

Eclectic ballet excites

by Kothai Kumanan

Ballet lovers savoured a delightful celebration of dance September 25 and 26 as The National Ballet of Canada entered the last leg of its Eastern Tour.

Founded in 1951 by Celia Franca, an English dancer, The National Ballet of Canada has always been a classical company and is still the only Canadian company to present the traditional full-evening ballet classic. Its repertoire includes classics like Marius Petipa's *La Bagadere: The Kingdom of Shades*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Swan Lake*. The company's diversity also embraces such works as Jiri Kylian's *Transfigured Night* and *Blue-Eyed Trek* by resident choreographer John Alleyne.

Under the artistic direction of Canadian-born Reid Anderson, who is himself a dancer, producer, and choreographer, the National Ballet of Canada has been described by Anna Kisselgoff of the New York Times as a company "that has come into its own".

Opening with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Concerto in C Major*, John Cranko's choreography of the ballet in three movements was often suggestive of a joyful, springtime frolic. Employing four soloists, two male and two female, and a corps of two men, the elegance of the piece was enhanced by the costumes which were loose, white shirts with ruffles at the wrist and neck and a tiny "wig" to imply the period of Mozart's music. These outfits were contrasted by the women's simple yet sophisticated tutus as the principals danced and wove aesthetic, flowing patterns around the core.

William Forsythe, choreographer for *Steptext* is described as "far from a comfortable choreographer", as "(someone who likes to) take our conceptions of dance and turn them upside down". Currently Artistic Director of the Frankfurt Ballet, Forsythe is one of the most original and fastest rising choreographers working today and is said to "attack the nerve endings of contemporary society" in his frequently brutal revelations about 20th century society. *Steptext* is a confirmation of step-material from the full-length ballet, *Artifact* (1984). *Artifact* is one of several ballets in a large repertoire created by Forsythe that brought the Frankfurt company international acclaim.

The piece starts dramatically with the sudden appearance of a sole male dancer starkly dressed in black. The stage is cast in shadows, though various lights are still on throughout the auditorium. The large stage is bare with the exception of a white board with black lines that form the outline of a rooftop. There is complete silence as the dancer stands in one spot

and "signals" using only his arms with movements not unlike tai chi. There's a momentary flash of Johann Sebastian Bach on violin. The dancer pauses...stops his movements, and walks away from the audience behind the board. He is replaced by another male who does almost the same thing; with the onset of a longer spot of music, the dancer falters...slows down...and disappears behind the board.

Enter a woman in a flaming red leotard with hair severely pulled back. The music continues as three males enter and the story continues. As the piece progresses, there is turbulence in the music as well as the dancer's movements. The controlled tension is present in the characters and through both the female's struggle with each male and the apparent conflict between the three males.

First soloist Martine Lamy's exhilarating technique and passionate dramatic interpretation are galvanizing to watch and inspirational to any dancer.

The Grand pas de deux, which is the third act and highlight of Marius Petipa's full length ballet, "is a daring display of bravura by the lovers Kitri and Basilio, whose impending marriage ceremonies are being celebrated". Margaret Illman is charming, yet elegant, capturing her character with great depth and emotion. Kevin Pugh's spirited characterization of Basilio is thrilling to watch as his compact athletic body soars through the air, and at times seems almost suspended there.

The Hispanic nuance in the choreography is sometimes very subtle and therefore even more appealing to the eye. The time Petipa spent in Spain influenced his artistry immensely and this is evident in his best known tribute to Spanish dancing, which he learned first hand during this period. Despite the playful nature of

the choreography, Petipa does not lose the classicism, but integrates the purity of the French standard with Italian virtuosity in his inventive and energized choreography.

Dream Dance, which premiered in Canada at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre last November was the final ballet of the evening and has gifted Czechoslovakian choreographer Jiri Kylian at his most enchanting. The extremely light hearted and playful ballet expresses the cultural diversities of regions such as Armenia and the Auberge in eleven vignettes that weave a poetic Kaleidoscope of ethnicity. Unlike many of his earlier compositions which were of a weighty psychological nature, *Dream Dance* is based on sheer movement. This abstract, yet moving piece has strong theatrical impact. Each section stands alone, yet all are united by a common theme which is the consistent existence of every man. This is depicted by Walter Nobbe's soulful set design of a sun and/or moon on a mirage composed of hues of blue and green. This alludes to the fact that the basic emotions of all humanity are canopied by the same sun and moon. Set to Luciano Berio's Folk Songs, which are based on eleven folk songs from the Americas, France, Italy, and Russia, each short vignette creates a sense of time and place and emotional energy while transversing a wide range of moods.

Mezzo soprano, Linda Maguire's rich voice and dynamic nature combined to produce polished results. Willa Kim's costume design was impeccable, ranging from simple, flowing dresses to multicolored, layered shirts with ruffles and black body suits. The last of the vignettes, the Azerbaijan Love Song, the most frolicsome with its clown hats, ended an evening of superb ballet on a lighthearted note.

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