of these lineages for matters of birth and death, love and the divine — pieces designed to catalyze experiences of wonder and insight. Scholars, too, are taking note, as seen in the creation of the *Journal for Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities*, founded in 2014, and the hefty 2014 anthology,

Dance, Somatics, and Spiritualities (Intellect).

Ronald K. Brown, who calls his 25-year-old company Evidence, not only intends his dances to provide evidence of something; he intends for his dances to count as evidence themselves — as proof of what he calls the "Great Mystery." As Brown described recently at a panel on his work, he is an "obedient boy." When making dance, Brown begins by getting into a place where he is "in touch" and "connected" with his Source. From there, movement patterns flow through him. His dancers watch him move, and recreate those patterns in themselves. Back and forth, Brown and his dancers tease forth the shape of a dance.





When making dance, Brown begins by getting into a place where he is “in touch” and “connected” with his Source. From there, movement patterns flow through him.

The movement patterns that flow through Brown are those he learned from years of training in African-based spiritual traditions. As an African American raised in Brooklyn, he did not study African American dance; he studied modern dance. Yet he later travelled to Africa and the Caribbean, studying Yoruban, Cuban, Haitian and other African dance forms in which, he affirms, the intention is to open a relationship with the Great Mystery. It is what he intends his work to do as well — for those who dance and those who watch.

In September 2015, Brown’s company performed a site-specific piece called *Journey of the Great Mystery* as part of a two-year residency at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. On a blue-sky, sun-filled autumn day, more than 60 people gathered in the courtyard of Williams College Museum of Art; the dancers held hands in a circle and bowed their heads. Brown turned to the audience and taught sign language for the phrase: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The dancers then led us into the museum where the piece began, later moving inside a church and finally to a grassy outdoor space.

In each setting the sequence was similar. Brown’s dancers entered with pulsing, undulating movements from African sacred traditions. They clapped, stamped and gestured toward the earth, one another and the sky. The group sat down in a circle, as individuals from the community stepped forward into the ring to “tell” their stories of spiritual journey in movement.

In taking us from one site to another, the piece as a whole enacted a spiritual journey of dancing itself: the dance, birthed in a round womb of a museum gallery, then squeezed its members inside a church (where pews made it nearly impossible for the audience to see the dancers except from the waist up), before breaking free into the open air. There, the repeated movement patterns made sense as the work of a community gathering together in a circle to affirm and celebrate life. In this *Journey*, Brown’s fluid forms revealed themselves as evidence.

Santee Smith, of Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) descent, creates modern dances with her Toronto-based company, Kaha:wi Dance Theatre, which pulse with narratives, spatial forms, symbols and movement patterns drawn from Haudenosaunee culture. Kaha:wi is Smith’s grandmother’s name and her daughter’s name, meaning “she carries.”

Smith’s training is varied, including Canada’s National Ballet School and several years participating in the aboriginal dance program at the Banff Centre. Smith explains that her motivations for sharing her culture through modern dance are rooted in her native tradition. She notes on her website, “As a Haudenosaunee person I believe that song and dance were gifts given to us by the Creator, to celebrate our lives on Mother Earth. It is what we do, it is what we know, since first we heard our mother’s heartbeat and her muffled voice, and moved along with the sway of her hips. Song and dance together are the ultimate expressions of who we are ... [They link] us to each other and to the Creator.” For Smith, dance is living. She intends to reveal the living dance of her tradition as an ongoing source of spiritual, female wisdom.

Smith’s breakthrough piece in 2004, *Kaha:wi*, does so. As described by scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Smith tells a Haudenosaunee story of creation in which women feature prominently. The piece begins with Smith curled in a circle of light, slowly unfolding, reaching, squatting, stretching and coming to stand. The soundtrack features spoken prayers that begin a Haudenosaunee ritual. She is Life itself, giving birth to Herself.

Three men emerge and three women, as humans on earth. They do a shuffle-dance, arching, bending and spiraling in four directions. As Smith explained in an interview with Shea Murphy from 2007, even though some audience members might perceive the upper body patterns as modern dance, Haudenosaunee would recognize the steps of the shuffle as their own — as sounding out a connection to Mother Earth, source of life.

The dance then circles around one of the women as she attracts and enjoys a man. When her grandmother dies, she and her lover mourn, as an Ancestral Spirit moves around them. The woman gives birth to a daughter, who inherits the grandmother's name. Mother and daughter frolic in a joyful duet, touching, hugging, rolling apart and coming back to one another again.

The dance ends as the daughter, now a young woman, discovers the pleasure of her own bodily movement. Smith's work thus celebrates the vitality of her own tradition in its ongoing ability to affirm women's pleasure and power as central to Creation.

A third example of spirit in dance appears in the work of Deborah Abel and Lee Perlman, married directors of the Boston-based Deborah Abel Dance Company. In their latest piece, *Calling to You*, Abel and Perlman juxtapose scenes enacting a Hindu tale of lost love and spiritual seeking with scenes of a modern-day couple who are disconnected from one another, and yearning to reunite. Here, Abel and Perlman invoke the Indian aesthetic theme of *nayaka nayika bhava* — the idea that desire between man and woman may be an effective metaphor for the devotion of a human soul to the divine. The movements of this dance, while rooted in modern dance vernacular, evoke the sinuous aesthetic and clear lines of South Asian dance.

Perlman, who teaches philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has studied Hindu meditation since 1976; Abel

earned a bachelor's in dance from Connecticut College and studied at England's Laban School of Dance since 1980. Their interest in spiritually potent dances is an expression of *bhakti* — a Sanskrit word referring to emotion, to a longing for the divine. They call what they do *bhakti modern dance*.

Devotion permeates every aspect of Abel and Perlman's collaborative partnership. When working on the music, Perlman reaches for something that fills him with the sense of beauty and desire he wants to convey. Abel finds movements inspired by the music, and suggests developments. Along the way, they each engage in practices of meditation to help them enter the spaces of receptivity they want their work to communicate.

Through this process, dance and music emerge together in a varied, multi-layered expression of Abel and Perlman's own devotion to one another, to their Hindu sources and to the transformative potency of art. When the audience arrives, what awaits them is an experience of exquisitely rendered shapes — sonic, visual and kinetic — that frequently move people to tears. Abel and Perlman are grateful for this response. Their highest aim is to awaken people from all walks of life to whatever love lies at the heart of their individual existence.

The work of these artists, as well as that of Brown and Smith, is not religion; it is art. Yet it aspires to catalyze experiences of the human relation to the Great Mystery, the divine and Life itself. In such work, dance appears as an activity that defines what "religion" is and should be — faithful to the earth in and around our moving bodily selves. *DI*



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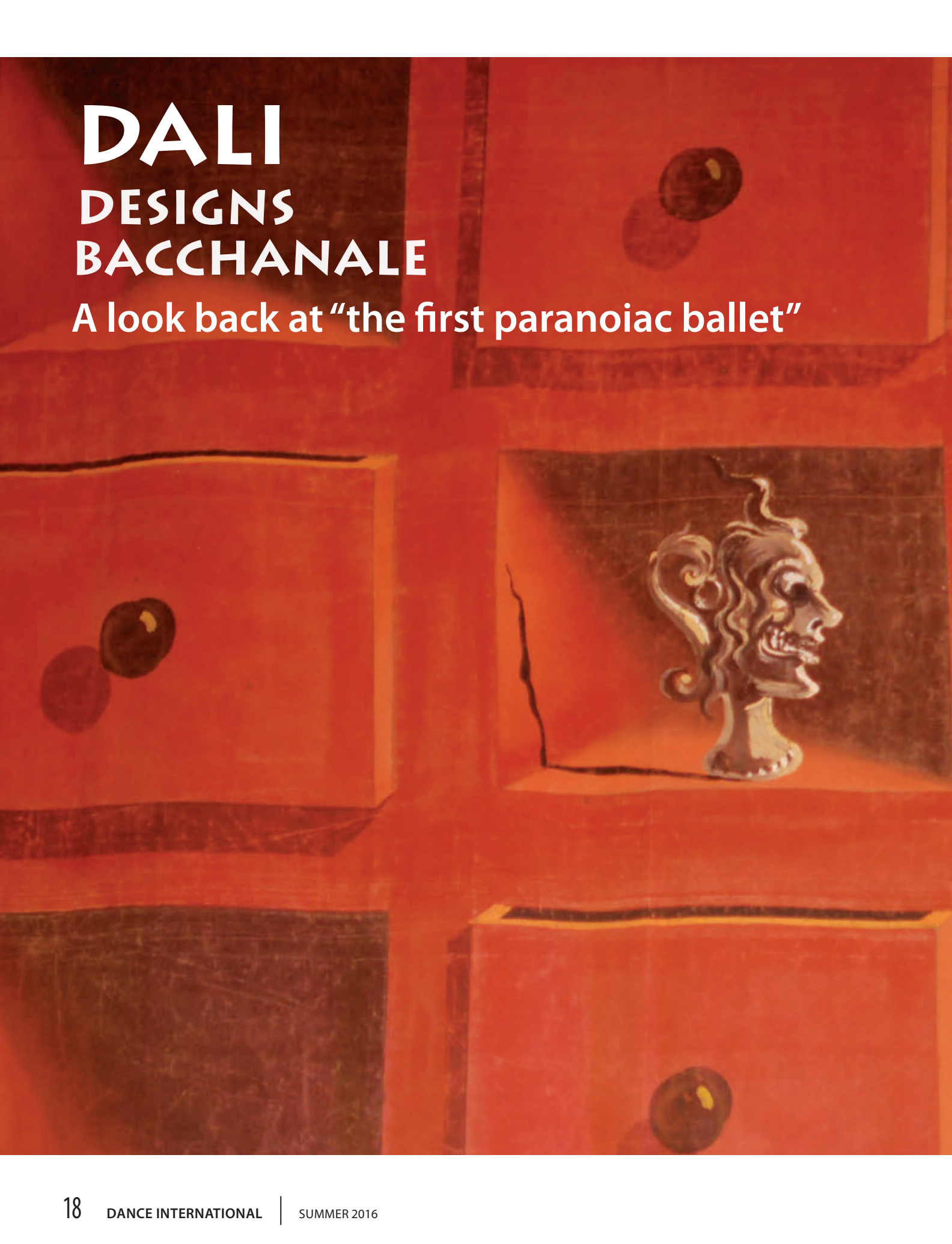
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DALI DESIGNS BACCHANALE

A look back at “the first paranoid ballet”



by Karen Barr



When Salvador Dali started designing for ballet, the Spanish-born artist was already famous. As part of the Surrealist art movement in France, Dali had been invited to New York in 1932 for the first Surrealist exhibition in North America. A solo exhibit at the same gallery would follow the next year; within three days, half his works were sold. A few years later, choreographer Léonide Massine asked Dali to design the costumes, sets and libretto for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's production of *Bacchanale*.

Dali based the libretto on Richard Wagner's 1845 opera *Tannhäuser*, in which the title character, a knight, entertains the goddess Venus. The opera score was kept, but the story was further embellished. King Ludwig II of Bavaria, crowned in 1864, had suffered from the delusion he lived in Wagner's operas, so he became a character in *Bacchanale*, which Dali called in the program notes "the first paranoiac ballet." Dali laced in more Greek mythology as well, adding the story of *Leda and the Swan*, in which Leda is seduced by Zeus in the form of a large swan.

The one-act ballet was scheduled to open at the company's home base in London, at Covent Garden, in September 1939. Haute couture fashion designer Coco Chanel had constructed the costumes based on Dali's designs, but war broke out days before the premiere. As the citizens of London were being relocated out of the city due to the risk of aerial bombing, the company hastily sailed to New York, leaving everything behind. Two months later, the show would go on in the United States.

Barbara Karinska, the Russian costumier who would later leave her mark for her stunning New York City Ballet creations, was hired to remake the 60 costumes in one week. The costumes were, not surprisingly, late. While the dancers waited in the wings of the Metropolitan Opera House, the orchestra played multiple repetitions of the ballet's overture to entertain the audience in a long intermission. Once Karinska arrived, many dancers stood perplexed, wondering just how to get into costumes of such architectural design.



Members of the United Scenic Artists union had been paid to paint the backdrop based on the artist's drawings, and a curious Dali went to watch. Intrigued by the workers' long-handled brushes, Dali picked one up and worked for hours painting the lower right hand corner, where he signed the piece.

The 40-by-50 foot backdrop, kept today at Butler University in Indiana, is supported by three sets of wooden legs painted in a checkered pattern, with drawers that contain props in the shape of bones. The scene depicted is of Mount Venus, in a desert-inspired landscape of ochre and burnt sienna, with scattered bones. There was also a large white fabric swan with its chest ripped open, through which the dancers entered, which has been long since lost.

Lola Montez, once a dancer, then the mistress of King Ludwig I, was the first character to emerge, in a hoop skirt decorated with a double row of teeth, worn over harem pants. Other characters included a woman wearing a rose-coloured fish head and the writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, happily being whipped by his wife, as depicted in his novel *Venus in Furs*. A satyr and his dwarf companion were busy knitting a long red sock, and some of the men had bright red lobsters that hung suggestively at their groins. Ludwig II (played by Yugoslavian dancer Casimir Kokitch) appeared dressed in the ruffled finery of the day, looking distraught, seeking help for his hallucinations. Nymphs flitted by with fauns with enormous genitalia. Female corpses hobbled past on crutches. Cupids arrived. Venus (Nini Theilade) entered with her two companions. Theilade wore a long blond wig and a body-hugging light pink unitard, in which she appeared to be naked.

Via email (with the help of her friend and former student Eva Tarp), Theilade, who recently celebrated her 100th birthday at home in Denmark, recalls being chosen for the role. It was spring of 1939, and the dancers were gathered with Massine and Dali. Theilade was quietly standing in the back row, while the dancers in front were trying to catch Dali's attention. When Dali pointed to Theilade, who had a slim boyish figure, she said, "But, Maître, you are making fun of me. I am no Venus." Dali said he did not want a traditional Venus. The other ballerinas, Theilade remembers, "narrowed their eyes." English ballerina Alicia Markova turned to Theilade and said, "Of course he chose you. You are such a good mover."

The character of Ludwig II, imagining himself as the knight Tannhäuser, slayed Venus, mistaking her for a dragon. The Knight of Death emerged costumed as a large black umbrella, alongside two men wrapped in a sheet. Four black umbrellas opened onstage, which Dali felt signified death, perhaps due to the superstition that opening an umbrella indoors brought bad luck. Meanwhile, Leda was busy in an intimate pas de deux with Zeus as the swan, which reportedly left the audience aghast. The production toured in the United States until 1940, but the creators decided to tone it down after the reaction in New York.

What happened to all those costumes Karinska struggled to make in time? They do not seem to be in museums, as do so many others from Ballets Russes productions. Perhaps they are in private collections.

Dali went on to design several other productions, including, for Massine, *Labyrinth* (1941) and *Mad Tristan* (1944), so ballet must have captured something in his imagination. *DI*



Homage to Dali

La Verità, an homage to Salvador Dali, was at New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music in May. Written and directed by Daniele Finzi Pasca, with choreography by Finzi Pasca and Maria Bonzanigo, the piece features a replica of the hand-painted backdrop Dali created for the Metropolitan Opera's 1944 ballet *Mad Tristan*, based on Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

"The truth is all that we have dreamt, all that we have experienced, all that we have created — all that forms a part of our memory," says Finzi Pasca. Amid a flurry of feathers, dancing animals and suspended objects, *La Verità* (which premiered in 2013 in Montreal) presents a kaleidoscopic view of Surrealism's most eccentric figure.

Finzi Pasca, who builds upon a vision of clowning, acting and dance, presented his monologue, *Icaro*, more than 700 times and in six different languages over the past 20 years. He wrote and directed Cirque du Soleil's *Corteo* in 2005, and created and directed the closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympic Games in Torino (2006) and Sochi (2014). His Swiss-based Compagnia Finzi Pasca was founded in 2011.

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Evann Siebens' *The Indexical, Alphabetized, Mediated, Archival Dance-a-thon!*
Photo: Courtesy of Wil Aballe Art Projects

ARCHIVAL DANCE-A-THON

Evann Siebens' *The Indexical, Alphabetized, Mediated, Archival Dance-a-thon!* was at Vancouver's Wil Aballe Art Projects through March. Siebens, who trained at the National Ballet of Canada and danced with Bonn Ballet before studying film at New York University, has described her practice as mapping choreography through media. *Dance-a-thon!* celebrated Siebens' archive of 16mm film and many years of shooting dance up to the present day.

Different in Munich



Richard Siegal
Photo: Kalle Sanner

Ballet of Difference, a new company run by American choreographer Richard Siegal, was awarded three-year funding by the cultural department of the City of Munich, where he has worked for several years. It is hoped the company, whose dancers reflect and celebrate the diversity of society, will strengthen Munich's profile as an emerging dance leader. Two new productions and a number of additional projects are planned for the funding period, with the first major premiere opening the festival DANCE in 2017.

Ommi Pipit-Suksun of Silicon Valley Ballet in Yuri Zhukov's *User's Manual*
Photo: Francisco Preciado

Silicon Valley Ballet Folds



After three decades, Silicon Valley Ballet is folding, impacting 32 dancers as well as a large staff. Founded in 1986 as the San Jose Cleveland Ballet, the company has faced many challenges, including the ousting of founding artistic director Dennis Nahat, who was replaced in 2013 by Cuban-born ballet star José Manuel Carreño. The news comes hard upon Silicon Valley Ballet's fall production of Alicia Alonso's *Giselle*, in collaboration with the Cuban National Ballet, which was the first time an American company had ever performed it (covered in our Spring 2016 issue).

War Child Ambassador



Michaela DePrince, a 21-year-old dancer with Dutch National Ballet, is the new ambassador of War Child Holland. DePrince grew up as an orphan in Sierra Leone during the civil war; at the age of four she was adopted by an American couple and, at 13, earned a full scholarship to American Ballet Theatre's summer intensive. DePrince would like to open a dancing school in Sierra Leone one day.

War Child Holland works in 12 countries worldwide, providing children and young people who have experienced armed conflict with psychosocial support, education and protection.

Michaela DePrince in Dutch National Ballet's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*
Photo: Altin Kaftira

Mata Hari

A Dutch National Ballet premiere

Spies from the First World War are not an obvious subject for a ballet. Yet the Dutch Margaretha Zelle (1876-1917), a.k.a. Mata Hari, suspected of being a double agent and shot by a French army firing squad, had also been a famous dancer in her time. On the crest of the Belle Époque's fascination with exoticism, Mata Hari became an international sensation when she performed a daring Javanese temple dance in 1905 Paris. She later wanted to join the Ballets Russes, but was unsuccessful. In any case, her unusual and turbulent life, from small-town bourgeois girl to worldly wise femme fatale, seemed dramatic enough for Ted Brandsen, artistic director of Amsterdam's Dutch National Ballet, to turn into an evening-length ballet.

No expense or effort was spared bringing *Mata Hari* to the stage. While Brandsen took care of the choreography, he gathered an international artistic team around him: Dutch dramaturg and author Janine Brogt gave shape to Mata Hari's life in the libretto; British composer Tarik O'Regan set it to music in a two-hour score for large orchestra; Dutch design duo Clement & Sanou conceived the framework of décor and lights; and French designer François-Noël Cherpin created more than 300 costumes from key episodes in Mata Hari's life, from late 19th-century Friesland to Dutch colonial life in Java and Paris in the Belle Époque.

Involving a cast of 60 dancers and an orchestra of 76 musicians, *Mata Hari* opened in Amsterdam's Muziektheater on February 6, quickly becoming a box-office success. The title role was created on Dutch National's first soloist Anna Tsygankova, with a supporting cast of several leading dancers, including Casey Herd as Margaretha's husband Rudolf MacLeod, Jozef Varga as the German officer Kiepert and Artur Shesterikov as her last Russian lover Vadim de Masloff. It is ballet on an epic scale, with a superhuman sweep we hardly ever see any more these days.

