

# Alberta Ballet Company celebrating twenty years

by Suzette C. Chan

When people talk about the Alberta Ballet Company, they talk about a bright, young, up-and-coming ballet corps. But the ABC has had an eventful history — it marks its 20th anniversary next year.

The man who helped the company to its current plateau from a miniscule organization nine years ago hopes to supervise it to its growth as Canada's fourth national ballet company.

Brydon Paige was hired as artistic director of the ABC in 1976 after he helped found and direct Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

"When I came to Alberta, there was little or no administrative or technical staff," says Paige. "All that existed at the time was the founder (Ruth Carse) who had turned the directorship over to someone else for one year; there were dancers with contracts and a general manager to take care of business."

While Paige's main job is to take care of artistic development, he took great care in developing an administrative support staff to help promote the company and ease growth and expansion.

"It took a long time to build up the administration to what it is now. There's a strong board and strong support in each city (the company splits time between Edmonton and Calgary). These have helped enormously to support the artistic side."

As his company grew, Paige saw its audiences grow.

"When I came to Edmonton, we performed at the Citadel to an average audience of 400 to 500. Now, for our repertoires we have between 1,500 and 1,800. When we perform full productions like the *Nutcracker* and *Cinderella*, the houses are generally full.

The company now performs at the Jubilee Auditorium when it is in Edmonton.

Paige also observes a wide range of the type of people seeing ballet.

"When we opened *Coppelia* in Lethbridge recently, there was a preview performance for people associated with a meat-packing company. Most of them had never seen ballet before and they were bowled over."

Paige feels that proficiency in classical ballet and the ballet's size are the company's strongest points. "The dancers get an opportunity to perform a wider range of roles," he says. Thus, *Coppelia* is a natural choice to close out the ABC season.

Considered the greatest comedic ballet of all time, *Coppelia*, according to the late, great choreographer George Balanchine, tells the story of Franz, who is fascinated with a "beautiful, lifeless doll, whose quiet, mechanical beauty contrasts with the charming liveliness of the real-life heroine (Swanilda)." In the end, Franz realizes the doll is no substitute for Swanilda and the story ends happily.

"There's a great deal of pantomime, which can be obscure and unclear to some audiences," says Paige, who choreographed the production Edmonton audiences will see next week. "I'm happy to see the dancers react to pantomime and try to bring out the humour (in the piece). For the leading roles, there's an opportunity for acting. Those playing Dr. Coppelius, Franz and Swanilda must all act very much as well as dance."

Paige says he has much faith in the future of the company and was encouraged by a successful debut in Toronto. "We were quite unknown so there was a great deal of curiosity," he said. "They (audiences and critics) were pleasantly surprised. I was told many times it was the warmest reception for a visiting dance company in a long time."

Paige believes the ABC will "eventually" join the ranks of the major national ballet companies, the National Ballet of Canada, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, but seems more motivated to build an exciting, individual company than a copy of the larger ones.

"People are always asking if we're trying to be one (of the national companies)," said Paige, "but we're trying to be ourselves. It's hard to pin down a company's image, particularly when you're very close to the image. The Toronto experience showed to all of us that this company has a wonderful future as a very vital, interesting company."



Scott Harris and Mariane Beausejour in *Coppelia*

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