

Ballet performance in modern tone

By: Diane Robinson

Last Thurs., Fri. and Sat. (Oct. 9-11), the Cohn Auditorium was host to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, a Quebec based ballet company that combines the traditional and the classic with a more modern style of dance. I saw the Saturday evening show and as each night's performance featured a different program there will naturally have been a difference in impressions but if the company danced with the balance and style evident on Saturday evening, each audience must have left the performances happily satisfied.

Because of an injury to one of the principal dancers in the first scheduled piece, the ballet "Serenade" was substituted. "Serenade" was a more traditional style of ballet and found this the least interesting dance of the evening, chiefly because it lacked the emotional strength which was evident in the other works. The women danced in unison in their long, netted dresses, while two males supported the principals. Although I found the piece a bit draggy with all the flitting and leaping about that was done, one redeeming quality was the style and timing of the dancers. They showed great strength and control in holding positions, and movements, difficult to make in a uniform group, were clean and clear without any stiffness or faltering.

The second piece "A Yesterday's Day" was more emotionally intense and, although the choreography

was less intricate than that of "Serenade", it appeared more involved as each of the seven dancers had concurrent individual movements. The choreography of this premiere piece was done by Linda Rabin and the music by Ann Mortifee. The piece opened with a spot lighting up seven women grouped closely together and dressed in a mottled variety of unfinished costumes. The impression of incompleteness was deliberately and effectively created in accord with the meaning of the dance. The music was predominantly electronic and supported the atmosphere created by the dancers' strong movements. The lighting was also an effective element, creating mood switches as the emotions and movements changed. Seven chairs were used as props and were important to the piece as they aided in the dancers' portrayal of the eerie unity, the staccato violence, the alienation and the tense dependency in the group. Often the movements on the stage were from only two dancers while the other dancers exhibited fantastic control of action and emotion that centered the focus on the two central females. One criticism I have is that the impact and meaning of the piece would have been just as effective in a shorter time as movements were becoming repetitive.

"Variations for a Dark Voice" opened with a striking lighting effect of a blue wash with gobos to

produce a shadowy smoky blue light over the blue costumed couples on the stage. This dance also had strong emotional qualities caught up with the sensuousness of the dancing couples who portrayed the story. The feelings emanating from the dancers' movements were repeated by the woman's hauntingly clear voice that sang the story of a woman, alone in a hostile city and finally finding a lover and some joy. The two lovers were danced by Sonia Vartanian and Alexandre Belin. Their portrayal of lovers was executed by excellent dancing and some very intricate movements were carried out with ease and gracefulness.

The last piece "Bawdy Variations", choreographed by Brian MacDonald, was pure and complete fun and lacked any subtlety of meaning that the former pieces had. The sets were gay, colourful and inventive and the bright lights and authentically phonograph-scratchy jazz and ragtime rhythms successfully re-created the infectious gaiety of the 1920's era. The colourful variety of costumes, in combination with the set and music were surpassed only by the excellent dancing of the company.

There was the Madame (not the Mrs. kind, but the bordello variety) danced by a very unfeminine Brydon Paidge, and although she was bulky she managed to dance and be coy in a purely comical sense. Robert Steele, as the Father,

was dapper and suave, bringing his skinny, virginal son for "initiation". The dance scenes of the son, Christopher Tabor, and his reluctant choice of females, Leslie-May Downs, were an excellent combination of acting and dancing, with the dancers never losing balance or control throughout fast and difficult steps. I think the best character in this comic bordello scene was the Octogenarian, played by John Stanzel. One wondered how the creaky looking old gentleman could "take his pleasures" when he was wheeled on stage in a chair. The talents he showed while dancing were fantastic, even while going through difficult and fast ballet movements he remained in the character of a stiff old man. He created the illusion of age while performing with control, strength and precision, and to me he was the prime example of all the dancing talents displayed by the company in this comical ballet.

For those that tend to think of ballet as a classical and boring art, this ballet company is one to change your mind. There wasn't just the objective sensual pleasure of watching good dancers on stage, rather a whole vibrant atmosphere was created to catch you up in a mood of understanding, exhilaration and excitement.

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