Brandsen describes Zelle's life as "a raging torrent," and emphasizes her uncanny talent for transformation and reinvention. In his ballet, scenes flash by in cinematographic manner, but no matter the intensity, the image of an extraordinary woman shines through, a willful character in a male-dominated society who eventually falls victim to her own mythomania. Mata Hari's execution following her involvement with high-ranking army officers can be read as the ultimate statement of disapproval by a society not yet ready for women of her calibre.

— MARC HAEGEMAN

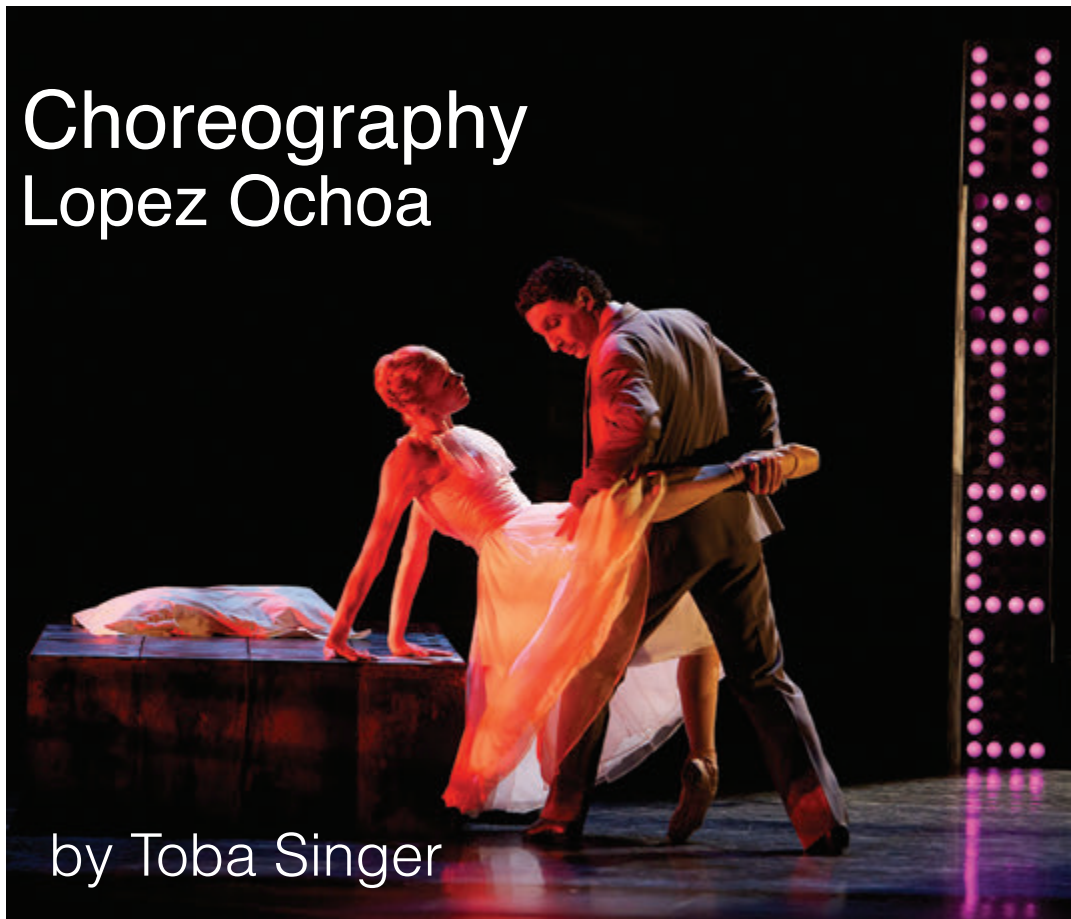
See Galleriespace on page 62 for more on Mata Hari.



Left: Anna Tsygankova as Mata Hari (first cast)
Above: Igone de Jongh as Mata Hari

Photos: Marc Haegeman

Insight on Choreography Annabelle Lopez Ochoa



Scottish Ballet's Eve Mutso and Erik Cavallari in *Streetcar Named Desire*
Photo: Andy Ross

by Toba Singer



Left: Washington Ballet's Maki Onuki and Corey Landolt in *Prism*
Photo: Paul Wegner

Above: Daniil Simkin in *Islands of Memories* at Jacob's Pillow
Photo: Christopher Duggan

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa is a self-confessed tomboy. Her mother, frustrated by her tree-climbing daughter, saw a remedy in ballet class. “I aimed for highest grades in my ballet class evaluations, since I wasn’t getting high grades in school!” says Lopez Ochoa. She was already making small works, at the age of 11, at her local studio in Brussels, where she grew up (her mother is Belgian and her father Colombian).

Later, at 27, while a dancer at Scapino Ballet Rotterdam, Lopez Ochoa readied a choreographic workshop assignment a month in advance of its due date. *Grafitti* was imagined in the mood of drawings by Keith Haring, which were inspired by dancers. “I thought I would reverse that relationship, and make a dance based on the drawings,” says Lopez Ochoa.

When she complained about Scapino Ballet’s 2001 choreographic workshop being postponed to the following season, then artistic director Ed Wubbe commissioned a work from her for the company, which became *->in:signs//*. Then Dutch National Ballet offered a commission, and soon after, Lopez Ochoa bowed to her new *métier* and stopped dancing. “I am more me in my choreographic work than when I dance,” she says. Her mother protested when she saw her daughter’s work without her in it. Lopez Ochoa countered, “But mom, it’s my piece!”

She set her career on a bold path working around the globe. “Creativity lies in finding solutions,” she says, allowing her to survive surprises when travelling from company to company as a freelance choreographer. “Because the stage in the Dominican Republic was the size of a postage stamp, I decided to place a single lamp in its back-wall loading space, and used it as the dancers’ theatrical entrance. Because the Russian dancers were so grumpy, I meditated for 10 minutes, then sent all but two home, and re-imagined the finale into a duet, which turned out to be the best ending for that piece.”

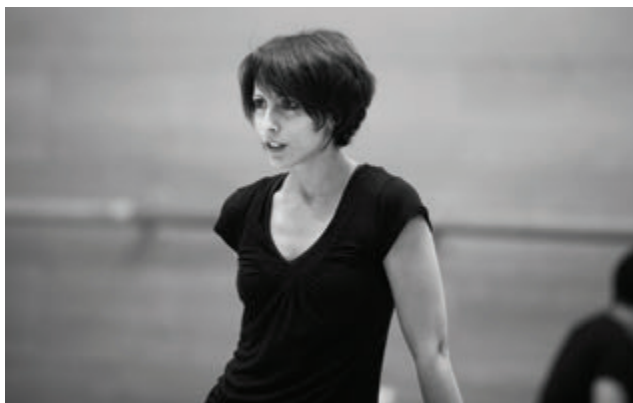


Photo: Fernando Ibanez Marcos

While staging *Prism* at Joffrey Ballet, Lopez Ochoa’s drive for perfection earned her a hashtag from the dancers: *Onemoretime*.

Working with different cultures and dancers discourages falling into formulas. “So each piece looks very different. For example, the Asian flavour that Manila dancers brought to my piece *Bloom* was so singular, I am unsure that any other company could interpret it as they did.”

Travel nurtures respect for cultural differences. There are issues of protocol to learn, as in Manila, where it’s considered improper for a dancer’s voice to be as loud as hers. In Cuba, “Everyone screams. People in passing cars honk horns or blare music.” It’s a geography lesson more enriching than those in books. “Russians look amazing in costume, but have to be in control. They get moody. Sometimes technique trumps your body sequence vision. They’re doing you a favour.”

In her 2002 *Nocturne* for Scapino Ballet, dancers vocalize. “I sometimes use voice as the musical element. In *Nocturne*, they grunt. When the dancer forgets her steps, she screeches, and disrupts the body frame.”

In Scottish Ballet’s 2012 *Streetcar Named Desire*, she and director Nancy Meckler wanted Stanley Kowalski to scream “Stella!”

“We did one version with and one without the scream, and decided, ‘No, we have to use it.’” Alternatively, if the

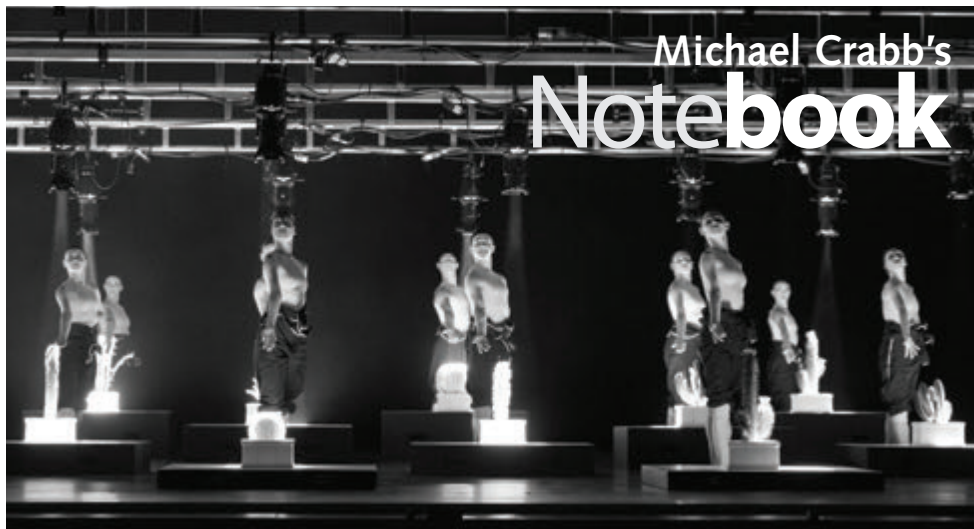
dancer’s voice isn’t musical, “it goes gimmicky.”

A colleague once warned her, “Every choreographer has to master the duet.” So she made *Before After* in 2002 for Dutch National Ballet about nuanced partnering. In it, dancers remove shirts in layered colours until there is only skin. It has drawn large audiences at Dance Salad, Jacob’s Pillow and Pacific Northwest Ballet.

What resistance does she bump into as one of the small number of female ballet choreographers working today? “I’ve had no difficulty getting jobs and respect. There are a lot of female contemporary choreographers, yet they get little buzz,” she says.

“Starting at 10, for ballet girls, it’s ‘Shut up, listen and do.’ So women don’t ask about or express feelings about a role they are learning. In ranked companies, it can cost a promotion or job.

“Artistic directors dispense ‘opportunities’ to women choreographers,” says Lopez Ochoa. “When a work is not a success, they may conclude, ‘She can’t handle it.’ Women can’t fail; the men can. Starting out, you *will* fail; so bluff at first. It takes courage. ‘Right or left out of that lift?’ Have no shame! ‘I don’t know now. I’ll know later.’ They have to trust that you will!” *DI*



Michael Crabb's Notebook

Sweden's Alexander Ekman is not the first to express his exasperation with what he deems to be the alienating, arcane obscurities of contemporary dance. Critics galore have been saying as much for years. Dwindling audiences tell their own story. What makes Ekman's public criticisms unusual is that he is an insider, a former dancer and an increasingly visible choreographer. The only other — and much higher profile insider — that readily comes to mind in this regard is Mark Morris — and he, of course, has bracing opinions about everything.

"If you want dance to have a wider audience," says the 32-year-old Ekman, "you have to look at the works being presented. If people don't go, it's surely because they don't find it interesting."

Why don't they find it interesting? Ekman insists it's because contemporary dance too often forgets that audiences deserve to be entertained, although he's quick to define what he means by that. "We've created this genre we call entertainment," Ekman explains. "We think of entertainment as light whereas real art is serious."

Ekman, who often injects wry humour into his own work, views this as a false dichotomy. "For me to entertain is not about 'show time.' It's to engage and hold the audience's attention. It's to reach out to audiences and take them somewhere." Ekman goes so far as to compare this notion of entertainment with meditation. For him, a good work of art focuses the mind acutely on a particular thought or state of consciousness.

He also thinks many contemporary dance works go on too long, exhausting whatever initial idea or choreographic content they may contain. "It can start well, then soon get boring," says Ekman. "Frankly, that's why I don't go to see a lot of things these days. I've lost interest."

He agrees the popular festival format that favours standalone works of 60 to 75 minutes is partly to blame for the over-inflation of dances that don't have the substance to sustain such length.

Ekman points out that we live in a busy world in which attention spans grow shorter and shorter. "People don't have time to waste. That's why I think of my work like film, where every second counts."

Although Ekman has spent time working in the United States, his criticisms arise mostly from his frustration with European contemporary dance — "Eurotrash," as some critics on this side of the Atlantic like to dismiss it — where government subsidies give free rein to choreographers to pursue whatever ill-conceived idea happens to float into their minds. "There's so much government support it doesn't matter if something is successful or not. That's wonderful in one way, but often it means choreographers forget about having a plan or a clear idea."

For any of us who have taken an uninitiated friend to see a contemporary dance performance and then felt impelled to apologize profusely afterward, Ekman has words of potential comfort. He's all for experimentation and professes to love watching it. The problem

is that experimental works can be a turn-off, perhaps even a permanent one, for those not prepared for a wild ride through a dark and twisting tunnel.

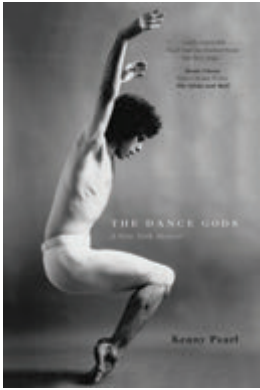
Ekman's solution again references the world of film where feature movies, apart from being rated for "mature" content, carry such descriptive labels as "action," "comedy," "drama" and so on. (He might well have included "horror," but didn't.) "Having a context is so important for audiences," suggests Ekman.

Another bone of contention for him is the way the little world of contemporary dance has developed its own self-congratulatory coterie of enabling admirers, the kind who jump to their feet and scream with delight regardless of what they've just seen — so long as it's so obscure only smart people like them could possibly appreciate it. "They just clap their hands anyway," says Ekman. He includes critics as prime suspects in this clique because he finds them willing to fabricate meaning and accord the dignity of significance to works he considers essentially vacuous.

Critics were the target of his now internationally acclaimed 2010 work, *Cacti*. The voice-over commentary by a fictional critic in *Cacti* is as much a brilliant parody of pretentious theorizing as is Ekman's merciless skewering of many choreographic tropes in the dance itself.

Naturally, like anyone intent on provoking discussion, Ekman tends to exaggerate. Apart from brief periods of relative popularity, the causes of which artistic directors and company managers try fruitlessly to divine and replicate, theatrical "art dance" has never commanded a large audience. The same is true of "new" music and opera, poetry of the literary as opposed to the versifying kind, and even much contemporary art.

This does not mean the art is bad. It could be argued that the lack of aesthetic literacy in some of the more challenging of contemporary art forms reflects grievous shortcomings in our educational systems. Audiences, through no real fault of their own, come unprepared. Still, in raising the issue and suggesting that the purveyors of contemporary dance need to be more mindful of audiences and transparent in their intentions, Ekman adds an authoritative voice to an important and continuing debate about the state of the art. *DI*



**Excerpt from *The Dance Gods:*
A New York Memoir
By Kenny Pearl
dancegodsbook.com or friesenpress.com**

Quotable

Sweat Leads to My First Broadway Solo

“ *A Time of Snow* is Ms. Graham’s exploration of the doomed love affair between student and teacher, Eloise and Abelard, in eleventh century France. The piece featured Ms. Graham as the elderly Eloise, who mainly sat on a chair, remembering her life; Argentinean dancer, Noemi Lapzeson, as the young Eloise; Bertram Ross as her teacher and lover, Abelard; and Robert Cohan as Eloise’s avenging uncle, who kills Abelard. Each of the other five male dancers in the piece played a variety of roles. At one point, I stood centre stage on a podium. My task was to announce, with a gesture of my outstretched arm, that the assassinated Abelard was about to be carried on stage.

During a Saturday night performance of my second New York season with the company, Ms. Graham sat to my left and, offstage to my right, four of my fellow male dancers were preparing to quickly hoist Abelard straight up over their heads and bring him to her.

However, that night, Bertram Ross as Abelard, costumed only in briefs, was so wet with sweat that the guys couldn’t grip his body to lift him. I watched from my podium as the music played on, and saw Ms. Graham become increasingly confused as Bert kept slipping and sliding down out of the men’s hands.

Nothing was happening on stage, so I took it upon myself to jump down from the podium and start making up a solo to fill the time, dancing every step I knew. I leapt to stage right, where the men were still struggling, to show the audience I was looking for someone. Following that came quick knee turns to Ms. Graham, who was so shocked as I rushed towards her, she almost fell off her chair. Then, seeing Bert finally airborne, I didn’t waste a minute to execute a series of big jumps that took me back to the podium.

Having finally located a towel, the men had quickly dried Bert off and then easily lifted him. Without much music left, everyone went on improvising and somehow we finished our section at the right time.

I had hoped Ms. Graham would be so impressed she would call me to her dressing room to inform me she would be adding my solo to the dance each night. But she remained happy with her version of the piece. ”

Obituary

Violette Verdy 1933-2016

French-born ballerina Violette Verdy (born Nelly Guillerm) made her stage debut, at age 11, in Roland Petit’s new ballet, *Le Poète*. She joined his company, Ballets des Champs-Élysées, shortly after. A few years later, she starred in the film *Ballerina*, which is when she took the stage name of Violette Verdy.

In 1957, Verdy guested with American Ballet Theatre, where she danced Balanchine for the first time. Then, as a member of New York City Ballet (1958-1976), Balanchine created roles on her in several works, including *Liebeslieder Walzer*, *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* and Emeralds from *Jewels*. Known for her witty, ebullient dancing, Verdy made many guest appearances, usually in 19th-century classical ballets, with major companies such as the Royal Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

Verdy briefly directed the Paris Opera Ballet (1977-1980) and was associate director of Boston Ballet (1980-1984). From 1984, she was busy teaching and coaching. Violette Verdy died on February 8 after a stroke.





Photo: Andrej Uspenski

In Conversation

Royal Ballet soloist Eric Underwood chats with Gerard Davis

Over the last few years, Royal Ballet soloist Eric Underwood has garnered something of a bad boy reputation as someone who likes partying and clubbing a little too much. It riles him.

“In the dance world, there are expectations for people to behave in a certain way. So when you’re doing something not in that box, it’s considered wild or outlandish when really it’s not — it’s just being normal,” he says. “I don’t want to be tamed.”

When we meet in the middle of the Royal Ballet’s hectic Christmas run of *Nutcracker* (he’s been dancing both the Spanish Dance and Lead Arabian), he is charm personified. Underwood speaks softly, and he has an infectious laugh as well as a striking sense of fashion — he arrives for the interview sporting an elegantly cut trench coat and a rather natty pork-pie hat. He comes across as a man at ease with himself.

Born in Washington, D.C., Underwood got into professional dancing by default. His mom encouraged him to try for a performing arts school, but when he forgot his lines in the acting

audition, he figured, “Well, at least I can do the splits!”

Dance had, in fact, always been important in his life. “Social dancing was a big part of the neighbourhood where I grew up — my mom would move the furniture and we’d dance! I still dance in my kitchen; I dance on a Friday night out.”

But it was only after failing his acting audition at the age of 14 that he started attending ballet class and simply fell in love with it. After six months, Underwood was off to New York to train at the School of American Ballet, where he was awarded the Philip Morris Foundation Scholarship. After graduating in 2000, he joined Dance Theatre of Harlem, reaching the rank of soloist before American Ballet Theatre came calling in 2003. The subsequent journey to London was almost as fortuitous as his failed acting audition.

“I’d seen the Royal Ballet perform when I was in school and was impressed. When Dance Theatre of Harlem toured to London, Monica Mason [the artistic director of the company at the time]

invited me to guest at the Royal the following season to dance *The Four Temperaments*. But by that time I’d already joined American Ballet Theatre and they were in the middle of their season. However, I wasn’t entirely happy at ABT and one day I had a rehearsal where things just went too far, so I called London on my lunch break and asked to audition.”

