

Amateur companies diversify dance in Edmonton

The following article is the fourth in a series on the Arts in Edmonton. It examines four of the largest dance ensembles in this city, and attempts to explain their organization, membership and dance preoccupations.

Cathy Herbut is a physical education instructor at the university. She has studied modern, jazz and tap dance at UCLA and in New York, and instructs and choreographs for Orchesis modern dance ensemble.

The dance scene in Edmonton is one of which residents of the city can be very proud. In Edmonton, dance at the amateur level is supported both in depth and variety, as is exemplified by the number of various dance groups and organizations working toward the development and exhibition of high quality dance. Among these are: Alberta Ballet Company, Shumka Dancers, University of Alberta Orchesis, Alberta Highland Dancing Association, and Alberta Tap Dancing Association.

The Alberta Ballet Company was formed May 1st, 1966, from senior members of the Edmonton Ballet Company, which in its turn grew from the original Ballet Interlude Company founded in 1957 by Miss Ruth Carse, the Company's present director.

In September, 1969, the Company received its charter to op-

erate as a semi-professional company; i.e. dancers within the Company are not paid a full-time salary, but receive, as payment, complimentary lessons and dance supplies.

One of the major functions of the Alberta Ballet Company is to take ballet to centers in western Canada that do not get much opportunity to view that art form—to help build appreciative audiences through education, as well as entertainment. Toward this end, the Company has travelled to many centers in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia—some more than once, performing and giving lecture-demonstrations. Miss Carse happily comments that if a community is skeptical about what the Alberta Ballet Company will bring to them on its first arrival, there are never the same feelings the second time around. Sell out crowds appear time and again on second and subsequent appearances to see a repertoire which includes modern ballet and jazz, in addition to classical works.

The criterion of acceptance into the Company is based on dancing ability. Age as such is not a determining factor. The average age of dancers in the Company is seventeen years.

With most of the dancers still in school, operation of the Company is difficult, for it means

evening rehearsals and weekend performances. This problem will be remedied if and when the dancers can be paid a full-time salary and receive integrated academic and practical study. This is a long range plan of the Alberta Ballet Company that will come about only when adequate finances are secured. At present, the Company operates on money obtained from minor grants from the Government of Alberta and the City of Edmonton, patrons, teas, bazaars, and profitable concerts.

York, including Montreal during Expo '67. Last summer, Shumka competed in the Biennial World Folk Festival where, representing Canada, they placed seventh out of sixteen countries in folk dancing.

Shumka Dancers dance for fun and enjoyment—which they easily convey to their audiences. They are a young, vital and dynamic group that share the culture of their ancestry with all to whom they perform.

University of Alberta Orchesis

by Cathy Herbut

The struggle is hard and slow, but it has been that way all along—and progress has been made. So if the past is any indication, the future looks bright for the Alberta Ballet Company.

Of international repute are Edmonton's Shumka Dancers, a Ukrainian ethnic dance ensemble founded in 1959 by Chester Kuc to promote and maintain Ukrainian culture in Canada. The club presently consists of approximately twenty-five members, all of Ukrainian ethnic extraction—which is a criterion necessary to belong to the group. Dancers practice weekly at Archbishop MacDonald High School under the guidance of those members of the group considered to be most experienced in the dances being practiced. Chief choreographer for the group is Orest Semchuk, who has been on the Edmonton dance scene for the past several years.

All dances are choreographed and are usually fast moving and highly spirited. Costumes are authentic and represent those worn on various occasions in different parts of the Ukraine.

Shumka Dancers are self-supporting, earning their money giving concerts. Their travel record is most impressive. The group has recently returned from a very successful trip to Yellowknife, N.W.T. where they played to sell-out crowds at \$25.00 a couple. They have performed in various centres from Vancouver to New

(modern dance club) began in 1964 as an extra-curricular activity, sponsored by the Faculty of Physical Education and directed by Mrs. Dorothy Harris, for a small handful of people interested in creative dance. Since then, the club has increased its membership (both male and female) greatly, and is now a registered Students' Union Club which meets twice weekly in the dance studio of the Physical Education Building—Tuesdays for general interest, and Thursdays for production work.

Orchesis is rather unique in that it offers young dancers the chance to be creative and to compose their own dances, within a predetermined structure, established for the most part, by four choreographic supervisors, all faculty members within the Faculty of Physical Education and Department of Drama. Orchesis also gives its members experiences in organizing and staging their own productions—the major one being its annual "Dance Motif", held early each calendar year in SUB Theater. For the past two years Orchesis has taken excerpts of their program to Calgary, as part of a Calgary-Edmonton modern dance exchange. Next year the club hopes to expand the exchange to include Regina and Saskatoon as well. At present, the club is working on a lecture-demonstration film on modern dance to be shown later this year on CBC Educational TV.

The main problem the club faces is a constant turnover of members, as students pass through the University each year. Despite this, however, the standard of dance is steadily improving.

Requirements for membership?—none, other than a desire to participate in creative dance. And the club heartily welcomes new members!

In addition to actual performing groups, the Edmonton dance scene benefits from dance associations which are dedicated to the advancement of specific forms of dance.

One of the oldest of these is the Alberta Highland Dancing Association which was founded as an Edmonton body in 1935 by Joseph Shirlaw, William McQuinnie, and Arthur Miller. The Association is now a provincial one with branches in Red Deer, Jasper, and Calgary as well as Edmonton, which alone boasts a dancing membership of 450. In Edmonton, the AHDA supports four annual competitions, two local and two open. Of these, one is a Northern Canadian Championship. In addition to competitions, the AHDA also involves its dancers in the annually touring "White Heather Show" from Scotland and various local festivals which display highland dancing.

Over the years the AHDA has fostered the development of numerous champions—some of them of world class caliber—such as Angus MacKenzie, 1969 adult world champion; Nancy Hays and Susan Passmore, first and second in the 1965 junior world championships—to name only two. Time and again Edmonton dancers have brought home honors from Scotland—including British and Scottish, as well as world championships. This could not have been possible, had it not been for development of "at home competition" by the Alberta Highland Dancing Association.

A younger, yet similar association to the AHDA, is the Alberta Tap Dancing Association which was established in 1965 by Mary Gay Strong and Cathy Herbut, who felt that Alberta tap students should be provided with an outlet for their talents. The Association has over fifty active members, most of them Edmontonians, interested in the promotion of tap dancing.

Since its inception, ATDA has sponsored five tap competitions which have involved hundreds of Alberta tap students and greatly increased the standard of tap dancing in Alberta. Another major project of the Association is its annual "Dance Spectacular"—an Easter benefit show for crippled children which is directed and choreographed by Al Gilbert of Hollywood.

Mr. Gilbert has commented that tap in Edmonton is as good as or better than that in any of the major American cities—something of which the city has to be proud. With tap dancing making its way back onto the Broadway and TV scene, there is no telling how many Edmontonians the ATDA may help into the "big time".

The dance in Edmonton is strong. The city has many interested and capable teachers, organizers and administrators; and a young, vibrant and talented group of students and performers. The tragic thing is that because there is no professional outlet for the high degree of talent that is built up here, dancers either move to centres where they can make their way in dance—or they forsake dance in favor of something more secure. If Edmonton could find a remedy for this situation, it would have a dance centre that would rival almost any in the world.



ORCHESIS AT U OF A
... creating with dance



ALBERTA BALLET
... experimenting in jazz and character

photos by Chris Scott
Dave Hebditch