

Robert Desrosiers' Mad, Magic Dance

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's most magical of all? Ask aficionados of Canadian dance, and ten to one the answer will be Robert Desrosiers, 36-year-old magus, choreographer and dancer extraordinaire who founded the Toronto-based Desrosiers Dance Theatre — one of the hottest tickets anywhere.

Since the company's earliest days, it has been known for the glorious, loose-limbed, high-voltage choreography that tumbles out of Desrosiers' fevered imagination. Quiet and reserved off-stage, Desrosiers on stage becomes a dynamo who hurls about with frenzied energy and wistful vulnerability — his rag-doll flexibility and acrobatic fervour combining in equal and improbable parts. But there is more finesse and precision to Desrosiers' choreography than one might think, in spite of its look of wild abandon on stage.

Over the years, his hallucinatory imagination has taken shape in such works as *Nightclown* (1980), *Brass Fountain* (1980), *Bad Weather* (1982), *L'Hôtel Perdu* (1983), *Ultracity* (1984), *Lumière* (1986), *Blue Snake* (1987), *Concerto in Earth Major* (1987), *Incognito* (1988), *First Year* (1988), and *Arc en Ciel* (1989).

With these, he has treated audiences to Daliesque or Boschian visions of inanimate creatures that come to life in horrific ways — a treacherous staircase devours dancers; cocktail tables careen drunkenly about the stage; chandelier-antlered men in tails dance a gavotte; a grand piano prances after its bewildered pianist. If this isn't magical theatre, what is?

As a choreographer, Desrosiers is well aware of the forces that make up his creative energy; he therefore alternates very theatrical pieces with more straightforward but equally challenging dance inventions. But almost always, he brings to the stage images that are so wildly improbable and so creatively juxtaposed that some have referred to him as the "Dali of dance" and others as the "mesmerizing crafter of unearthly delights."

It was with *Incognito*, which premiered at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics Arts Festival, that Desrosiers made his mark. The *West Australian Times* called it "the most exciting, powerful and compelling theatre you will see in

one lifetime." For Anna Kisselgoff of the *New York Times*, "the viewer was rewarded by a hypnotizing spectacle.... With his brilliant ability to blur the lines between the fantastic and the real ... Desrosiers is a great entertainer who reaches deep."

Born in Montreal, Robert Desrosiers entered the National Ballet School in 1966. Five years later, he joined the National Ballet of Canada and then moved on to Europe where he studied with such greats as Lindsay Kemp, Raymond Franchetti and Felix Blaska. Following his return to Canada in 1975, he performed with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Toronto Dance Theatre, Dancemakers and Ballet Y's before forming his own Desrosiers Dance Theatre.

In its first decade, the troupe reinforced its image time and again as a company that breaks the borders of consciousness. Robert Desrosiers continues to astound audiences the world over with magic and creative energy to echo the future and call up the primeval and prehistoric past. "Magic," you say? Indeed. ♦

Robert Desrosiers' *Blue Snake* astounded audiences the world over with its magic and creative energy.



Barry Gray