Since joining the Royal Ballet in 2006, alongside the more traditional repertoire such as *Manon* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Underwood has had a fruitful time creating roles for Christopher Wheeldon (in pieces such as *DGV: Danse à grand vitesse*, *Aeternum* and as the Caterpillar in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*) and has proved a favourite with Wayne McGregor, creating roles in *Raven Girl*, *Chroma*, *Wolf Works* and many others.

Moving to London wasn’t as straightforward as expected, however. “Obviously, because English is my first language, I could understand everything being said, but that didn’t mean everything made sense. Things like people saying to me, ‘Are you alright?’ [a typical British greeting]; I’d be thinking ‘What have I done? Don’t I look OK?’”

Underwood eventually settled in, and also thrived in the artistic surroundings of one of the world’s great cultural capitals. Among many other projects, he’s performed in a film by British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, danced in Gounod’s *Faust* for the Royal Opera, made a “hyper-sexual” (his words) music video with fellow Royal dancer Melissa Hamilton, posed naked for world-famous photographer David Bailey and recently found himself on the cover of the British Airways in-flight magazine.

“Doing other things than ballet is a breath of fresh air,” he says, “and it can colour my dancing in a very positive way.”

Hard though it may be to believe looking at this confident, extraordinarily toned man, life wasn’t easy growing up. “I was quite a wimpish child,” he admits. “I was really short, really skinny and had big glasses — my sister would have to defend me. If I could go back in time to my 10-year-old self, I’d tell him not to worry, that I would grow up to be big and tall and strong, and that I’d be able to stand up for myself.”

Nowadays he uses his Royal Ballet

status to try and inspire underprivileged children of all ethnicities into participating in the company's Chance to Dance program. Equally, he's spoken eloquently about elitism and racism in ballet. Refusing to put the blame solely on the companies, in an insightful article for the *Guardian* newspaper in 2013 he wrote: "A lot of ballet audiences, especially those who come for traditional pieces, tend to view ballet in a dated way. They're not interested in it reflecting today's society, but in maintaining the history and tradition of the form. Yet to go forward in today's society, we have to go forward in ballet as well; the stage should reflect what you see on, say, the tube."

It comes as no surprise then that awards and industry accolades are not the things that drive him. "I've never had any expectations of what I would achieve as a dancer. I just thought I'd give it a really, really good go and see what happened. Maybe at the end of my career I'll look back and assess what I've done, but I'm not there yet!"

I ask him what's been the proudest moment of his career so far and was given a typically personal response. "In 2009, I went on tour to America with the Royal Ballet and my mom came to watch in Washington. After performing *DGV*, Monica Mason was there and all these dignitaries, but I just wanted to get to my mom to hear what she thought. When I found her, she was like, 'Oh, that twirly thing you did, it was amazing!' I loved that; it was so honest and genuine. That was the coolest moment for me."

Underwood has a strong personal philosophy on life that underpins everything he does. "I try to be as free as I can possibly be and not judge other people or put judgments onto myself, either. Life is just one big experience and I don't know anything deeper than that. You can make your life as colourful and as interesting as possible, or you can just wait. I've painted the picture a bit, but it's not as colourful as it could be. I think there's a lot more to come!"

With that we conclude the interview and he whirls off down the corridor to get ready for the evening's show. But almost immediately he stops to chat with one of the Royal Opera House security guards and his laugh is heard lighting up Covent Garden. ⁰¹



"I try to be as free as I can possibly be and not judge other people or put judgments onto myself, either. Life is just one big experience and I don't know anything deeper than that. You can make your life as colourful and as interesting as possible, or you can just wait."

Above: Zenaida Yanowsky and Eric Underwood in the Royal Ballet's *DGV: Danse à grande vitesse*
Photo: Tristram Kenton © ROH



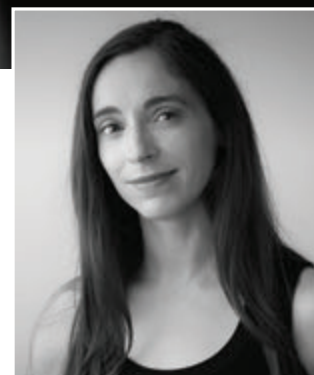
Right: Eric Underwood as the Caterpillar in the Royal Ballet's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
Photo: Johan Persson © ROH

Inside *Happyland*

A dancer finds liberation onstage in Jolene Bailie's new work

I am scared of performing. I am terrified of blanking and being stranded, dumbstruck, in front of the lights. The thought of mucking up a movement or not fulfilling an emotion gives me such anxiety that before going onstage I sometimes vomit or break out in hives. Backstage and in the wings, I'm usually slick with a cold sweat and struggle to contain nervous yawns.

And yet I keep dancing. I've become accustomed to pushing my panic into a faraway corner of my mind. But recently, something strange has been happening. The intense stage panic is beginning to fade, which is completely discombobulating for my entire sense of performance.



Choreographer Jolene Bailie
Photo: Bruce Monk

Jillian Groening and Elise Page in rehearsal
Photo: Hugh Conacher



It's a chilly grey day in December 2015, and I'm back in rehearsals with Jolene Bailie and Gearshifting Performance Works. NAFro Studios, with the white winter light coming through the windows, is cozy in the odd way that a scalding bath makes you shiver. I'd be resorting to jumping jacks if it weren't for my thick socks and turtleneck. The lofty room, located on the second floor of an old church in Winnipeg's much-loved and equally maligned Osborne Village neighbourhood, is nothing short of an historic site. Once home to Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers as well as their school, the space is now run by NAFro Dance Productions and plays host to almost every contemporary group in the city, as well as to community classes and rehearsals ranging from flamenco to ballet to Ukrainian to hip-hop to belly dance.

After about a month off from rehearsal, my body feels awkward, all tendon and bone and stiff quads. The lightness and fluidity I had possessed when we last worked in October seems a far cry from my current state. I may as well be moving on legs made of golf tees. Only my hips have benefitted from the time away; they're prone to grip and the first few days of rehearsal offer glorious, if fleeting, freedom.

I've come to find that no matter how much class I take or how often I cross-train, nothing can compare to the athleticism required during the creative process. Whether it's the unfamiliar movement, the repetition of patterns or the ferocious will to be there for the choreographer and throw myself into whatever possible action comes next, the satisfying exhaustion connected with creating a new piece never ceases to amaze me.

All told, I'm a lucky dancer.

Jolene arranges her rehearsal schedule thoughtfully. For *Aspects of Alterity*, the very first piece I did with her in 2012 when I was still a student at the School

of Contemporary Dancers, we spent the first couple of rehearsals concentrating on a complicated lifting section that happened to be at the very end of the dance. This involved me sprinting while in forward curve, at the same time as five other dancers took turns leaping and being lifted above their partner's head. This would have been intimidating to learn closer to performance time, but because Jolene rehearsed the section early on, we were able to gain the strength and endurance necessary to pull it off.

The process has been similar with her latest work, the full-length *Happyland*. In August 2015, at the very start of our rehearsals together, Jolene began by working on the most rigorous movement. We were pushed to go faster, bigger, cleaner, with more repetitions and more laps, leaving me red-faced and panting, disappointed at my tired, jelly limbs. By the time we return to the movement in December, the sequence that had felt so taxing before is now executed with ease, despite my stiff muscles. My body isn't necessarily in better or worse shape, but during the time away I had the chance to unconsciously absorb the patterns, similar to using a

good night's sleep to resolve a difficult dilemma.

When we come back to the studio, the focus is not on re-learning, but on remembering the movement. "Memory is magical," Jolene said one day over after-rehearsal coffee. "There's musicality in the body when people remember things that is so different from when they are in the midst of learning the combo."

Now that movement patterns learned earlier are engrained in our bodies, the piece starts to develop a life of its own. Jolene provides imaginative visuals to help us embody the movement more richly: "You are a massive ear against the wall," she says, or "You have long neon pink armpit hair."

Odd vignettes begin to develop, beginning with one featuring sinewy Ian Mozdzen, who lurks around the edge of the dance floor. Sitting and observing the action onstage, sometimes fiddling with his kneepads, Ian asks the audience what they think of the performance. He intimidates and aggravates. He even berates Leelee Davis as she pushes through a difficult solo. Yelling at Leelee to curve her spine more, get her leg higher, emote, emote, emote, Ian's heckling

puts into question the audience's role as passive observer.

In another section of *Happyland* that also speaks to the objectification of the performers, Elise Page and I stand on chairs, heads down with hair covering our faces. We are still as Ian discusses what does and doesn't make an "ideal" dancing body. He orders us to move, and Elise and I wiggle like cartoon characters at a sock hop.

Relationships, both onstage and in the studio, develop within the cast naturally. From the youngest dancer, Camila Schujman, who is a pre-professional student, to Krista Nicholson, an emerging artist, to Helene Le Moullec Mancini, an experienced pro, there is a firm foundation of commitment to the work as well as trust and compassion toward each other. Our relationships fuel the work, after all.

While Jolene must be open enough to be able to absorb every fragment of inspiration as it happens during rehearsal, she only uses what works for the piece

as it evolves. "You have to be like a bus that picks up everybody, but you still go on your route," she explains.

This outlook on creativity is reminiscent of what film director David Lynch has said about harnessing the imagination. In his book *Catching the Big Fish*, Lynch describes how he has learned to be receptive to good ideas and important connections, which can come when you least expect them. Like Jolene, he picks up seeds of ideas that come his way and harvests the good ones when the time is right. At some point, all these seeds begin to grow, connections are made, and the piece starts to break open.

Through her fluid method of creation, Jolene encourages sincere intention in rehearsal as well as in performance. Similar to how contact improvisation focuses on the ever-changing point of connection between two bodies, while rehearsing *Happyland* relationships between dancers and movement details are constantly evolving, and we must be open

and engaged with each other in order to deliver an honest and dynamic performance.

This type of candidness lives in moments between set movements. The glimmers of accumulated experience and genuine physical and emotional connections are the gems interpreters need to be on the watch for, ready to catch and transform into ephemeral performance magic.

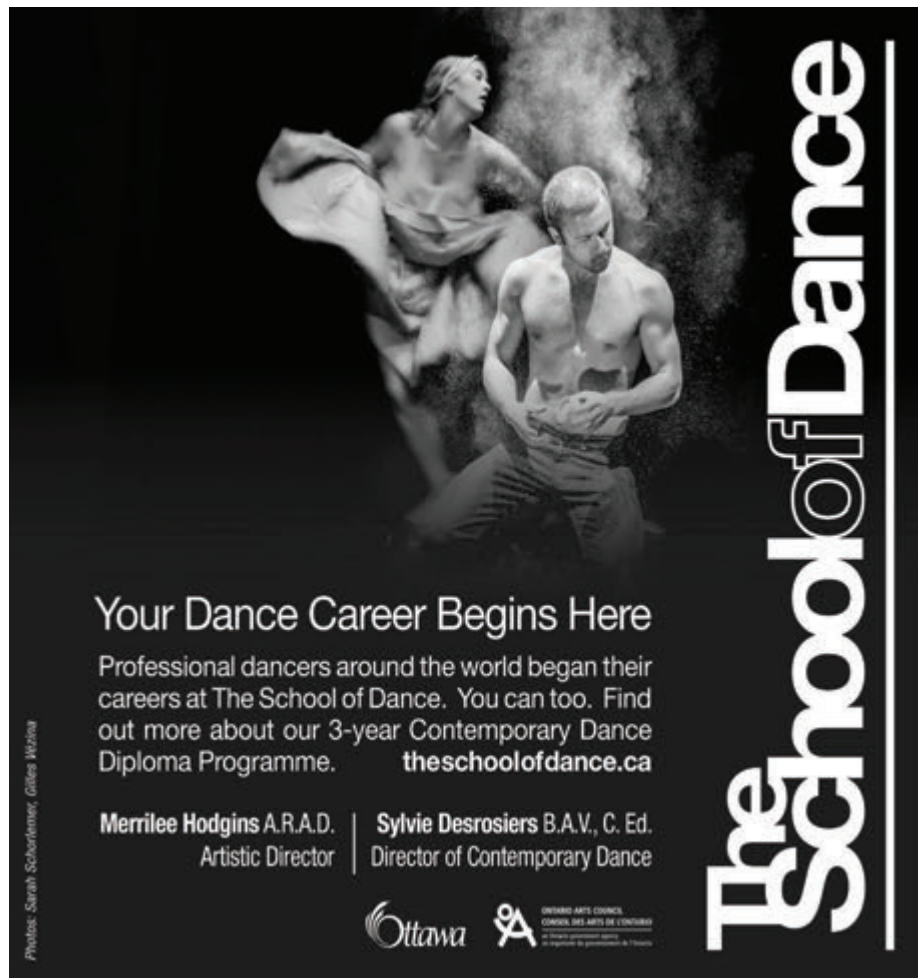
"The seconds are set, but the milliseconds are lived," Jolene explains. Striving to always find this in-between spot, this moment of destabilization, the performer has no option but to be fully present and available to whatever might happen.

"Outside the world floated like a mote in a straight shaft of glory," Canadian author Sheila Watson writes in her 1959 novel *The Double Hook*. The image is one I've held onto in order to find the precise focus Jolene demands, helping me to be aware of my tiny place within the whole, floating like dust in the sun, while still being able to concentrate and perform fully and with awareness.

It's a state of mind that has been crucial to me in combating my stage fright as we move into the last phase of our creative process in March, and begin run-throughs of *Happyland*. Entering into this focused inner-outer state is now part of my pre-performance ritual, along with the deep breathing and Pilates lumbar imprints I do in the wings. Having an expanded view of myself onstage in relationship with the audience and the world outside the theatre somehow lessens the fear of performing. Realizing that the work is bigger than seven bodies in front of a crowd has allowed me to connect to my fellow dancers and to the movement in a greater and more humbling way.

Each moment, every glance and every motion, is filled with points of inspiration, more than enough to help us keep the heart of the piece alive. A whole river of information, of visual stimuli and purpose, flows beneath the structure of *Happyland*.¹⁰



Jolene Bailie's Happyland premiered April 15-17 at the Rachel Browne Theatre in Winnipeg.



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The first time I heard about a choreographer working with a dramaturg, I felt a surge of excitement. It was the 1990s, a time when much dance was struggling to be intellectual and “deep,” often not quite pulling it off. A dramaturg, I thought, would bridge the worlds of dance (so good at dealing with emotion and image) and drama (with its history of developing ideas through text and character). Pina Bausch used a dramaturg, I heard, and look how brilliant her eccentric, intense tanztheater was. To the present day, though, I still felt a little in the dark about what exactly a dramaturg contributed to dance, until I came across Katherine Profeta’s *Dramaturgy in Motion*.

Profeta calls Bausch’s dramaturg Raimund Hoghe the first to use the title in dance, though she notes that Sergei Diaghilev’s work with the Ballets Russes might qualify him for the honour. It’s a nice nod to Diaghilev, but, after reading *Dramaturgy in Motion*, it’s hard to see the brilliant, manipulative impresario in a role that Profeta describes as a highly collaborative one, sensitive to the needs and issues of others, particularly the lead figure of choreographer.

The list of terms Profeta keeps on hand to “either support or refute, sometimes both in turn,” any requests to define the role, are broad: “researcher, editor, questioner, catalyst, historian, archivist, literary manager, outside eye, inside eye, advocate for the audience, advocate for anything *but* the audience, witness, midwife, gadfly, friend, and even amateur shrink.” In other words, it’s a changing, fluid role, fitting in where most needed at any one time, on any one project.

Having worked for more than 20 years as a dramaturg, for the last 18 with New York-based choreographer Ralph Lemon, Profeta writes with the authority of experience. With a frankness many insiders shy from — they

DRAMATURGY IN MOTION: AT WORK ON DANCE AND MOVEMENT PERFORMANCE

By Katherine Profeta
University of Wisconsin Press
uwpress.wisc.edu

fear offending collaborators, particularly the choreographer on whom they rely for employment — Profeta takes us inside the creative process for several of Lemon’s works. She shares some disagreements they have had, as well as challenges faced by the cast. Such honesty may well be key to effective dramaturgy because without the courage to tackle the job with some independence — to allow for the clash of ideas — a dramaturg is surely only a supporter or sounding board.

Profeta was a student at the Yale School of Drama when she began collaborating with Lemon, who hadn’t worked with a dramaturg before. Helpfully, she came with training as both a dancer and actor, and was a founding member of Elevator Repair Service theatre company, for whom she had worked as a choreographer. Lemon was beginning an intercultural dance theatre collaboration with two African-American performers (including himself) and seven West Africans. By taking us into the studio for this work, *Geography*, and for several others, Profeta lays out the territory in which she fulfills her insider/outsider role: a dramaturg, it becomes clear, needs both distance from the work and intimate knowledge of it.

In one of many practical examples of what she actually does, Profeta describes research-

MEDIA | WATCH

ing mourning rituals from various cultures, including the work of a professional mourner in China, for Lemon’s *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* This proved helpful to one of the performers, Okwui Okpokwasili, as she rehearsed a challenging section in which she had “to cry for eight minutes straight, really cry, without pretending . . .” Although the section was developed in private with Lemon, Okpokwasili later told Profeta that the research about the professional mourner had helped her find the genuineness and purpose of her own public display of crying.

In another example of the dramaturg at work, found in a section of the book frankly titled *Butting Heads*, Profeta expresses her concern over whether the audience had enough context to read a particular group section in *Come Home Charley Patton* “as anything more than beautiful abstract movement, and would it be OK with [Lemon] if that was all they saw? If not, was there a way to reveal a little more of the context?”

While the language of the book is sometimes a tad thick in academic-styled doggedness and detail (Profeta is an assistant professor at Queens College of the City University of New York), *Dramaturgy in Motion* is a valuable introductory text that lays out the bigger historical picture as well as the nitty-gritty realities of a working dance dramaturg. There is also much to think about in terms of developing a dramaturgical point of view as a tool that could be useful for the whole team of collaborators, including the dancers.

— KAIJA PEPPER



Katherine Profeta and Ralph Lemon at work in 2014
Photo: MANCC / Courtesy of Ralph Lemon



A MAN OF DANCE/UN HOMME DE DANSE

Directed by Marie Brodeur

www.comarie.ca

83 minutes

Filmmaker Marie Brodeur has a big winner on her hands, to the delight of Montreal dance personality Vincent Warren. Her latest bilingual documentary, *A Man of Dance / Un Homme de danse*, about dancer, teacher and historian Warren, was chosen as the best Canadian work at the 34th annual Festival international du film sur l'art (FIFA) in March.

A former dancer, Brodeur is an award-winning filmmaker who has made several dance films (including *Anik Bissonnette: Danser ma vie* and *La danse en Asie*). With *A Man of Dance*, she echoes Warren's own charm and elegance by telling his story of living the love of dance situated within a brief history of contemporary Quebec.

Sensitively directed, *A Man of Dance* follows the gentle, cultured artist through his multiple careers during some of Quebec's greatest sociopolitical upheavals. Now an active 78, Warren was once the poster boy for Montreal dance, hugely sought-after as a partner and almost outrageously popular among audiences during his 18 years with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Even decades after his retirement in 1979, his image in the centre of a huge photo tapestry is the first thing theatre-goers see as they enter Place des Arts' main hall.

Although his performances in *Tommy*, the rock ballet by Fernand Nault that toured the world for several years in the 1970s, brought him cult status among fans, the dance world acclaimed him as a devoted, intuitive artist and generous partner. He could dance anything, from classics like *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* to contemporary pieces like *Tommy*, *Cérémonie*

and *Adieu Robert Schumann*. He also starred in Norman McLaren's renowned dance film, *Pas de deux*, made for the National Film Board of Canada. After retiring at 40 at the zenith of his career, Warren became a respected teacher, dance historian, curator and lecturer.

He narrates *A Man of Dance* with the power and presence of his stage persona. The documentary follows Warren through a period of great upheaval: he is moving from the beloved apartment where he has lived for 47 years, ever since "the love of my life," renowned New York poet Frank O'Hara, was killed in a car accident in 1966. Although he has already donated much of his vast collection of antique dance-related art and out-of-print books to the library that bears his name, Montreal's Bibliothèque de la danse Vincent-Warren, there is still lots to pack and he does so slowly, sadly.

