

Canadian Artists on Tour

Royal Winnipeg Ballet En Route to Asia: "...go now and be challenged"

Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet is about to embark on a two-month tour of Asia, in a reflection of a continuous quest for excellence and thirst for new challenges.

Founded in 1939, and granted its royal title in 1953 by Queen Elizabeth II, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB) spends about 20 weeks on the road each year, performing a wide-ranging repertoire of full-length classics and ensemble ballets. For Artistic Director Arnold Spohr, who will retire at the end of this season after an illustrious, 30-year career, the company's meteoric rise can be chalked up to a "pioneering spirit" and a supreme commitment to quality.

"We always had a spirit of working hard, doing our own thing, and then going out to meet challenges outside our comfortable environment," Mr. Spohr told *Canada Reports*. "We always wanted to tackle new countries, new places, and show them what we were doing — and that's what we did...."

"My whole idea was to be an excellent company with a very high standard. By getting terrific teachers involved with the company, I would learn from the best; then, if we worked hard enough, we could become one of the best."

Without a doubt, much of the Royal Winnipeg's success can be credited to Mr. Spohr's own background as a teacher, and to his determination to reach out to a wider world. In the 1960s, convinced that the company could learn from the leading lights of professional ballet, he persuaded board members to endorse a rare guest performance by dancers from the Soviet Union. Later, he helped recruit top instructors to the RWB's professional school, ensuring that a new generation of performers would receive training based on the Volkova development of the Vaganova (Leningrad) School. Today, 80 per cent of the company's 26 dancers — including Principal Dancers Evelyn Hart, David Peregrine, and John Kaminski — are graduates of the school.

Mr. Spohr sees the Asian tour as an opportunity to share the spirit that makes the Royal Winnipeg Ballet unique. But typically, he also welcomes the chance to learn more about new cultures. "By seeing the world, by being in other places, you develop and get an extra dimension to your personality and to your artistry," he says. "Anybody who travels absorbs traditions from around the world, and tradition is very important in dance because all the world is related."

Based on a recent visit to China and Japan, Mr. Spohr is anxious to become more familiar with Oriental ballet and folkloric dance. "I was mesmerized by the music," he recalls. "It filled my being... this was where the beginning of life was, and there was such a wis-

dom and humility. There's a quiet courtesy, one to another, that we can all learn from."

The company's touring schedule begins with six appearances in Taipei, January 26 to 30, followed by visits to nine other cities ending March 10. Audiences in Singapore and Hong Kong will see a performance of *Our Waltzes* by Vicente Nabadra, *Pas de Deux Nuages* by Jiri Kylian, *Five Tangoes* by Hans van Manen, and *The Hands* by Paddy Stone. In Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Kyoto, Beijing, and Shanghai, the program will include *Allegro Brillante* by the late George Balanchine, the *Giselle Pas de Deux* by Peter Wright, *Belong Pas de Deux* by Norbert Vesak, *Four Last Songs* by Rudi van Dantzig, and *Rodeo* by Agnes de Mille. The company will present both programs in Tokyo and Osaka.

After receiving dozens of prestigious awards and medals from around the world, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Arnold Spohr might be expected to sit back for a moment of respite. But Mr. Spohr sees the Asian tour as the next in a series of milestones that will keep the company alive and vibrant.

"We want to go now and be challenged by this experience," he says, "because the true challenge is to achieve, develop, and keep on reaching from plateau to plateau until you die. Otherwise, you *do* die.... If you have success upon success, then you're living; if not, you have problems...."

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet performs *Steps*, a trilogy of short dances commenting on contemporary social phenomena.

