

CROSS CANADA CURRENTS

Ballet's Orient Express

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's (RWB) recent tour de force of seven Asia-Pacific countries was an "Orient Express" of a different kind — but one that captured the original's spirit of elegance, beauty and grace.

Founded nearly a half century ago, Canada's internationally acclaimed Royal Winnipeg Ballet had performed in 31 countries prior to its recent tour, but never before in Asia. Yet it was greeted with

unprecedented enthusiasm during its seven-week tour of the Far East. Each performance was attended by large, appreciative crowds and praised by local dance critics.

In tropical Kuala Lumpur no ballet company had ever sold out before, even though most had played in small theatres. But when the RWB arrived in the Malaysian capital, it performed before a sell-out audience of 3 500, and organizers were forced to turn people away at the door.

And in Bangkok, the troupe's performance was a highlight of the birthday festivities for Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej. From its inaugural January performances in Taiwan through those in Singapore and Hong Kong, to its shows in the major Japanese cities of Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, and performances in Beijing and Hangzhou in the People's

Sarah Slipper and André Lewis in Norbert Vesak's, *Belong*, which won gold medals for choreography.

Republic of China, the RWB's Asia-Pacific tour was an unqualified success.

During the tour, the Winnipeg troupe presented three different programs selected to highlight the company's versatility and showcase the talents of its leading artists, including principal dancer Evelyn Hart. The first program was devoted to the troupe's acclaimed full-length production of the classical ballet *Giselle*. In Tokyo the performance was filmed for later broadcast on the Japanese national television service.

The other two programs of mixed repertoire featured works ranging from the haunting *Pas de Deux: Nuages* to the jaunty "country hoedown" style *Rodeo*, and included two Canadian works — *The Hands* by the late Paddy Stone and Norbert Vesak's *Belong*, which won the gold medal for choreography in 1980 at both the World Ballet Concours in Japan and the International Ballet competitions in Bulgaria.

At the conclusion of the tour in March, Canada's oldest classical ballet troupe returned to its home in Winnipeg and its lavish new headquarters. The airy four-storey structure, which officially opened in January, is being hailed as the finest dance rehearsal facility in North America. Designed and built specifically for dancers, it is only the second such structure on the continent. As it approaches its 50th birthday next year, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet is enjoying new comforts at home and new conquests abroad.