He bids goodbye to many objects that can't move with him to the smaller apartment, musing on memories hilarious, thoughtful, painful, social, political and personal. He recognizes that he is an old man now with hair long and grey. Yet he projects such vigour, passion and curiosity when he speaks of dance, beauty and love. "Great dance," he proclaims, "is spiritual."

His voice is soft, sometimes fading like the light in which Brodeur bathes him. She splices his reminiscences with marvellous old photos, rare snippets of archival dance sequences from early television and film, and testimonies from former partners (Véronique Landory, Annette av Paul, Jeanne Renaud), choreographer Brian Macdonald, friends and others. Their formality contrasts nicely with Warren's casual, insightful and often hilarious commentary delivered in rapid-fire English and French, sometimes in the same sentence.

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Warren was born the youngest of 14 children in Jacksonville, Florida. All of his brothers played football in high school but, at age 11, he saw the British film *The Red Shoes* and his life changed. Beginning a lifelong habit, he collected dance memorabilia and very soon enrolled in ballet class paid for with earnings from his paper route. He went to New York City as a scholarship student at Ballet Theater School, now the School of American Ballet, and joined the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. Then he met O'Hara, who introduced him to the city's experimental arts scene. Warren explains he "was one of those rare ones that did both" (ballet and contemporary), breaking strict boundaries that segregated ballet and modern dance in the process. He has followed all the arts ever since.

Dance contracts were short in those days, leaving Warren plenty of time to freelance. He joined Les Grands Ballets Canadiens as a guest in 1961—despite being almost barred from entering Canada by a border official because he mentioned he was gay. He shut his mouth and went to another border crossing.

A Man of Dance captures the essence of Warren—his humour, charm, melancholy, passion and perseverance. It is so engaging that I fell too far under its spell at its premiere and forgot my journalistic responsibilities, so had to return for a more considered look. My seduction is a tribute to the skills of both Brodeur and Warren.

— LINDE HOWE-BECK



Les Grands Ballets Canadiens' Vincent Warren (centre) in Fernand Nault's *Cérémonie*
Photo: © Donald Labelle

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INSIDE ED

Continuum's Fluid Strength

by Amber Elizabeth Gray

Solid as we may seem, a mostly fluid constitution is our inheritance: much of our body is made up of water, just like a jellyfish. Free-floating in the ocean, the strength of a jellyfish's liquid pulsations creates form, image, movement and beauty. The practice of Continuum, which derives from the earthy undulation of Haitian dance, recognizes our fluid origins and composition. Continuum suggests that movement is more than mechanical, functional or expressive; it is also sacred. It is not what we do, but who we are.

We are not a final product; we are a species travelling an evolutionary pathway with unknown possibilities to innovate, adapt, complexify and change. Research suggests that movement is a potent way to grow the brain, which may be the pathway to a more evolved body with as of yet unimagined creative potential. This is where dance and Continuum meet.

When dance is based on repetitive movements by overly exerted muscles shaped in defined patterns, there is less opportunity for diversity and complexity. When we introduce the idea of fluidity, we amplify the "sound" of movement and create many more ways for a movement to express itself. Dancers shape and define movements with emotion, precision, artistry and other attributes that connect the dancer to the dance and to the audience through form. Our ability to draw up movement from internal reservoirs of dynamic fluidity, versus static repetition, offers dancers a way to increase the potency of their art.

Think of the use of ultrasound in physical therapy; the introduction of sound waves or frequencies to tissue changes the density of the tissue. Just as ultrasound can dissolve scar tissue, when we use breath-made-audible, or sound, inside our bodies, we can change the density of our tissue by

promoting fluidity. When tissue softens and becomes suppler, we are stronger. We are supported by water's strength and capacity to shape our muscles, and therefore our body and its movement. We literally enhance the capacity of the body to shape, move and express by breathing sound streams that promote fluid undulations and micro-movements, creating new and innovative textures, nuances and affects below the larger movements that create dance.

To try this practice, make an O sound. O is one of Continuum's classic sounds; it's a tubular sound that can create pathways and help tissue to organize, gather, tonify and cohere. It's also universally accessible and familiar; almost everyone has a reference point for the O. Sometimes it's simply alphabetical, sometimes sacred and ancient.

A simple way to teach an O sound is to describe it as an OM without the MMM. Without tensing or straining the mouth, inhale and on the exhale make an O sound, sort of like a foghorn. A powerful way to experience the tissue-shifting quality of the O is to plié simultaneously. When you begin the downward movement of the plié, exhale and send the O through your spine, bottom to top, and imagine it lengthening your spine while you plié. As you rise up, sound an O through your spine, top to bottom. Rest. Repeat this several times, noting the influence of the O on your spine as you plié.

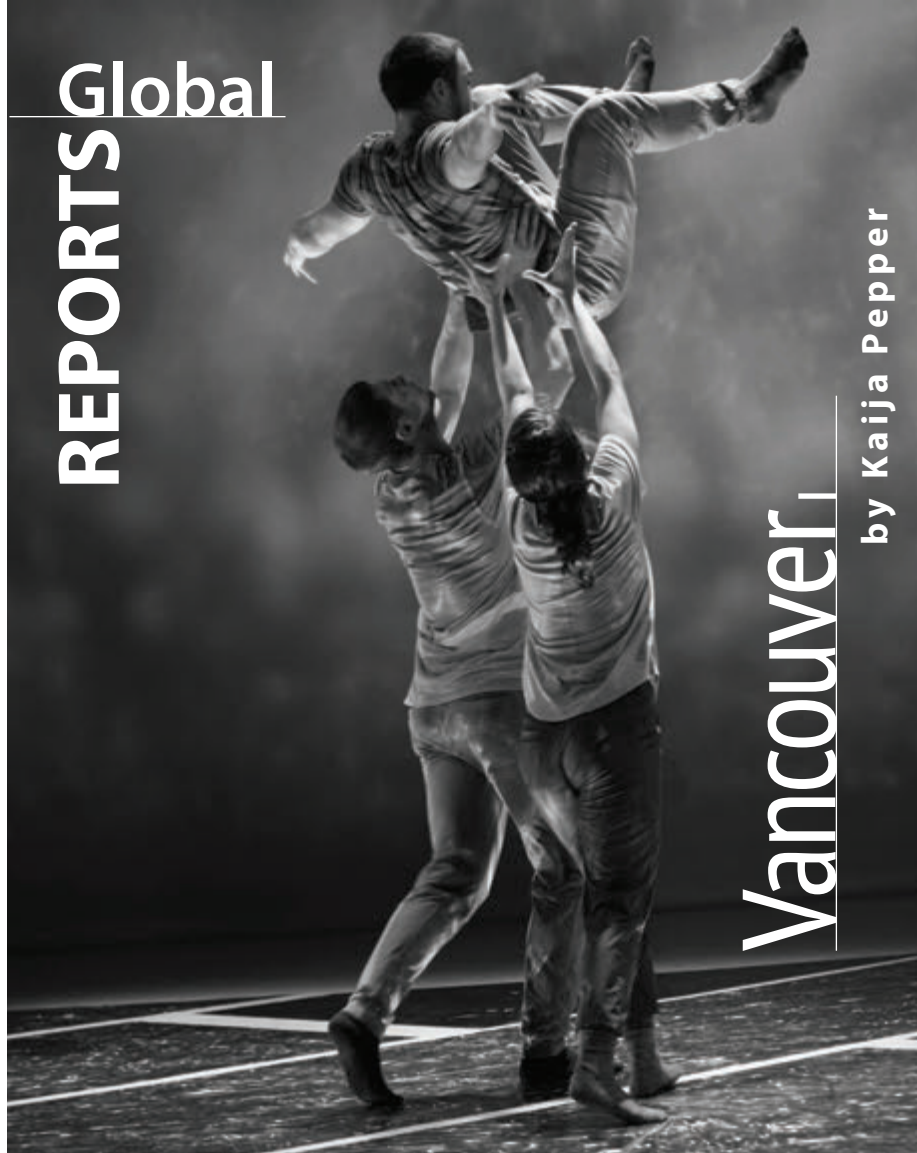
Sending the O into the muscles of the buttocks and thighs can increase muscular coherence, strengthening and grounding the quality and action of a plié. Sending it into the spine can support and enhance the lengthening elegance of a plié. Our body's response to the sound is the echo of fluid in our tissue.

After practising this several times, rest a moment, and allow whatever micro-movements, pulsations or waves arise to move through you, and *move you*. Notice what's new and novel, and what creative possibilities arise. This being moved is the essence of Continuum Movement. ^{DI}

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**Above right: Todd Stone (foreground) in Continuum class led by Linda Rabin in Montreal
Photo: Tony Chong**

Amber Elizabeth Gray is a dancer, an authorized Continuum Movement teacher and a dance movement therapist.



Vancouver

by Kaija Pepper

Three major festivals upped the ante in terms of dance in Vancouver over the last quarter. The first was PuSh, whose heart is in theatre but that always includes a good infusion of dance and movement-based performance. PuSh often hits the jackpot with the latter, as in their presentation of *L'Immédiat*, in which eight performers are partnered by an assortment of props that seem to have a life, and a will, of their own. Objects shift shape and position at the most inconvenient times — a chair slumps or the rungs of a ladder collapse, a table slides away or lights crash down — creating a world where mayhem, and slapstick, is just around the corner.

Camille Boitel, who won the first Jeunes Talents Cirque award in 2002 (the same year he founded his French company Association Immédiat), created this anarchic world, where bodies lurch and lunge in dangerous-looking relationships with

props that misbehave. Yet, even when the Playhouse stage was a pile of wayward objects, these men and women never gave in to despair: still they tossed and tumbled their way forward. Their acrobatic dance was full of surprises and fun, a welcome addition to the more typical dance offerings from England and France also at PuSh: Aakash Odedra in *Inked* and *Murmur*; Liz Santoro and Pierre Godard in their *Relative Collider*; and Nacera Belaza's duet, *Le Temps Scellé*. All worthy, if a little dry; it's the whimsy of *L'Immédiat* that remains most vividly in my mind.

Chutzpah! festival has been generous with the amount of dance in its performing arts line-up ever since artistic managing director Mary-Louise Albert, an ex-contemporary dancer, took over the helm a dozen years ago. As well, having danced on many Vancouver stages herself, Albert's loyalty to the local scene is unwavering. This time around, Shay Kuebler and his company, Radical System Art, opened the

dance programming with the premiere of *Telemetry Volume 1*.

In his hour-long work, Kuebler pondered the body as a kind of transmitter and communicator (telemetry is about measuring and transmitting information). What was shared here was primarily dynamic interaction: between the ensemble of five dancers; between the ensemble and a low-hanging spot that swings aggressively toward them; and between the ensemble and guest artist, tap dancer Danny Nielsen.

Much of the work is about the pulse and flow of the quintet, who slink like gangsters through the night, or maybe like cats in an alley: there's urban drive and tense tableaux throughout. Kuebler and Lexi Vajda offer contrasting forces in their striking duet. Kuebler uses his powerful arms and shoulders to balance and toss himself with the hyper-speed and martial attack he is known for, while Vajda seems to take all the time in the world to stretch upward into a slow back arch that in reality last a fleeting few seconds.

The work is strongly staged, including a high-tech configuration that allows Nielsen's tapping to trigger lighting cues. But the technical part isn't belabored, and what we are left free to concentrate on is the dance, featuring a lone tapper in a sea of contemporary, urban-styled dancers (there's tap, swing, jazz and house moves in their mix). There is both sense and magic in the way the same rhythmic connection drives the two sides — the soloist and the ensemble — to very different physical conclusions.

Chutzpah! always includes an international component, favouring Israeli artists (its home is the Norman Rothstein Theatre at the Jewish Community Centre), but not exclusively. This year, it was good to see Rome-based Spellbound Contemporary Ballet in the line-up, making their Western Canadian debut in four of artistic director Mauro Astolfi's own works. Though the territory was the same dark urban one favoured by many choreographers today, Astolfi also has a lighter, even sentimental touch, as with the red rose that a dancer gives to a member of the audience at the end of the final piece, *She is on the Ground*. The evening rambled a little, but the clarity and accomplishment of his ten performers kept bringing things back on track.

The 16th Vancouver International Dance Festival arrived with the stylistic mix it now favours, after the early but-tot years. Like Chutzpah!, looking at one



local work and one from away seems a good way to provide a sense of the scope of the eclectic festival.

Swedish company Memory Wax, in collaboration with Cuba's Danza Teatro Retazos, presented two works that filled the downtown Playhouse theatre with the kind of heart and soul that is rare in contemporary pure-dance pieces today. Everybody wants to be taken seriously as a philosopher or scientist, or just a cynic.

Possible Impossible, choreographed by Miguel Azcue and Johanna Jonasson from Memory Wax, presents, according to the program note, a "surprising world of dreams," a place where "the impossible becomes possible." Dreams are a handy hook on which to hang the fantastical scenarios featuring large animal masks, full-length mirror frames or smooth white facemasks, though not quite enough to build an arc through 50 minutes. But the spirit with which the eight dancers from Retazos inhabited the various episodes, and the musicality of their movement, was truly exciting.

Crisálida, choreographed by Azcue for eight dancers (again, all from Retazos), seemed to be about attraction and the force of community. There was a sea storm of warmly lit flesh in one early section featuring male-female couples, a flow of rhythm and force, that ends when the women slide down their partners' bodies like silk. The dancers own the space not by hard projection of personality or technique, but by grace: this absorbing dance was musical and rhythmic, not complicated but compelling.

The six Vancouver dancers of Company 605 co-created *Vital Few*, directed by artistic co-directors Lisa Gelley and Josh Martin. Over 65 minutes, the dancers seem connected to each other by instinct, repeatedly flocking together and then wandering apart. Martin, who also dances in the piece, is always able to find a dramatic pulse in the company's signature tense, hunkering poses, and in the twitches and jerks that lead into them: he's the kind of dancer your eye keeps returning to. Petite Sophia Wolfe — physically so different from Martin, who is tall and solidly built — is also highly watchable, the creamy texture of her moves bringing something hearty to the stop-and-go aesthetic that can veer toward being a bit cold and robotic. Her dance may be programmed, but, like Martin's, there's a warm pulse inside.

Finally, with festivals over until summer, the city's popular DanceHouse series ended its

season with Companhia Urbana de Dança from Brazil. The pulse inside these dancers was hot; they really felt the music, but, also, it seemed to really matter to them to be onstage dancing for us. In the two works presented here, choreographed by artistic director Sonia Destri Lie with the dancers, the one woman and eight men showed us not just steps but their whole personality.

The subtlety of *ID:Entidades* (2009) is rare for a hip-hop/contemporary dance mix: there was often a quiet push into the cool moves, and silence and stillness before the storm of street-styled choreography. *Na Pista* (2012) was a more conventional theatrical work, built around a loose idea of a dancehall, complete with a rotating silver ball overhead. Musically, there were some heavy dance beats here, pushing bodies into the odd angles and curves of street-inspired choreography. The bright faces of these Rio de Janeiro dancers, the quirky intensity of their moves, and the straightforward enthusiasm of hips and shoulders brought the audience to such a giddy state of happiness that the group's encore turned into a party as we stood up and clapped and danced in front of our seats. ▫



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Hats off again to Toronto's Canadian Stage! During seven seasons at the helm, artistic and general director Matthew Jocelyn has turned the erstwhile rather predictable middlebrow theatre company into an exciting platform for what he justifiably calls "genre-defying" performance. Jocelyn has brought the city a steady stream of stimulating programming from other parts of Canada and abroad, including a healthy component of movement-based work.

Last season, one of Jocelyn's biggest successes was *Kiss & Cry*, the invention of Belgium's Michèle Anne De Mey and Jaco Van Dormael. It's a poignant, reflective narrative, flecked with humour, about an old woman and the five loves in her life, told through a stunning smoke-and-mirrors amalgam of real-time videography and finger dancing, staged within various miniaturized settings and visible both in its actual raw form and on the big screen.

Kiss & Cry returned to Canadian Stage in February as the welcome lead-in to the presentation of the same team's most recent work, *Cold Blood*. The technological magic is similar, but the content decidedly darker and mordant, the humour verging on macabre. Instead of a narrative, we have a litany of "last moments," seven deaths in all, sordid, self-inflicted or sad, none of them heroic.

Again we can observe the mechanics, the way the projected performance is achieved. Again, too, there is finger dancing, so unimaginably expressive and convincing that you wonder why dancers bother with anything else. Highlights include a slinky pole dance, a six-hand recreation of Maurice Béjart's iconic choreographic interpretation of Ravel's *Boléro*, and a glittering Fred-and-Ginger, Hollywood-style number with thimbles for tap shoes.

Canadian Stage, like the National Arts Centre, was all set to present the only

Canadian appearances of Spain's avant-garde flamenco dancer Israel Galván and Britain's kathak-trained Akram Khan in *Torobaka*. Then Galván badly injured his knee, and *Torobaka's* mid-February Ottawa engagement had to be cancelled. However, Jocelyn — unlike some presenters in the U.S. who also cancelled — asked Khan, a favourite in Toronto, if the show could be reconfigured without Galván. Khan gave it some thought, got Galván's blessing and, in collaboration with the show's four musicians, reinvented it for Toronto as *Toro*.

Without having seen the original, one can hardly make a comparison, but in itself *Toro* was an imaginative and finely performed meeting of two different but rhythmically based dance forms, in this instance with the musicians playing a much more central, interactive role. As usual, Khan, who at age 41 and after his serious ankle injury, now carefully paces his dazzling displays of whiplash turns and foot-stamping, was mesmerizing.

After a four-year absence, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returned to Toronto's vast Sony Centre for the Performing Arts with two programs, only one of which included *Revelations*, Ailey's iconic 1960 ode to the black American experience. This left more room for Robert Battle, artistic director since 2011, to program works that illustrate his gradual repositioning of the company from its traditional mode of showy spiritual uplift — "the Ailey experience" — to something more akin to a contemporary dance troupe that seriously wants to be part of the evolving art form.

There was still plenty of easy-on-the-eye, traditional fare such as *Toccato* from Talley Beatty's 1960 *Come and Get the Beauty of It Hot*, and Ailey's 1972 male solo, *Love Songs*, but the urgency of Rennie Harris' 2015 *Exodus* and, from the same year, Battle's *Awakening*, brought out a different kind of visceral power from Ailey's famously sexy, athletic dancers.

On the classical front, Hong Kong Ballet managed to get within easy driving distance of downtown Toronto with appearances in Burlington to the southwest and Markham, with its large Asian community, to the northeast. Sadly, neither venue could accommodate the company's full-length production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, which was only shown during its earlier Ottawa tour stop. Instead, we got a mixed bill that seemed chosen less for its choreographic interest than as a platform for Swedish-born artistic director Madeleine Onne's impressive, well-trained dancers.

Even in a work as vulgar and silly as Nacho Duato's 2002 soft-core, homoerotic S&M fantasy, *Castrati*, the men were more expressive and less concerned with showing off their technique than is often the case in such circumstances. The company's women sparked on their toes in Krzysztof Pastor's *In Light and Shadow*, their arms contrastingly slicing or gently stroking the air with sensitive attention to the varying impulses of the J.S. Bach music.

As for the home team, the National Ballet of Canada, its winter season featured a revival of Bournonville's *La Sylphide* — it comes around every decade or so — in a new staging by Johan Kobborg, but set in overly ornate designs by Desmond Heeley, rented from American Ballet Theatre.

Those who attended — *La Sylphide* was not a hot ticket — seemed to enjoy the ballet's quaint charm, with some excellent dancing from lead ballerinas Jurgita Dronina and Svetlana Lunkina. They were partnered respectively by Harrison James, another confident debut, and Polish-born Dawid Trzenimiech, brought in at doubtless unwelcome cost as a guest-artist replacement for an injured Francesco Gabriele Frola.

Sandwiched between this and yet another run of *Romeo and Juliet*, there was welcome respite from storytelling in a mixed bill featuring Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* and *Rubies*, plus the Canadian premiere of Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman's *Cacti*.

Ekman's ironical ballet, poking fun simultaneously at pretentious critics and their choreographic equivalents, featured 16 dancers on movable plinths, an onstage string quartet playing improvised Schubert fragments, lighting battens that lowered so far as to risk crushing the dancers, a kinetically witty pas de deux complete with choreographic non sequiturs and a running dialogue, and, of course, cacti of varying sizes and types; it was all deliberately nonsensical and delightful and the undoubted hit of the season. ¹⁰

The Manitoba premiere of *Sara Riel: The Long Journey*, a collaborative production from 2014 by Regina choreographer Robin Poitras and Métis visual artist Edward Poitras, was a highlight of the annual Festival du Voyageur. It was made for Vancouver dance artist Yvonne Chartrand, the artistic director of Compagni V'ni Dansi, joined by actor Gregory Coyes. Inspired by the Prairie province's Métis founder Louis Riel's younger sister Sara, the piece was presented on Louis Riel Day, February 15, at the Rachel Browne Theatre. The highly imagistic work also included an organic soundscape by Charlie Fox teeming with naturalistic sounds of rushing water, crickets and mosquitoes.

The episodic work particularly compelled with its stunning visuals. It opened with Chartrand shrouded by a white silk cloth billowing like drifting snow, with seemingly hundreds of flickering votive candles placed downstage evoking a galaxy of stars. Poitras' seamless tapestry of movement is effectively laced with fleeting moments of aboriginal powwow dance. We journey with Sara throughout her short life, from her St. Boniface birthplace to the Grey Nuns' Convent, where she became the first Métis Grey Nun, in Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan. Sara died of tuberculosis in 1883.

Voiceovers of her letters, including her premonition of her brother's tragic death, added further sonic texture. Some sections felt overly cryptic, and some aspects of historical narrative became obfuscated. Nevertheless, the work's final moments in which Chartrand stands poised, her

pulsing, blood-red lit hands evoking her own beating heart, resonated with imagery about ties that bind, serving as a tribute to a lesser-known Canadian heroine.

The show also featured Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers' emerging artist company, Verge, joyfully jiggling (in choreography by Chartrand, excerpted from Poitras' *Buffalo Pound Round Dance*), as well as the Norman Chief Memorial Dancers, who nearly brought down the house with traditional step dancing.

NAfro presented its season-closer at the Gas Station Arts Centre at the end of February. The mixed bill included the premiere of Mozambique-born artistic director Casimiro Nhussi's *The Image*, a powerful work reflecting a true melting pot of multicultural stylistic forces and one of his strongest to date.

For the past 14 years, Nhussi has explored the combustion of African and contemporary dance to greater and lesser degrees. In his latest creation, he has now fully synthesized these two dance forms, where the whole truly did become greater than its parts. As the ensemble of five dancers pull and tug at their loose overcoats, it is as though attempting to shed their own skin. Each takes a turn with dynamic solos — Dammecia Hall and Salé Almirante Alberto's no-holds-barred performances were standouts — before rejoining their tribe in Nhussi's whirling leaps and wild arm swings that increasingly morph into joyful African dance.

The program also included the premiere of longtime NAfro member Paula Blair's *Spoken*, as well as Nhussi's 2004 *Let Me Dance Before I'm Gone*. The evening's

only weakness lay in the fact that NAfro's live music sets, which typically alternate with the choreographed dances, have now morphed into the lion's share of the program. Thus, the company risks blurring its core identity as one of the city's oldest and most respected dance troupes to that of a music-based showcase.

Winnipeg inter-media artist Freya Björg Olafson presented her latest creation, *CPA (Consistent Partial Attention)*, also in February. The 85-minute, technologically infused work performed by Olafson, local dance artist Lise McMillan and Montreal-based James Phillips explores "what it means to be present" in a world obsessed with digital screens. The trio responds in the moment to pre-sourced internet footage of real-life individuals improvising in their homes through several computer monitors strategically positioned around the Asper Centre for Theatre and Film's stark white stage — itself becoming a screen for the dancers.

Olafson's gutsy, daring works — including her dazzling *HYPER_* (2013) and *AVATAR* (2009) — always fascinate as thought-provoking commentary for a postmodern age. However, with *CPA*, she creates a paradox: how to present a work positing the impact of technology without distancing the audience by its own use of technology? Therein lies the show's fatal flaw. Seeing three, committed dancers wholly engaged with screens — rather than their audience — quickly unsettled in terms of an overall theatrical production, ironically hampering its own communication of ideas by disengagement from real, flesh-and-blood people. This might well have been precisely Olafson's point; if so, she succeeded in spades.

She artfully balances the piece with humour, with Phillips displaying his comedic chops as he dons a pair of headphones and recites text that gradually distorts and breaks up. McMillan is always solid, and it's always a pleasure to see Olafson onstage in her own technological "natural habitat."

Hugh Conacher's lighting design includes geometrical windowpane grids cast onstage. The finale in which the ensemble comes together — eyes still glued to their respective screens — is heightened by looming shadows cast on the upstage wall. There's even a trompe d'oeil as four silhouetted figures magically emerge from the live trio, creating an entire company of pulsating dancers — both live and ephemeral. *DI*



Yvonne Chartrand in Robin Poitras' *Sara Riel: The Long Journey*
Photo: Chris Randle



It is a splendid sight: a stage full of power and contrast — elegant, ebony dancers with white feathers in their hair, shaking their hips in short, floppy, white tutus. Fluttering their hands high and well behind their heads, they stomp barefoot or point them in fleet classical poses.

Except in name and in snippets of Tchaikovsky's famous score, Dada Masilo's reimagined *Swan Lake* bears no resemblance to its 19th-century prototype. Joyous, gorgeous and funny, this thoroughly modern work is no fairy tale despite its title. Masilo's ballet for her South African company Dance Factory Johannesburg is a subversive fusion of classical and African dance that attacks some of the scourges of contemporary South African life — like homophobia, AIDs and forced marriage. In this version, Siegfried rejects his mother's choice for his bride in favour of a handsome male swan.

In a froth of wagging hips, men and women execute far-reaching ports de bras and the high extensions of ballet, along with audible stomping and gyrating hips. Unabashed goofiness permeates many moments. Splat! Women collapse on the ground — to Tchaikovsky! A narrator/marriage broker/mother tells the story at lightning speed, and dancers mutter, squeal or dispute vociferously, while pulsating through unusual classical and tribal combinations.

It's smooth, fascinating, even heroic in daring and execution. Masilo, a tiny tornado, dances the role of the bride. Siegfried is a delicate gay man who opposes the marriage with a forlorn, whispered, "I can't." He is ignored. He loves a man, Odile, the

only member of the cast to perform on pointe. Odette, Odile and Siegfried are portrayed as victims, but ultimately it is the latter who is sacrificed, leaving both his chosen and his intended to mourn him.

Soweto-born Masilo, internationally known for revising classics like *Carmen* and *Romeo and Juliet*, made her Canadian premiere with *Swan Lake* at Place des Arts in January.

A month later, also at Place des Arts, Shanghai Ballet made its Montreal debut. Judging by its production of *Coppélia*, the Chinese company deserves to be ranked among the most polished and best trained in the world.

With their uniformly light-muscléd physiques — fragile, long-limbed women and tall, narrow men — they display an astonishing ability to float like dust motes across the floor, their technique so dazzling that members of the corps are frequently indistinguishable from principals.

Choreographed in 1870 by Arthur Saint-Léon, *Coppélia* is a gently comic ballet of misadventures. Fan Xiaofeng's Swanilda, a villager engaged to Franz, performed by Wu Husheng, was all sweetness and light, even when stirred to anger and revenge by her intended, who didn't hide his infatuation with Coppélia, a puppet he mistakes for a girl. Westerners generally interpret Swanilda with a good deal more edge, but Fan's jilted Swanilda maintained ladylike behaviour, her graceful footwork tracing lattice patterns, ankles strong as elasticized steel. By Act 2, although eschewing displays of all-out rage, she began to show some backbone as well as humour in her resolve to trick her fiancé.

Pierre Lacotte's excellent adaptation of Acts 1 and 2, replete with well-mastered mime that flitted like conversation, was set in a mythical European locale, providing an excuse for embroidered dirndl skirts and short leather boots. The stage filled with red-and-white costumes and high-energy mazurkas that were whipped to an ideal fever pitch by Oleksiy Baklan conducting the Grands Ballets Canadiens orchestra.

Lacotte alone provided the choreography for Act 3, putting a damper on an already successful evening. In contemporary productions, Act 3 is frequently eliminated. To honour the original, Lacotte produced a conventional display of diversissements that were not only superfluous, but entirely unrelated to the rest of the production. For instance, the setting was not a village but a lord's castle even though the first two acts dealt exclusively with village life.

The effect was jarring. Villagers suddenly morphed from charmingly expressive to aristocratically sophisticated. Costumes and sets appeared imported from another production. Dancing, although technically as spot-on as ever, traded exuberance for lackluster. Such a pity for such a splendid company.

The old adage that "Time passes quickly when you're having fun" has come true for me. I realized recently I've been writing this column for 26 years, the longest period I've been regularly associated with any publication in my career as a journalist/dance writer.



The Shanghai Ballet in *Coppélia*
Photos: Courtesy of the Shanghai Ballet

There's another old saying: "All good things must come to an end," and that, also, has come true for me. I have reluctantly decided that this is the last report I shall write for *Dance International*. It's a bittersweet time to be sure, but one that allows me to look back at all the fun and privilege I've enjoyed writing about the plethora of theatre dance, both local and imported, which has graced Montreal theatres since 1990.

Back then, Montreal was newly established as one of the world's major dance

centres, with companies like Marie Chouinard, O Vertigo, La La La Human Steps and many others beginning to attract international acclaim. The older Ballets Jazz de Montréal (BJM), which produced many of the talented dancers who helped to fuel the successes of those younger companies, continued to evolve by expanding its appeal as one of the world's most dependably upbeat and challenging groups to watch. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens also redefined itself, becoming a sensational contemporary dance company instead of just another

regional ballet group. Watching the Montreal dance community blossom has been an exciting and profoundly humbling experience for me.

I owe much to *Dance International* for its dedication to the dance world, for the camaraderie and frequent inspiration it has offered, and for its assurance that dance is everywhere and for always.

Be well. I'll see you at the dance. *or*

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In 1987, the third year of his tenure, San Francisco Ballet artistic director Helgi Tomasson commissioned from the young William Forsythe a dance called *New Sleep*, which was like nothing ever seen previously on the stage of the War Memorial Opera House. This was movement theatre before there was a name for it. Forsythe promised Tomasson a second original work, but he got awfully busy in Frankfurt and elsewhere for a couple of decades. So Tomasson contented himself with borrowing pre-existing Forsythiana (most of it, admittedly, enthralling).

Then, on January 24, Forsythe made good on his three-decade-old commitment with the North American premiere of *Pas/Parts 2016*, originally made in 1999 for the Paris Opera Ballet, but, according to the choreographer, 75 per cent revised, with great attention given to smoothing the almost imperceptible transitions between the 21 sections. This was (and now is) Forsythe's last pure ballet piece. At the opening, it seemed dense in detail, yet airy in effect, classical in its language, pointe work and épaulement, but resolutely contemporary in its sensibility, and exploratory in the Forsythe manner. The choreographer juxtaposes solos for some of the 15 dancers with small ensembles, bringing on the entire complement for the fourth episode and the finale.

Although alluring, the bare-bones scenic apparatus keeps us focused on the

dancing. The women wear multi-coloured bathing suits. The men sport outfits with black and green tops. Their world is Forsythe's off-white, three-sided environment, evocatively lit, and it spins on its axis for 37 minutes.

Again, as he has so often done, the choreographer called upon composer Thom Willems to fashion an electronic score. What sounds like the upstairs plumbing evolves into high-pitched whistling and spare chords, hints of cha-cha and even vocalizations. Forsythe uses the music to build contrapuntal structures, as arms and legs move in directions they're not supposed to go, and the effect is oddly harmonious.

Alone, Sofiane Sylve launched the piece and her high extensions signaled this as Forsythe territory. Then, Yuan Yuan Tan and Wei Wang met in a duet of skewed balances, arms reaching impossible distances. Later, Sylve returned for a colloquy with the extraordinary Carlo Di Lanno, in which the shifting of weight assumed a major role.

Throughout, the choreography seemed pared down, yet voluptuous in its physical explorations. As the piece proceeded, it started to look like a pageant, showcasing the San Francisco Ballet's abundant dancing riches. Forsythe capitalized on individual dancers' strengths. Near the end in a male trio, Joseph Walsh spun in place, spotlighting his speed and flexible wrists; James Sofranko revelled in his expressive torso;

Francisco Mungamba displayed rhythmic acuity.

Forsythe draws his performers from all over the roster, so it is not unusual to find a corps member like Mungamba involved in a duet with a principal like Maria Kochetkova, looking like they belonged with each other. It takes a genius like Forsythe to find these empathetic qualities in his dancers, whose souls seem scrutinized here. *Pas/Parts 2016* is a major acquisition for the company.

I cannot say the same for Liam Scarlett's dark and enigmatic *Fearful Symmetries*, given its premiere on a mixed program January 27, the second San Francisco Ballet commission from the youngish English choreographer. John Adams' sweeping 1988 minimalist orchestral essay has attracted more than a dozen choreographers, but none of the three I have seen has so under-communicated the rhythmic verve of the score, although Scarlett is obsessively responsive at the phrase level.

Instead, for inspiration, Scarlett went to the William Blake poem that provided the composer with his title and let that be his guide. So, from Adams' ebullient triads, Scarlett spun a dour, neo-primitive epic, divided between contorted duets and crawly group endeavours. The 14 dancers emerged from the abyss under David Finn's massive LED light sculpture with the men, dressed in black caveman getup, exercising their shoulders and rolling around on the floor a lot. Scarlett aims for earthiness, cladding the women in flat shoes.

Fearful Symmetries is a stop-and-start affair, lit so ineptly that details of partnering just disappeared in the murk. With this and his first local commission, *Hummingbird*, Scarlett seems infatuated with the new brutalism. Every duet adds up to an ugly encounter (millennial audiences apparently find partner abuse meaningful), in which metaphors for sex lead us down some disturbing paths. The work enlisted some of the best dancers on the roster, including Sylve, Frances Chung, Lorena Feijoo, Joan Boada (in his farewell season), and Tan and Davit Karapetyan who, at the end share a lyrical coda. Too little, too late. That San Francisco Ballet is a co-commissioner of Scarlett's full-evening *Frankenstein* ballet, slated for 2017 after a Royal Ballet premiere, should not necessarily be regarded as good news. ▯

Sofiane Sylve of San Francisco Ballet in William Forsythe's *Pas/Parts 2016*
Photo: Erik Tomasson



Throughout his years guiding and shaping New York City Ballet, George Balanchine made numerous, often pithy remarks about the work he did for the dancers in his company. Among these, usually in reply to being baited for eschewing narrative motivation for ballet, he addressed the notion of literary source material. While elsewhere the story ballet was evident — for example in the works of NYCB’s sibling troupe, American Ballet Theatre — in his troupe’s repertoire, it wasn’t especially prominent.

His ballets, according to the standard, outside assessment, were abstract, non-narrative and thus without subject matter. After explaining that when putting a man and a woman onstage “there is already a story,” he proposed that by including an additional woman in the mix, “there’s already a plot.”

To cap such conversations, the ballet master famously rejoined: “So, how much story you want?”

It would seem that for current NYCB ballet-master-in-chief Peter Martins, who’s been at the helm since just before Balanchine’s death in 1983, the reply is “more and more.” Somewhat frequent runs of Martins’ *Sleeping Beauty* (1991), *Swan Lake* (1999), *Romeo and Juliet* (2007) and *La Sylphide* (2015) have become usual.

Elsewhere, beyond offering extended runs of the Danilova/Balanchine 1974 *Coppélia*, as well as Balanchine’s 1962 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Martins has looked to story ballets much more than his predecessor. In 2011, Martins himself created *Ocean’s Kingdom*, a one-act ballet set to an original score by Paul McCartney with designs by Stella McCartney. The much-anticipated work with its McCartney celebrity has yet to catch on with audiences; it has not been seen much following early showings.

Over the years, Martins has seemingly encouraged his company’s first resident choreographer, Christopher Wheeldon, to explore narrative, yielding such efforts as *Carnival of the Animals* (2003), *An American in Paris* (2005) and *The Nightingale and the Rose* (2007). The last of these, an Oscar Wilde story-based one-act ballet, had next to no life beyond its initial runs. The other two only fitfully reappear.

This year, in February, *The Most Incredible Thing*, the first narrative effort from current NYCB resident choreographer Justin Peck, was lavished with publicity. Peck’s previous nine works for his home company, where he still performs as a soloist, all had winning aspects, none of which sprung from narrative impetus and most of which took shape with sweeping energy, and fresh use of groupings and ensemble forces. Unlike Martins, whose choreographic talents have never gained much traction as more than dutiful efforts, Peck’s reputation as a young, eager and accomplished choreographic artist has grown steadily. He remains in strong demand from companies other than his own as a choreographer.

For this first foray into narrative ballet, Peck — who was apparently given

For collaborators, Peck chose composer Bryce Dessner, who had no previous theatrical experience, and visual artist Marcel Dzama, whose art gallery works display some theatrical elements, but whose eye, and hand, turn out to be lacklustre, as exemplified by the drawn, painted and sculpted examples of his artwork that overran the display areas of NYCB’s David H. Koch Theater.

Still, Dessner’s atmospheric score, without much for a choreographer to sink his dancers’ feet in, and Dzama’s scenic and costume designs (the latter get much needed help from the detailed construction given by NYCB costume director Marc Happel), could still become part of a memorable piece of ballet theatre if Peck were in better command of what’s wanted for a work of this nature. Right now, there is a neglect of nar-



carte blanche and as far as I can tell, no assistance from his elders at NYCB — chose what seemed an inspired source. *The Most Incredible Thing*, a tale from 1870 by Hans Christian Andersen, is succinct, yet filled with the kinds of narrative elements that might support a ballet.

Its action centres on a fairy-tale kingdom’s contest in which anyone creating what its people would acknowledge as the most incredible thing could gain the hand of the princess. What transpires is the creation of a fantastic clock where the hours are struck by a succession of marvellous mechanical figures. Eventually, however, a spoiler with an ax destroys the mechanism and just as his incredible act is about to win him the princess’ hand, the clock’s characters rise up and triumph, re-establishing the clock’s creator as the winning contestant.

rative explication and, instead, what’s given the strong-suit treatment are the 12 distinct, hourly figures, which play out here in the mode of traditional ballet divertissements.

Between Dzama’s often figure-constricting costumes and the surprising lack of distinguished, physical invention from Peck to theatricalize his clock-works, *Thing* plays out monotonously as the numbers’ numbers tick away, one through 12, like so many elements in a game of “... and then there were none.”

Balanchine’s “So, how much story you want?” rings in the air. Peck has stressed that this work is one aware of its presence in the House of Balanchine. For his first such excursion in this “house,” Peck shows more ignorance than inspiration. As it now appears, and Peck may well be rethinking and tinkering with his ballet, the costly looking result suggests something less than a story-book future. ^{or}



When Pina Bausch and her performers created *...como el mosquito en la piedra, ay si, si, si...* (*Like Moss on a Stone*) in 2009, no one knew it was to be Bausch's last work. She died just two weeks after its premiere, and her shocked dancers resolutely pulled together to keep the company going and the repertory alive. Since then, London has been privileged to see many of Bausch's works, especially during the mammoth World Cities season in 2012. Like the other pieces in that late cycle of her work, *...como el mosquito* was made through a residency in a particular country (in this case Chile), and created from the experience.

...como el mosquito, presented at Sadler's Wells in February, has Bausch's distinctive signature all over it. The women wear sumptuous gowns (by regular costumier — or should that be couturier? — Marion Cito); the men are in monochrome suits. The piece unfolds as a collage of cameos circling themes of folly, absurdity, desire and disparate sexual dynamics, and while it takes its time to meander through them, the pace accelerates toward the end with a recap of some of the highlights.

Yet if the look is familiar, the feel is strange, most noticeably in the relations between men and women. Out with mutual incomprehension and

competitive power play; in with — it's hard to believe — gallantry. Typical is a scene where Fernando Suels Mendoza offers effusive compliments to each passing woman, which the women simply accept — not because they believe him, but because if compliments are to be had, they might as well enjoy them. Elsewhere, gentlemanly Damiano Ottavio Bigi vacates his chair for a gracious lady, and Anna Wehsarg playfully tosses her hand in the air, delighted that Mendoza keeps catching it to cover it in courteous kisses. Couples walk arm in arm, and a woman dancing a rumba explains she is living for the moment. It's remarkably convivial.

But not superficial. There's a mood, an attitude to the work — to the women in particular — that suggests an appreciation of beauty and an acceptance of simple pleasures: the feel of a frock, the flow of one's hair. In many solos, the women seem to dance for no one but themselves, luxuriating in their own limbs. When the performers form human chains, they're not the arbitrary, ship-of-fools clusters of earlier Bausch, but little plaits of togetherness. The music — easy-on-the-ear folk melodies, popular songs and loungy jazz — is mostly gentle, often tinged with melancholy.

Such lack of conflict sometimes makes the material feel underpowered, and it's certainly a huge contrast to the angst, desperation and futility that marked

her earlier works, and indeed made her name. Yet this also sensitizes us to more elusive dramas: men fleeing like fugitives; a sudden onrush of windblown figures; whistles and claps echoing like unanswered cries. Above all, there's a sense of the precariousness of life and of beauty. The unusually muted set (by regular designer Peter Pabst) is a floor ingeniously fissured with cracks that almost imperceptibly widen and close again — unstable tectonics underpinning the action.

With hindsight, it's hard not to read those often unnoticed cracks as harbingers of fate or departure, just as it's hard not to miss, in the gorgeous dancing and flowing locks of this now largely youthful company, the sardonic grit and bite the older dancers seemed to bring to almost any role. But time moves in one direction only; from May this year, the company will be led by Adolphe Binder. Currently the director of the Swedish Göteborg Opera Dance Company, she is experienced, eclectic and the first director to arrive from outside Bausch's company. If *...como el mosquito* feels like a transition piece — Bausch, but not quite as we know it — then seven years on, it is probably time for the company to transition, too.

Elsewhere in London, it's good to see several theatre venues extending their programming to dance. Wilton's Music Hall — 19th century, marvellously gothic and in the heart of Jack the Ripper territory — forms the perfect stage for choreographer Mark Bruce (son of the well-known Christopher Bruce, but with a style that's all his own). *The Odyssey* may lack the bite of last year's *Dracula*, but it too offers plenty of dark fantasy and surreal cinematic pleasure as Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus lurch through fly-by scenes that pitch them against gods, monsters and each other.

The music veers wildly from Mozart to reverb-guitar and, most bizarrely, Frank Sinatra, for an inexplicable Cyclops-as-Santa-Claus scene. Without basic knowledge of the myths, you might end up befuddled by what is going on and why. Yet the dancers — who are skilled technicians as well as charismatic performers — conspire with the brooding atmosphere and bravado showmanship to grip you not by the head or the heart, but by the gut. ^{vi}

Expectations ran high for 2016's Jerez Festival, which took place from February 19 to March 5, but, sadly, the festival's 20th year might just be remembered as one of its most mediocre.

From Eva Yerbabuena's bizarre and pretentiously clichéd *Apariencias* to Marco Flores' gaudy, even vulgar *Entrar al juego*, right up to Sara Baras' ultra-commercial and completely disingenuous *Voces*, the festival left many scratching their heads. When did it become necessary to hide flamenco behind female dancers sporting shiny latex bald caps and projected images of war and money (*Apariencias*), high school sexual humour (*Entrar al juego*) and rock concert lighting (*Voces*)?

This is not to say there weren't some bright spots, such as Andrés Peña and Pilar Ogallás' *De sepia y oro* (*Of sepia and gold*), which won the festival's Audience Award, most likely because it was one of the few traditional works to make it onto the main stage this year.

On the other end of the spectrum, Rocío Molina's very contemporary new work *Bosque Ardora* — which may not have had enough flamenco for some — had more coherence and visual and thematic substance than many of the other festival performances that seemed intent on finding newfangled ways to seem current and relevant.

Manuel Liñán's *Reversible* was a phenomenal example of exceptional flamenco dance with a modern twist. Liñán presented evocative, yet simple visuals in this production that scooped up the festival's Critics' Award. Rope was used to restrict movement, demarcate boundaries and tie him to others, while red flowers strewn and collected from the stage seemed to symbolize love, desire, blood and pain. The only drawback to this visually and thematically engrossing work was Liñán's overuse of the bata de cola (trained skirt) and Spanish shawl, which have become his signature over the past year or so. Yes, we get it, Liñán can manipulate both traditionally female accoutrements with strength and dexterity, but one dance is enough.

In past editions, some of the best, most surprising productions came from the secondary stages, where those artists labelled "up-and-coming" perform. In



the festival's program notes, director Isamay Benavente writes, "We've listened to those who are starting out, giving them stages and opportunities; we've accompanied, supported and helped them ...to grow." Yet even these performances came up lacking.

Last year, festivalgoers were treated to works by breathtaking dancers who've been an integral part of pushing the form's boundaries, such as Eduardo Guerrero, Patricia Guerrero and Luisa Palicio, but this year's young performers

— with the exception of the fantastic El Choro, winner of this edition's Revelation Prize for outstanding young dancer, and Jesús Fernández — were complete unknowns whose productions were amateurish.

Although most commonly associated with flamenco, the Jerez Festival administration has always stressed that this is a Spanish dance festival. Although this *dance* festival has one series that focuses on flamenco singers and another for flamenco guitarists, it always seems

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to come up short with regard to styles of Spanish dance other than flamenco. Other styles, such as classical Spanish, Escuela Bolera and folkloric dances, have not been able to carve out a niche for themselves the way flamenco has. This makes their inclusion in major festivals all the more necessary, in order to continue introducing new audiences and promote new creation within these genres.

Benavente has said in the past that it is challenging to find productions in these styles, and while that may well be true, it is not impossible. There are many dancers who have produced phenomenal shows in alternate styles of Spanish dance: Rubén Olmo, Aída Gómez, Miguel Ángel Berna and Emilio Ochando, to name a few. Unfortunately, none of the festival's four Spanish dance productions were brought to life by seasoned professionals. Also, these shows were relegated to the festival's worst performance space, La Sala Paul, an old winery with a relatively small stage, poor lighting and sound, and terrible riser seating. Needless to say, the shows were poorly attended, which in the case of Larreal, the Mariemma Royal Professional Conservatory of Dance student company, was a shame.

Although a little rough around the edges, the performance was devoid of pretence and was one of the most dynamic productions of the entire festival. Pulling from repertoire produced at the

conservatory's choreography workshop, Larreal performed works of Spanish classical, folkloric and flamenco dance that deserve to be seen more widely.

Of these choreographies, *Del origen* by David Coria, currently principal dancer at the Ballet Flamenco de Andalucía, combines contemporary dance, flamenco and Andalusian folk dance in a seamless work that pushed us to remember Andalusia's origins, transporting us to the fields where men laboured and to the village parties where men and women met and danced. The work concluded with the company singing lyrics that reminded us that our legacy is the ground beneath our feet and the sky above.

Duas lágrimas de Orvalho, a contemporary look at Spanish classical dance choreographed by Manuel Díaz, was set to a fado of the same name sung by the legendary Mariza. This solo was so brief — a little more than two minutes — and so simple — no staging and dim lighting — yet proved to be one of the purest and most evocative moments of dance over the 16-day festival. The lithe young dancer, left nameless in the program notes, elegantly elicited emotions of loss and sorrow with the strength and sensuality of her movements.

While I wouldn't even contemplate watching the majority of productions performed on the festival's main stage again, I attended Larreal's show twice, and would gladly sit through it again. *DI*



José Maldonado and Manuel Liñán in Liñán's *Reversible*
Photo: Javier Fergo



The story behind Benjamin Millepied's resignation — or possible termination — from the Paris Opera Ballet has been the subject of much debate since the news hit the headlines in February. The bottom line is that his short tenure has earned him substantial publicity and, all in all, an excellent reputation with the general public, including those unfamiliar with ballet who have been regaled with his dashing looks, bold declarations and Hollywood marriage.

Millepied came as the herald of a new, more modern order, and leaves as a hero defeated by the antiquated, and now exposed and maligned, constraints of an age-old company he once called the best in the world. That was, of course, before declaring in a film released on French TV in January that it was the best in the contemporary repertoire, but ballet-wise, was hardly up to par.

Needless to say, some of the dancers did not appreciate such a statement. Étoile Josua Hoffalt published a rather bitter open letter ending with these scathing words: "As a dancer, I shall not miss him." He mainly denounces Millepied's abrupt ways and his aloofness bordering on absenteeism, and also challenges Millepied's claims that he wished to encourage homegrown dancers' choreographic ventures. Hoffalt presented a ballet just outside Paris that, he

says, Millepied never bothered to see. Indeed, Hoffalt's inventive version of *Swan Lake* did not get the attention it deserved, though it was most notably performed by the young premier danseur François Alu, the Paris Opera's new enfant terrible and an exciting dancer who, somehow, Millepied did not see fit to name an étoile.

Millepied did, however, uphold his wish to break the heavy hierarchy and give youth pride of place. Naturally, it irked some of the bona fide étoiles who have struggled to reach that level. Also, Millepied exposed the almost all-white policy at the Paris Opera, and won kudos for denouncing the *négrillons* ensemble in *La Bayadère* and demanding that the ballet school kids performing the sequence stop being painted black. This widely covered event turned Millepied into a heroic avenger and the Paris Opera into a tacky racist institution.

In retrospect, the old dame did not gain much by taking on the handsome Benjamin. But he did achieve something in a year and a half that his predecessor, Brigitte Lefèvre, did not in 20 years. Anyone who watches TV, listens to the radio, reads *Elle*, *Le Monde*, *Vogue* or any other magazine or newspaper, knows his name. From what I hear from people only remotely interested in dance, he is known as the young progressive dance director who was thwarted by archaic conventions, the reason, surely, for his self-confidence at the

impromptu press conference to announce his resignation. He spoke briefly and left forthwith after it was announced that no questions would be taken from the journalists present. The next day he swaggered, all smiles in a close-fitting suit, onto the Garnier stage following the premiere of his new ballet, *La Nuit s'achève* (*The Night is ending*) loudly acclaimed by the crowd. What, I pondered, could they be celebrating?

Pierre Bergé, ex-director of Yves Saint-Laurent and once president of the Paris Opera, recently declared in his usual provocative form that "it just couldn't work out between a choreographer who copies Robbins and a corps de ballet who is no fool."

If the last two ballets Millepied created for the Paris Opera so far this season — *Clear, Loud, Bright, Forward* and *La Nuit s'achève* — are anything to go by, it's hard not to say Bergé is partly right. Millepied is an artful choreographer, but he has not yet developed his own style. And it is possible that some of the dancers might have found it hard to look up to a man whose claim to choreographic fame is still a bit vague.

His abruptness has also been denounced. To be sure, Nureyev in his time was much more of a tyrant, but then he was Nureyev. And the generations who danced under his direction still speak in awe of him. Was it thanks to Nureyev or pure chance that his time was one of the most brilliant in the history of the Paris Opera?

Millepied does have a point when he now says that this generation may not shine as brightly as it should, albeit in total contradiction with what he announced when taking office. Maybe he did not know them so well after all. He also says that he found the heavy administration and hierarchy at the Paris Opera too much to bear. But how could he not have been aware of this before accepting the job?

Be that as it may be, general director Stéphane Lissner has now decided to offer the position to Aurélie Dupont, who had previously accepted, then declined, the position of maître de ballet. Dupont is one of the last internationally recognized Paris Opera étoiles that the corps de ballet will easily look up to. She is also a cool, intelligent perfectionist and a woman of taste. The future could not look any brighter. *DI*

Not only are Milan and Rome Italy's capital cities for economics (Milan) and politics (Rome), they also have to be considered the country's centres for ballet. Due to the closure of other classical companies in Italian opera houses (the latest is the Fondazione Arena di Verona ballet company), Italy's ballet heritage seems indeed entrusted to La Scala Opera Ballet in Milan and Rome Opera Ballet.

La Scala is famous all over the world for its long history of opera, but the ballet company also has an important tradition since its founding in the 18th century. Rome Opera Ballet has been marked by decades of turmoil, laziness and union tyrannies. Only Carla Fracci, who ruled the Roman company for 10 years until 2010, provided credibility; she improved the standard of the dancers, gave the younger generation opportunities to emerge, and proposed some culturally important programs recognized by the international press.

In the last several months, both companies faced turning points. In Milan, after seven years as head of La Scala, Makhar Vaziev resigned to take over the direction of the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow. The news apparently came out of the blue, and La Scala management was taken by surprise; their ill-timed press release announcing Vaziev had renewed his duties until 2018 followed the announcement from Moscow. Whatever the reason, La Scala's CEO Alexander Pereira had to

quickly find a successor for Vaziev, who had really developed the company standard to an international level.

Rumours about the possible new director began to circulate immediately; would it be the home star Roberto Bolle? Or Pereira's old colleague in Zurich, choreographer Heinz Spoerli? Or the French former étoile Laurent Hilaire? But it was Mauro Bigonzetti.

At the time, in February, Bigonzetti was creating a new *Cinderella* for Bolle, Polina Semionova and the La Scala company; Pereira saw him as the perfect choice to turn La Scala Ballet into his vision of a touring group with a signature choreographer and repertoire of its own. Better, too, if the choreographer is renowned — and Bigonzetti is. His works are performed all around the globe (next with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in June 2016). He has also experienced direction during his 10 years as the head of Aterballetto.

We will have to wait and see how far this joint venture will take the Milan company. For now, we can say that Bigonzetti's *Cinderella* puzzled critics, but mostly satisfied audiences. For his very first ballet for the company, this grand Petipa-style spectacle featured a string of variations, pas d'action, mime and grand pas that carefully maintained the dramatic development as conceived by Prokofiev and Volkov when they created the ballet.

The only poetic licence he took was that his Cinderella lost not her slipper, but her gown. On paper, it might seem mischievous and spicy; in the realization, it was

dramaturgically inconsistent. A great help came from the production staff. Oscar-nominated costume designer Maurizio Millenotti evoked an obscure 17th-century world with clear references to painter Diego Velázquez, while lighting designer and videographer Carlo Cerri created a constantly changing virtual scenery. The imagery was deeply imbued by visions of that rude era — when Neapolitan Giambattista Basile wrote the first sinister literary version of the tale — from the initial appearance of the stepmother and the stepsisters, who were busy with rhythmic hand jerks and grotesque facial expressions.

Bigonzetti walks on the razor's edge between the earthy and rough sensuality of the characters and more trivial vulgarity. After all, the mood of the original story is really rude, which is perfectly coherent with Bigonzetti's peculiar style that generally lacks lyricism in favour of athletic, muscular movement, emphasized in the female dancing.

Meanwhile, Rome Opera Ballet, under the direction of Paris Opera étoile Eleonora Abbagnato since summer 2015, had an unexpected box-office triumph last Christmas with the new *Nutcracker* by an ancient Roland Petit dancer and current show director Giuliano Peparini. It was an important hit for the strong-minded Abbagnato, allowing her to show how the company could improve quickly and boldly, and can be of value to the Opera House.

In February, the second program of her first season was more ambitious: a bill with Balanchine's lyrical masterpiece *Serenade*, Forsythe's frenzy of classical vocabulary *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*, and the complicated Nureyev version of *Raymonda's* third act. It was a wide range of styles, moods, nuances and visions of academic dance from masters of our time, which the Roman dancers had to execute with mastery and skill in order to confirm that Abbagnato's approach is raising the company's standards. Indeed, the result was encouraging, as the dancers exhibited an enthusiastic joy of dancing and a generally good technical level. Artistry and sense of theatre is doubtless inspired by Abbagnato herself, a dancer with an outstanding presence, as she once again showed in the program's final piece, Benjamin Millepied's duet *Closer*, when she was partnered by Florian Magnenet. *DI*



MILAN & ROME I

by Silvia Poletti

Antonella Albano, Stefania Ballone and Virna Toppi of La Scala Ballet in Mauro Bigonzetti's *Cinderella*
Photo: Brescia e Amisano, Teatro alla Scala

After the Royal Danish Ballet's last performance of the season of George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations* in February, American-born Holly Jean Dorger was appointed principal dancer by artistic director Nikolaj Hübbe following her sparkling performance as the lead ballerina. In 2008, Hübbe brought the talented young dancer with strong technique back to Denmark with him, when he left New York City Ballet to come home to become artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet.

Dorger became a soloist in 2013. Her roles have included the demanding parts of Odette-Odile in Hübbe and Silja Schandorff's new version of *Swan Lake*, and the ballerina in Harald Lander's *Études*. In keeping with the tradition of the company when a new principal is appointed, Hübbe praised Dorger for her passion for the art of ballet and called her a "dance diamond" in the jewel box of the Royal Danish Ballet in front of the standing and applauding audience.

On March 3, at the company morning class, corps dancer Andreas Kaas received a long-awaited promotion to soloist. In the evening he danced his first Romeo in John Neumeier's *Romeo and Juliet*. His Juliet was soloist Ida Praetorius, with whom he had in 2014 created stunning moments as the leading couple in Neumeier's *Lady of the Camellias*.

The two young dancers were wonderful together as the star-crossed lovers. In the balcony pas de deux, their sweeping runs and lifts were full of spontaneous, happy sensations of love, and in the scene when Romeo must leave Verona they were passionately despairing. Their performance caused many eyes to be wiped as the curtain went down.

As Romeo's friends, Alexander Bozinoff was a sprightly Benvolio, and Sebastian Haynes performed Mercutio's spectacular death scene with a convincing mixture of dark humour and pain, after being stabbed by Sebastian Kloborg's drunkenly confused Tybalt. As Lady Capulet, Susanne Grindler's reaction to his death left no one in doubt of an intimate

COPENHAGEN I

by Anne-Marie Elmy



relationship as she threw herself onto his lifeless body, while Ulrik Birkkjær as Lord Capulet kept up appearances and held her as she fainted. The breathtaking fencing duels were whipped along by Sergei Prokofiev's magnificent score, played by the Royal Danish Orchestra under Graham Bond's fiery baton.

The first performance of Fokine's Russian folktale ballet, *The Firebird*, was in 1910 in Paris with the Ballets Russes, featuring colourful décor by Alexandre Golovine. Sergei Diaghilev had commissioned the then fairly unknown Igor Stravinsky to compose its groundbreaking score. In his time, artistic director of Danish Dance Theatre Tim Rushton has seen many versions of the ballet with a splendid Firebird ballerina in a red tutu, but apparently he has found it difficult to relate to the story. His intention with a new *Firebird* was to "make the story function in a contemporary context."

In January of this year, Rushton's partnership with Copenhagen Phil was revived (in 2013, they collaborated to celebrate the centenary of *Le Sacre du Printemps*), with the addition of the artistic director of Theatre Republique, Martin Tulinius. His theatre provided the venue for the performance of Rushton's new *Firebird*, allowing the orchestra to be part of the scenographic picture behind the performing dancers.

Tulinius' idea of this new *Firebird* as a Gesamtkunstwerk put Stravinsky himself on the stage. In a prologue, Danish actor Jens Jørn Spottag embodied the portrayal with vigour and humour, while sheet music and video-projected notes flew around him. Memories and reflections placed the composer and his work in the historic period with quotes from his own words and music excerpts from some of his other compositions.

In his customary working process, Rushton had engaged the dancers in developing a fascinating, modern title character. As the Firebird, Elena Martinez Ibar was punk chic in black leather and metal, as inspired by the character Lisbeth Salander in Swedish author Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy.

A blend of fierce harpy and lithe panther, Ibar appeared on the top of a high wall, with a video projection of the earth as seen from space encircling her. Spotting a young man danced by Joe George climbing onto another wall, she engaged in a dominating duet with him that also brought out softness in her character.

A crouching group of suppressed beings fled the Tyrant, portrayed by Alessandro Sousa Pereira's powerful figure. Among them was a young girl with flaming red hair, danced by Lucia Pasquini, who became the young man's partner in an imaginative, sensual love duet. There were intensely choreographed fights between the young man and the Tyrant, where the floor played a prominent part, and also the Firebird became involved. Eventually the Tyrant perished when the Firebird phoenix ascended upon him, surrounded by cathartic video flames.

Barely visible pegs stuck out from the vertical sides of several of the movable walls, which gave the impression that a dancer could climb freely in the air and even hang upside down. The spectacular video designs created by Tulinius and Mikal Bing set clouds and mysterious tree formations as background for the archetypical fight between good and evil, a dichotomy that was underlined by Åsa Gjerstad's black-and-white avant-garde costumes. *DI*

Oslo

by Fredrik Rütter



When Tom Remlov, artistic director at Norwegian National Touring Theatre, invites a choreographer to stage Shakespeare, he knows he has to engage actors who are able to move and dance. So does choreographer Jo Strømgren, who staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Oslo-based company, which tours to 70 stages. Strømgren, who has been creating productions in unbelievable numbers, thrives, he explained during an interview, because of the diversity in his productions — he does everything from straight theatre to theatre with dance to dance with theatre, and works both with contemporary dancers and dancers who are only classically trained. His *Midsummer Night's Dream* is in a baroque-inspired style with lots of humour, and actors gliding around the stage as dancing fauns.

Stellaris DansTeater visited the smaller stage 2 at the Oslo Opera House with its ballet *Where the Mainland Floats*. Stellaris normally tours the northern parts of the country, so this was a visit many wanted to see. Choreographer Solveig Leinan-Hermo is one of the grand ladies in Norwegian dance, with 40 years of experience. Living in an area of the country where it is not possible to escape nature, it is fitting that nature is featured in her works, including in

Where the Mainland Floats, which also has the poetic nerve her movement is known for.

The Opera House in Oslo, which is more or less surrounded by water and is covered with white Italian marble, looks like an iceberg floating on the water. It is built in such a way that visitors can walk on the roof to get a fantastic view of the city and harbour. On winter evenings, it is quite chilly when crossing the marble bridge before entering the warm theatre.

On one dark foggy evening, the Norwegian National Ballet's *Giselle* awaited inside. The very first production of the company did of *Giselle* was in 1965, staged by Finn Doris Laine; today, it performs a version staged by Cynthia Harvey. David Walker was responsible for the colourful and lavish costumes and scenography, providing a gorgeous frame. The acoustics in this house are extraordinary, with every single instrument clearly heard from the pit, and conductor Per Kristian Skaland was superb; he had an eagle's eye view of the stage and gave the dancers the needed tempo.

American Melissa Hough, one of three given the opportunity to perform the title role, has long limbs and lines, airy jetés and a strong jump, though is not as strong in mime. In the mad scene, she loses her mind a little too fast,

a small objection; her dancing and acting in the second act were superb and properly ethereal. Her Albrecht was Lucas Lima, a handsome Brazilian who has been with the company for seven years. He has good technique and really takes care of his partner. The corps de ballet did a great job, too, and altogether it was a lovely evening.

Norwegian National Ballet presented its big spring premiere at the beginning of March. The choice this time was *Anna Karenina* by German choreographer Christian Spuck. He is also responsible for the effective, though simple, scenography. Spuck incorporates film shown on the backcloth to describe where we are and what is happening; sound is also an important ingredient. At the beginning of the ballet, one can hear the sound of heavy breathing and a locomotive. The music Spuck has chosen to follow the story of Anna and Vronsky is mainly from Sergei Rachmaninoff and Witold Lutoslawski; he has done a great job sewing it all together, and the result is that the collage fits the story and his choreography like a glove. The ballet follows Leo Tolstoy's novel closely, and while the main focus is, of course, on Anna and Vronsky, the characters of Levin and Kitty, Stiva and Dolly, and Karenin, also get a lot of space.

The choreography is formal in its expression, but within that structure Spuck shows great ingenuity. Lima danced Levin with sensitivity, and Emma Lloyd as Kitty gave a charming portrait of a lively young woman who is absolutely in love. In one long slow pas de deux, Lima again showed his skills as a strong partner.

But the performance belonged to Eugenie Skilnand as Anna Karenina. Skilnand, back from giving birth, seems stronger than ever. She was never a virtuoso dancer; her strength is in the combination of being a good actor and a good dancer. All of her character's joy, doubts and pains were seen in her expression, both in her face and body.

The young Douwe Dekkers portrayed Vronsky with charm and strong partnership in many of the difficult pas de deux. And he was believable when, as life gets tough, he left Anna for the next easy conquest without any remorse. The ending of the ballet was just as devastating as Tolstoy wrote it. ²¹

The months following Australia's summer holidays are usually quiet for dance, with audiences and artists seeming to prefer the beach to the theatre.

As summer shifted into autumn, however, the Australian Ballet launched its 2016 season, a contemporary triple bill featuring significant works by Jirí Kylián, Christopher Wheeldon and William Forsythe. In this report, though, I focus on a new contemporary work that is in contrast to the high voltage of Australian Ballet and is representative of Melbourne's independent dance sector.

In *Small Details*, which premiered at Dancehouse in March, choreographer Sandra Parker explores the notion of an automated body. She does this through repetitive choreography that builds incrementally, as well as by bringing Rhian Hinkley's kinetic sculptures to the stage where they populate an otherwise unadorned landscape.

These sculptures, or motorized machines, perform simple tasks. One encourages a small red ball to roll on a platform the length of the stage. It moves so slowly that it barely rolls a fraction of its curve each second, painfully inching its way to the finishing point. Another swings a small metal arm in a circle, causing a chain reaction as it bumps against two more levers. A third machine operates as a kind of pulley, drawing a small silver object up and down. These machines operate on a small scale. Wrapped in unvarnished plywood boxes so that their inner workings are hidden, they are studies in machinated uselessness. They are isolated from one another, moving when they are turned on (remotely, it seems, from the lighting desk), running through their predetermined activities in parallel to the choreography.

Three dancers perform in and amongst the machines. Rebecca Jensen, Melissa Jones and Kasey Lack begin, standing in a line, with precise finger gesture sequences, their charcoal-grey tank tops forming a dark canvas for the workings of their fingers. The highly specific gestures seem almost familiar; one looks as though they are looping thread on a bobbin, another could be flicking a speck of dust off, turning the handle of a tiny music box, or rotating an object the size of a matchbox in three different directions. There is no showboating here, no demonstration of double joints or extravagant shapes, merely the execution of predetermined tasks. Over and over again.

As the sequences evolve through extensive repetition, two things become obvious. First, just remembering these choreographic structures and patterns is a feat in and of itself. It is a mental game, one performed with very few cues. Secondly, Parker has no interest in ascribing anything remotely emotional to these structures. The faces of the dancers stay blank; their eyes are mostly downturned or focused on their gestures. *Small Details* is about tasks, sequences, order and structure — three humans embodying the futile activity of motorized movement.

It is as if Parker has stepped even further into an exploration of minutiae than in other recent works. Parker, the former director of DanceWorks Melbourne and now a PhD in dance (from the University of Melbourne), is renowned for developing choreography that is specific, detailed and often quite small in scale. She has previously described her interest in the "everyday," and if it weren't for the rigorousness of the development of each and every movement, her work might seem casual and disinterested.

To suggest this hour-long work is tedious is perhaps evidence of its success as a conceptual, if not theatrical, enterprise. Parker is interested in duration, monotony and repetition. Unusually, rather than try to make a long work feel as though it flies by, she attempts to trap her audience in a sense that time has stopped and we are caught between a desire to understand how the sequences are jigsawed together, and an

awareness of a larger picture that reveals itself slowly over time until the cycle is complete.

David Franzke's sound design offers little to grasp onto either. Like the choreography it supports, the sound — raindrops, gentle clacks and taps on metal — is both familiar and non-specific. It offers a kind of rhythmic underpinning, but it, too, is deliberately benign, to the point that it almost fades away. Jenny Hector's lighting design casts the dancers in fluorescent light; the most perceptible change is the slow lowering of the full house lights to black, a process not fully complete until the work is well underway.

As *Small Details* progresses, the pace eventually picks up. After performing constantly in unison, the dancers begin to add their own changes of direction or travelling steps. These changes are largely perambulatory, but the gestures remain primarily in their upper bodies, which offers an interesting counterbalance to leg movements that shift weight from side to side, forward and backward, or by small, fractional turns.

At the end of *Small Details*, I was left pondering the extremely detailed development that Parker and her collaborators have poured into this work over the course of a year. These are not broad, sweeping gestures; nor is this work — which claims to explore the "vulnerabilities, limitations and potentials of the body in an automated and technologically advanced world" — one that reaches beyond its tightly wound framework. ⁰¹



Melissa Jones, Kasey Lack and Rebecca Jensen
in Sandra Parker's *Small Details*
Photo: Gregory Lorenzutti

As the Lunar New Year celebrations in February welcomed the advent of spring with an excess of food and drink, Taiwan's U-Theatre brought a production that reflected on the passage of the seasons in larger, statelier terms. *Beyond Time*, presented as part of Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts, asked the audience to consider the ebb and flow of time away from the bustle and burdens of contemporary life. The performers took to the stage of the Esplanade Theatre in plain robes, their hair closely cropped or tied back, like members of an ascetic order steeped in solemn ritual.

The show unfolded to reveal six sections invoking the elements and the

a brass-bright array of cymbals, gongs and other instruments — confronted Huang in white, who handled a wooden pole like it was a weapon or an oar. Less convincing was artistic director Liu Ruo-yu's role in the piece, as she appeared reciting cryptic verses in Mandarin at times, cooing from the sidelines at others. "In the blooming flowers, I see your formless face," she said at one point to nobody in particular.

Over at the Esplanade Theatre Studio, Taiwanese dance artist Huang Yi encouraged viewers to think about their relationship with technology. In *Huang Yi & KUKA*, he charted his affinity with a German-made factory robot that Huang had programmed to partner him onstage. KUKA stretched, turned and

dancers take on canine traits to comic effect, with Bern-based choreographer Joshua Monten inventively blending bestial tics of nuzzling and scratching with ground-gobbling movement suggesting pooches at play. The work also includes signing, varying the style according to where it is being presented; for its Asian premiere at the festival, this was Singapore Sign Language. This live-script of hand, facial and bodily gestures accompanied the four monologues at the heart of the piece, giving a visual counterpoint to the dancers' bemusing descriptions of their part-dog selves and opening their world to hearing-impaired viewers in the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

The other standout, also having its Asian premiere at the festival, was *La Loba*, based on a Mexican folk tale about a woman who gathers the bones of wolves in order to resurrect them. Czech dance artist Lenka Vagnerová built her grim rendition of this fable on dancer Andrea Opavská and singer Jana Věbová as two halves of the protagonist. Alone, each expressed different aspects of the wolf-woman's character. Opavská held the audience in the Esplanade Theatre Studio with a menacing gaze, rolling and vaulting across the stage belligerently to fend off unseen foes. Věbová, her head veiled at first, seemed more reserved, but unleashed a landscape of feeling within the crests and valleys of her enigmatic songs. Together, their interactions highlighted the central figure's interior discord — her altruism fighting against her instinct for survival.

Finally, at 72-13, a revamped warehouse that houses arts group TheatreWorks, five women and three men repeated a collection of steps set to a handful of tunes for 90 minutes. That was the gist of *RE/PLAY Dance Edit* — Tokyo-based theatre director Junnosuke Tada's restaging of a 2011 play for a cast of Singaporean and Japanese dancers — and it did not make for compulsive watching at the start. Once the initial sense of tedium had passed, however, I began to admire how one performer made a step bigger or faster, how another threw in a jump after every somersault in a movement phrase and how they all managed to cross paths without crashing into one another. There was, indeed, a method in this madness. ¹¹

Singapore

by Malcolm Tay



cosmos, with pockets of space filled by Hsu Yi-chun's video backdrops of celestial objects and acts of nature. It began with master drummer Huang Chih-chun spinning in place against a projection of pouring rain, before giving way to a rumbling display by a dozen performers on a variety of barrel drums. Trained in meditation and Chinese martial arts, these musician-movers remained sharply focused, and kept up a sparkling interplay of percussion and tightly calibrated action.

Beyond Time worked best when small scenes of conflict tempered its overall pensive mood. In one section, a troop of eight black-clad performers — wielding

dipped its orange crane-like arm to echo Huang's movements or support him when he tilted off-centre. When KUKA pushed a folding chair toward him with the gripper on its arm, the action recalled a pet dog nudging its owner for playtime. But the performance's fitful pace (compounded by the frequent need to tune the machine onstage), the dim lighting and the insertion of two dancers did little to showcase the rapport between Huang and KUKA.

Earlier, the Singapore Fringe Festival explored the bond between humankind and animals, and two dance acts in this year's program felt especially strong on that front. *Doggy Style* saw a quartet of



Alexei Ratmansky / *Swan Lake*

Perhaps the biggest surprise in Alexei Ratmansky's reconstruction of *Swan Lake* presented by Ballett Zürich in February was how few surprises there were in it.

The ballet has a convoluted history. It was first done in 1877 in Moscow and completely redone in 1895 at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Ratmansky's version is based on Nicholas Sergeyev's notes and records detailing the second production by Lev Ivanov and Marius Petipa, which has formed the basis of most every traditional version in the West.

Even with so many radical remakes of the bird, if Ratmansky's reconstruction is correct, most portions seem to have survived: just not in the same production. The massive editing and orchestration of the original Tchaikovsky score for that production by Riccardo Drigo is also still used as-is in some productions. So, much of it looked familiar, and almost all of it sounded familiar, even at brisk tempos that recalled Balanchine's stagings. It felt less like an excavation and more like a compilation.

The differences Ratmansky focused on

were stylistic. Like a restorer removing varnish, he peeled back many of the additions and embellishments accreted over time. Partnered pirouettes stopped at doubles. Men's cabrioles reverted to simpler, unbeaten tours jetés. Women's extensions didn't skyrocket past the ear; they didn't go past the shoulder.

You could see the biggest differences in the larger dances. The dance of the four little swans in Act 2 looked like the same beloved clockwork it still is today. The Act 1 waltz involved footstools, as it still does at the Royal Ballet. But in Petipa's version the majority of the corps provided a moving framework for

a smaller group or the soloists, and their steps were simple. Get on a stool. Get off a stool. Arms high. Arms low. A smaller group did more complicated enchaînements. And then the pièce de résistance: scores of dancers arrayed in a wide pyramid posing as if for a wedding photo. That is what has changed most over time: Petipa and Ivanov were as often traffic cops and landscape architects as choreographers.

The most noticeable changes for the leads included Siegfried's entirely different variation in the Act 3 pas de deux. Instead of the familiar, shorter jumping variation, it was to a longer waltz and laden with beats. And Benno was back in the Act 2 adagio. Undercutting the conventional wisdom about the original Siegfried, Pavel Gerdt, being old and needing someone else to do the hard bits, Benno did no heavy lifting here. Mostly he caught Odette when she swooned away from Siegfried. He appeared to be there instead for decorum and design. Benno seemed to display Odette and showed her off for Siegfried so he could get some distance from her to get a better look: ballet's ultimate wingman. The pas de deux à trois was much more formal than the intimate duet it has been distilled into, and the

choreographic and emotional changes went hand in hand.

There were other changes of character over the years. Siegfried wasn't melancholy and there was barely any emotional foreshadowing, even when the music ached into Odette's theme at the close of Act 1. He simply decided he'd rather hunt than rest. Odette didn't do bird arms; her port de bras were largely classical.

With elegant lines and long, arched feet, Ballett Zürich's Viktorina Kapitonova looked as if she'd be at home in any version of the ballet. Her prince, Alexander Jones, was big, sturdy, a good dancer and an exceptional partner. They had great chemistry together; Kapitonova was a passionate actress, Jones a very clear mime. By the final act, with Kapitonova literally collapsing in despair in Jones' arms when finishing pirouettes, they made you feel the story.

The sets and costumes by Jérôme Kaplan were based on historical photos. The swan corps all wore white skullcaps. Odette's tutu was fuller and longer than is common now. She wore a small crown and all the swans had a single sausage curl at the back rather than their hair secured up. It's easy to see why that was changed; it was awkward during pirouettes.

It was often clear why steps had also been changed over time. Originally, the final pose of the Act 3 pas de deux had Odile in arabesque with her hands on Siegfried's thigh as he knelt. It forced Kapitonova to drop her arms to reach Jones' thigh; she nearly lost her balance and wound up clutching his leg to steady herself.

Zürich's ballet company mirrored Zurich itself and looked prosperous, its dancing well-engineered. But what Ratmansky was asking for isn't how dancers are now trained, and at times they looked side-swiped by having to recalibrate. The women's legs often had a thick, blocky look in extensions from the extra resistance they added to stop their legs from going too high.

Ballets are like the drift of continents; they change slowly and imperceptibly — and that change is not always deterioration. Yet without efforts like Ratmansky's, we'd have no idea where we started. That knowledge is illuminating and in itself beautiful. Maybe you can't go home again. But at least you should visit.

— LEIGH WITCHEL

Coastal First Nations Dance Festival

First Nations dance is more than a colourful spectacle of music and movement; it's a reflection of the values and traditions of a people. Their dance practice is a ritual involving visual arts, song, intergenerational exchange, storytelling and movement, and the Coastal First Nations Dance Festival, held each March, offers the public an introduction to these cultural offerings.

The event is a continuation of the Hawyah hawni nah Festival, held in Prince Rupert, B.C., from 1967 to 1986. Although it began 16 years after the lifting of the potlatch ban, which had prohibited the traditional ceremonies and gatherings of First Nations people under Canada's

totem poles and coastal First Nations art and artifacts, is the perfect venue.

Fifteen dance groups, representing nations from coastal B.C., Alberta, Ontario, Yukon and Washington State, performed at the 2016 festival. Tesha Emarthle, a competition smoke dancer from Ohsweken, Ontario, and a member of the Tuscarora Turtle Clan of Six Nations, was one of the headliners. Emarthle showed off the rapid-fire footwork and deep concentration of her smoke dance, followed by her partner, Jordan Smith from the Mohawk Bear Clan of Six Nations, who performed a fast-paced, grounded war dance. Not only are song and dance inextricable in First Nations cultures, but the stories that accompany the dances are also inseparable. In one introduction, Smith likened their Old Moccasin Dance to the Charleston, joking that a man named Arthur Murray

wore a simple pink silk dress, using hand-held fans to represent the bird's wings and accenting the sharp, flicking movements of the wrist. Both interpretations embodied the playful, curious nature of the animal.

Many of the coastal groups of B.C. showcased impressive wooden masks, with some performers playfully coming into the audience. The Haida group, Rainbow Creek Dancers, used masks in most of their dances after a powerful drum-heavy entrance down the main hallway of the museum. Their frog masks had moving tongues, their raven masks had beaks that snapped open and shut quickly — making it easy for one dancer to swiftly take an audience member's hat — and their salmon dance featured a giant wooden salmon head bobbing above a billowing sheet. Similarly, the Squamish Nation's wolf dance featured a large, realistic mask for a commanding solo, and the Tlingit group Dakhka Khwaan featured a masked duet with a raven trying to impress a wolf lady with huge eyelashes. The larger-than-life masks amplify the performances and challenge the dancers to maintain their animal character, often while manipulating the mask's moving parts. The most impressive mask belonged to Git-Hoan, a Tsimshian, Tlingit and Haida group, whose large eagle masks split open to reveal human faces.

Also impressive were the different types of regalia worn by each group, representing their unique identity. The dancers make their own outfits and accessories, which is an integral part of their practice — another skill passed down through the generations. Many of the coastal groups wear red and black button blankets adorned with animal outlines. Emarthle and Smith, representing the Eastern Woodland aesthetic from Ontario, wore floral prints, fringed leather, bright moccasins and beautiful feathered headpieces.

When I spoke with Grenier after the festival, she explained that her group doesn't own the traditional dances they perform; instead they are taking care of them, preserving them and keeping them alive for the next generation. These generations were present on the stage, from grandparents to small children, all participating in shared cultural rituals and combining visual arts, music, dance and storytelling to create multifaceted performances that are beautiful on the surface while also rich with history and meaning.

— TESSA PERKINS



Indian Act, there was still a lot of work to be done to revive artistic traditions and ensure the dances were not lost. It has been presented since 2008 in Vancouver by Dancers of Damelahamid, whose artistic director, Margaret Grenier, saw the importance of this type of gathering for the presentation and preservation of First Nations dance firsthand. Haw yah hawni nah was founded by her parents, whose legacy she continues with the festival's school programs, afternoon showcases and evening performances. The Grand Hall of the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, surrounded by imposing

must have visited the First Nations and stolen their moves, because the Charleston shares the same fast switching of feet and swiveling of ankles.

Another highlight was a preview of two excerpts from the full-length work by Dancers of Damelahamid, *Flicker*, titled after a woodpecker from the northwest coast of B.C. The contrast between traditional and contemporary dance was on display in a group section featuring long-beaked wooden masks with movable parts and full button blanket regalia, and a solo that focused on contemporary interpretations of the bird's movement. Here, the dancer

Daniel Linehan / *Not About Everything*

Joanna Kotze / *It Happened It Had Happened It Is Happening It Will Happen*

“Rising stars” of contemporary dance Daniel Linehan and Joanna Kotze appeared in February at ODD Box, a studio-sized venue in downtown Ottawa. A sign of their growing stature is that the prestigious National Arts Centre joined in with Ottawa Dance Directive as presenter.

Two rooms were used for the shared program. In the first, about 50 chairs were placed in a large circle, with a handful of books on the floor forming an inner ring. This was Linehan’s simple stage design for *Not About Everything*, which opened with him entering the centre space and slowly turning, placing his feet carefully and nodding an acknowledgement to each of the spectators. After one full rotation, the motion accelerated to full speed, where it stayed, with various accents in tempo and with simple arm movements.

Linehan also droned text, at first repetitive and flavoured with the occasional change in tone — an inflection here, a pause there — in careful unison with his recorded voice coming from a loudspeaker. His script unfolded as a mantra itemizing all of the things he purported this piece not to be about (above all, not about everything).

In this 35-minute solo, Linehan not only set himself a clear task (to spin and speak), he also examined what he was doing, to take it apart, to question himself. “I have no good reason to engage in this practice,” he admitted, never ceasing to whirl. “If I were in a war zone right now, I don’t think I’d be spinning.” He proceeded to pull a pen and a petition out of his pockets, to sign it, enclose it in an envelope and hold it out asking for an audience member to assist him by mailing it. It was a charming gesture by a sincere performer.

An American who has spent the past eight years in Europe, Linehan has obviously broken away from an attachment to pretty movement, and moved toward performance art as choreographic expression. Created in 2007, *Not About Everything* was the piece that propelled the

choreographer overseas, to Belgium and P.A.R.T.S. (Performing Arts Research and Training Studio), and to find his tribe in other Judson Church-revivalists living there. Among them, he seems to have found his stride, along with recent support from Sadler’s Wells and l’Opéra de Lille.

Linehan is poised for a fruitful career, and it will be nice to say I got to experience his early work when he later makes waves with the bigger pieces he has made since then, waves that will surely cross the Atlantic from Europe to North America.

After intermission, the audience was ushered across the hall for the second piece, a 50-minute trio by another American, Joanna Kotze, who presented her 2013 Bessie Award-winning *It Happened It Had Happened It Is Happening It Will Happen*. Curiously, the setup here echoed the first, in that spectators again surrounded the performance space. One row of bright yellow chairs lined the front edge of the stage area, continuing up against the side walls to the very back of the room. We were offered another chance to gaze directly into the artist’s eyes, this time, Kotze’s, as she circles in front of us to initiate the piece. Kotze’s face seems, in its neutral position, to have a perpetual frown. She is strikingly thin, and her movements are exquisitely precise and angular. They are balletic in their rigour, but evade any narrative logic.

She was soon joined by dancer Stuart Singer, and after a beat by Netta Yerush-

almy, who each perform disjointed, spirited exertions with a similar precision. The quick succession of non-sequitur gestures — an arabesque, a leg slap, a body building pose, a lunge, a foot stomp — is read quite differently on each body, one more solid, another more curved. The transitions move quickly, like a stream of consciousness that flows and flows and ebbs and stops and starts, but still goes and goes.

Intimate indeed, the dancing was at moments so close we could reach out and touch the dancers. Their sweat was visible, glistening in the stage lights, and their movements brushed up little breezes when they swooped by. We were warned not to stretch our feet out, and I dutifully kept my body in line, lest I relax and trip a dancer by accident.

Despite the audience’s proximity to this work, I found there was very little to hook myself onto Kotze’s world and her logic. She has a degree in architecture — and you can almost imagine her choreography as a building, a great hall, a vessel for a flow of people with snippets of stories passing through. But though it is full of humanity, it is also, ultimately, without coherence. The most I can say about the piece is something stolen from Kotze’s composer Dave Ruder and the title he gave the EP he made of mostly leftover unused pieces created for the choreography: *It Happened*.

— LYS STEVENS



Stuart Singer, Netta Yerushalmy and Joanna Kotze in *It Happened It Had Happened It Is Happening It Will Happen*
Photo: Ian Douglas



Pederneiras, Galili, Foniadakis, Millepied / Mixed Bill

What a difference a day makes. On the first night of Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal's two-night stop last February in Victoria, British Columbia, they performed the program as announced: Rodrigo Pederneiras' *Rouge*, followed by Itzik Galili's *Mono Lisa* and Andonis Foniadakis' *Kosmos*. An injury that first night, however, meant the company had to do a last-minute switch for the next-day performance, replacing *Mono Lisa* with Benjamin Millepied's *Closer* — and it made for a dramatically different show.

Israeli Itzik Galili's *Mono Lisa* is a sharp, funny and extraordinarily difficult duet danced to a score co-created by Galili and composer Thomas Höfs, based on the distinctive sound of a manual typewriter. It is a classic "anything you can do I can do better" story, beginning with a man (Mark Francis Caserta) showing off his best moves to a woman (Céline Cassone), who proceeds to show him that he is not the only one with swagger. The two dancers are a terrific match: he is tall and strong, yet flexible, while she, tiny even on pointe, with startling cherry-red hair, is positively electric. Complex lifts, including one where Cassone's legs go beyond a split into a V-shape, show off not only her super-extensions, but also her enormous strength and seemingly effortless ability to be graceful in impossible positions.

New to BJM this season, *Mono Lisa* provides a perfect showcase for Cassone's precision with face, hands, legs and feet. She is a star, and this spiky, fast-paced piece is ideal for her. At the same time, the cleverness and completeness of *Mono Lisa* — a short but perfectly formed, gender-equal update on the traditional, and traditionally serious, male-female pas de deux — made the two longer pieces on the triple bill pale in comparison.

Rouge, by Brazilian Rodrigo Pederneiras, is based on an idea by BJM's artistic director, Louis Robitaille. When Robitaille commissioned the piece, he envisioned it as a tribute to the indigenous people of the Americas, and the driving score by Quebec's Les frères Grand reflects that, with a blend of North American aboriginal drumming and more complex South American rhythms, layered with modern electronic music. The costumes, however, with their Pocahontas trim, border on the cheesy, and the choreography, while fabulously energetic, feels empty by the end.

Rouge is supposedly about "themes of confrontation, the clash of cultures and power struggles between the dominant and the dominated," yet it reads more like pure entertainment, with a little samba here, a little jazz there and the occasional dash of ballet, but no serious commentary on indigenous realities. And the "dominated" turn out to be women only. In three different duets, each occasionally veering to the near-pornographic, the women are relentlessly, scarily, dominated by the men. And then we go back to being entertained by lightning-fast group numbers.

Greek choreographer Andonis Foniadakis' *Kosmos* offers a more sophisticated and successful take on group dynamics and male-female relationships. Another new commission by Robitaille, *Kosmos* boasts handsome black-and-white costumes by Montreal clothing designer Philippe Dubuc and a pounding score by Julien Tarride that the dancers take and literally fly with, alternating fearless, soaring leaps with grounded, gymnastic floorwork. The movement is frenetic and athletic, with exhausting full-body movement intended to evoke the frenzy of life in a big city. And it does: these are real people — even the dancers' hair, in many colours and styles, reinforces this — whose lives and bodies intertwine in ways both chosen and random. But the ending to *Kosmos* is a letdown.

After the headlong movement of the first three-quarters, *Kosmos* ends quietly, with the company, now appearing nude behind dappled light, slowly moving from one group tableau to another. It echoes the work's title and is very beautiful, but also puzzling in a piece otherwise devoted to urban chaos.

Now we come to the second night, when French choreographer Benjamin Millepied's *Closer*, danced by Alexander Hille and Cassone, replaced *Mono Lisa*. Set to a 20-minute solo piano work by Philip Glass called *Mad Rush*, *Closer* is soft, lyrical and sensual, and again showcases Cassone's extraordinary flexibility, this time through slow, poignant back bends. Gone is the cockiness and sharpness of *Mono Lisa*, replaced by delicacy and generous emotional connection to her partner. And Hille is a worthy partner; there is rarely a moment when he is not carrying Cassone with clear tenderness or raising her without a quiver into a beautifully sculpted lift.

Placed between *Rouge* and *Kosmos*, though, this duet served to slow the evening down. The driving physicality of the two longer pieces needed something with more fire, intelligence and meaning to balance them out, and *Mono Lisa* provided that, plus a much-needed dose of humour. Yet the company was also wise not to put *Rouge* and *Kosmos* back to back. Together they would be overwhelming and too similar. Goes to show just how important programming really is.

— ROBIN J. MILLER

Barton, Hattori, Wang / Mixed Bill

In Alberta Ballet's mixed bill *Dynamic Directions*, three choreographers with ties to Western Canada — Wen Wei Wang, Azure Barton and Yukichi Hattori — were featured in a showcase that brought their very different approaches into focus. This made for a satisfyingly diverse program that was full of great dancing, though it felt, overall, a little thin emotionally.

The program opened with Wang's *Futureland*, a visually arresting odyssey into a world bearing a strong resemblance to the video games that provided the score. The industrial stage design, with strong lighting by Nicole Pearce that carved the smoke-filled space into triangles, and the androgynous costumes by Linda Chow, created an edgy, impersonal mood.

Wang, who immigrated to British Columbia from China in 1991, uses a dance vernacular for the men reminiscent of martial arts, with its low centre of balance, deep lunges and sudden flashes of energy. The sculptural quality showed the men off well, as in a solo by Hattori (one of Alberta Ballet's finest dancers), in which he seemed to dissolve into pixels. Leiland Charles was also exceptionally dynamic.

The women's vocabulary drew more on classical ballet, to the extent that I wondered why they were in grey socks instead of pointe shoes. Also, Wang fell back on some tired tropes here, such as menacing walks that end in an aggressive *tendu en avant* in *croisé*.

The final *pas de deux*, with the slinky Reilley McKinlay and Kelley McKinlay (a recently married couple), was in line with the work as a whole: extreme and impressive off-balance physicality that, despite moments of physical intimacy, veered away from any real human connection. The dim lighting and smoke made it impossible to read the dancers' faces and, without any discernable dramatic thread, the steps appeared more functional than expressive.

The most polished piece was Barton's *Happy Little Things (Waiting on a Gruff Cloud of Wanting)*, a work originally created for the Juilliard School in 2009. Barton, an Alberta native, has a genuine talent for creating inventive movement phrases that evoked, at times quite beautifully, her theme of western life: hands

fluttering behind the back like birds, arms that suddenly transformed into lassoes, bent bodies moving with the fluid mastery of bull riders. The music was a pastiche, with the use of American jazz guitarist and composer Bill Frisell especially effective.

The work began with a lone cowboy, played by Alberta Ballet's artistic director Jean Grand-Maitre, ambling down the left orchestra aisle after the lights dimmed. He cut in to a row, forcing patrons to stand, walking past them to the other aisle and on up to the stage, where he set himself on its edge like a cowboy on a fence. This arresting image gave way to the company, outfitted in cowboy-like costumes, sitting along a bench that ran the length of the stage. Eventually they all joined in a dance and the lone cowboy disappeared — a

dance drama, but her meta-commentary, as clever as it might be, kept the audience at arm's length.

The final offering, choreographed by Hattori, was *01010010 01101001 01110100 01100101 (rite)* set to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Hattori came to Alberta after dancing with Hamburg Ballet, and the influence of German dance theatre was wonderfully evident in *(rite)*. Hattori's point of departure is the multiplication of cells, a microscopic take on the primitive that was rich with allegory. The stage was lit by rows of fluorescent lights under which the dancers, costumed in white underwear, appeared to be specimens in a laboratory. Though it sounds impersonal, Hattori's ability to fuse steps with meaning made it the night's most intimate work.



Alberta Ballet

whimsical grace note in Barton's riff on Western cultural codes.

The piece made many references to the West, some more successful than others. When the mesmerizing redhead Christina Bennett danced completely surrounded but seemingly alone, Barton captured something of the majestic lonesomeness of prairie life, though the tension was dispelled when the presentational choreography for the ensemble resumed. At the end, Barton reached for an emotional climax when Hattori, after his dejected solo that faintly echoed Nijinsky's solo for *Petrouchka*, climbed a wall of dancers and threw himself backward in an apparent suicide. But by that point the jarringly literal staging made no sense in the larger context of the work. Barton clearly has her own stories to tell and can create authentic

Hattori understands the theatrical power of imagery, for example a dancer's exposed spine while lying still at centre stage in child's pose. He has also absorbed some of John Neumeier's filmic sensibility. While the work lagged near the end (a section in which the dancers walked in a stiff limp around the chosen one, Luna Sasaki) and did not match the intensity of the score, the legibility of intent and sense of restraint was exalting.

Sasaki, who has a wonderful lightness and clarity to her dancing, could have used more weight and opposition in her final solo, but this didn't lessen the dramatic power of her resistance to being subsumed into the whole during the sacrificial dance.

— JENNIFER FOURNIER

Trisha Brown Dance Company



Trisha Brown / Proscenium Works 1979-2011 and In Plain Site

Trisha Brown has been building movement since the 1960s, creating work that examines how the human body moves in relation to the space around it. Like the Judson Dance Theater artistic collective, of which she was a founding member, Brown's work rejects dramatic narrative, focusing instead on building complex movement patterns from pedestrian gestures. Brown has described herself as "a bricklayer with a sense of humour." Yet, for all her structural rigour, it's the brick she lays askew that connects her work to the cadence of the human experience.

In February, performances at Meany Hall in Seattle, not far from Aberdeen, the city where Brown was born and raised, concluded a worldwide tour in which the Trisha Brown Dance Company gave the final performances of several of Brown's works created specifically for theatre stages. In future, the company plans to focus on her site-specific pieces, like *In Plain Site*, performed in the foyer of the Seattle Art Museum.

The Meany Hall evening opened with the hypnotic *Son of Gone Fishin'* (1981), Brown's first piece set to music, after

some 20 years of choreographing. Excerpts from Robert Ashley's *Atalanta (Acts of God)* laid electronic beats and synthesizer notes in the black proscenium space where six dancers shimmered in gold-tinted T-shirts and loose pants (the original designs by Judith Shea remade for this tour).

Through complex sequences of pedestrian gestures — a leg lift, an arm swing, light hops and torso rotations sprung from momentum — the dancers casually flipped and reversed their phrases, intertwined and unravelled, never colliding. The changing puzzle-like structure was invigorating and suspenseful,

from which glimmers of unison — a gesture downstage mirrored by another upstage — occasionally emerged like quiet, soothing breaths.

You can see us (1995), performed by Cecily Campbell and Jamie Scott, was a response to a solo made in 1994 in which Brown had danced with her back to the audience. Though there wasn't explicit interaction, the pair was deeply connected by synchronization, as one danced with her back to the audience and the other, mirroring the movement, faced forward.

Rogues (2011) was comprised of two simultaneous duets, one performed by Marc Crousillat and Stuart Shugg, and the other by Campbell and Scott. Though each only interacted with their partner, the audience sees the whole composition of all four. Their limbs swept and swung with characteristic fluidity, building momentum to partnered lifts that were as lofty as they were steady. Momentarily, they deliberately fell out of sync, then promptly returned to unison, as if to prove unwavering commitment to one another that also brought a sense of comfort and reassurance. *Rogues* was set to piano, harmonica and wind instrument notes that faded in and out against a hum of grinding static, composed by Alvin Curran.

PRESENT TENSE (2003) added a touch of play and theatricality. A painted backdrop of bold shapes of red, green, orange and blue, designed by American artist Robert Rauschenberg (a frequent collaborator of Brown's) accented seven dancers dressed in solid coloured tops and pants. Dancers became puzzle pieces, interlocking into three-dimensional structures with calculated balance; then, with casual ease, a dancer is flipped head-over-feet.

In another acrobatic feat, two dancers jumped into splits, held mid-air by the ensemble while their front legs intersected at 90 degrees. Later, a dancer balanced his outstretched body horizontally with his stomach on the flexed feet of his partner, who was lying on his back. Suddenly, the dancer on top flopped, playfully limp, over the feet as if to say that even in such rigour, it's not above them to embrace some silliness. John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*, for prepared piano, reiterated the theme of creating new structures.

The foyer of the Seattle Art Museum, where 13 pieces or excerpts were adapted for the long, rectangular space, gave audience members a chance to view the dance from ground level or from the balconies above. In an excerpt of *Set and Reset* (1983), three dancers walked alongside a wall holding another dancer horizontally above their heads, whose feet "walked" in the same rhythm against the wall. *Sticks* (1973) positioned dancers against posts and tasked them to shift positions while balancing long wooden sticks. The piece doesn't finish until all the dancers have completed their task, which generated audience support as one person shouted cues to help a dancer finish.

Group Primary Accumulation with Movers (1973) created challenge and suspense when a "mover" overlapped a dancer's legs on top of another's, while both persisted in dancing identical phrases of movement lying on the ground. They were left, subject to the mover's whim, who placed a third dancer nearby such that her limbs, dancing the same phrases while standing, intersected the pair. The dancers were never named, and the piece was void of any reference to time and place, but out of these precarious circumstances, Brown has created narratives and characters.

— PIA LO

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FROM THE MATA HARI COLLECTION



Mata Hari — born, out of the imagination of Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, in Paris in 1905 — made her breakthrough as a dancer that same year, when she performed at what is now Musée Guimet and became a trending topic in the media. Who was this European woman who knew Eastern temple dances? Mata Hari (“eye of the day” in Malay) created mystery around her persona, telling different stories about her past. She was a Javanese princess who married an English officer, she was born in Java from European parents, she was born in India where she learned the temple dances... In fact, Zelle was born in 1876 in Leeuwarden, Netherlands, and, if we may believe the French, was a German spy during the First World War who sent information to Germany using invisible ink. Although Mata Hari would probably have seen some traditional dances during the time (1897-1902) she lived in the Indies with her husband (an officer in the Dutch colonial army), she never received formal dance training like, for example, her rival Maud Allen. Perhaps this makes her early successes all the more impressive.

The photographs shown here are from the Mata Hari collection in the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, capital of the Dutch province of Friesland. In 2017 — 100 years after Mata Hari was executed by the French for treason and espionage — the Fries Museum will present a major exhibition to celebrate her life. www.friesmuseum.nl

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