

## Gala celebration for Canada's "first lady of dance"

Celia Franca, founder and for 24 years the artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, was honoured in a gala celebration at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa on September 29 for her contribution to the arts in Canada.



Ken Bell

Miss Franca performs one of her early roles in dance.

Called the "first lady of dance" in Canada by many, she has helped to bring dance in the country to a high level of professionalism. She is now a member of the board of directors of the Canada Council where she continues the struggle to raise the standards of dance in the country.

Miss Franca has danced on the Canadian stage in many roles since she arrived from England in 1951. Her most recent role has been as Lady Capulet in the National Ballet's production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

### Dedicated to developing ballet

She is most remembered for her efforts and dedication in helping to establish the National Ballet Company as the world class ensemble it has become today.

The National Ballet School was also founded by Miss Franca with Betty Oliphant in 1959. Graduates of the school have filled the ranks of the National Ballet and many have gone on to other companies in Canada as well as other parts of the world.

Recognizing the necessity for touring, Miss Franca invited guests like Rudolf Nureyev for star appearances to draw audiences in cities where the National Ballet was unknown. Within a short period the company was taking its full length production of *Swan Lake*, the only one

in North America at the time, and productions like *Cinderella*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *La Sylphide*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, across the continent and on successful tours of Europe and Japan.

Miss Franca has also helped many individual Canadian choreographers and artists. Ann Ditchburn, James Kudelka and Constantin Patsalas made their first steps towards creativity under her watchful and helpful eye.

In demand in other parts of the world since retiring as director of the National in 1974, she has mounted *Pineapple Doll* and *Offenbach in the Underworld* for the Joffrey Ballet in New York, and visited and taught in mainland China, where she staged a full length *Coppelia* in Peking.

### Artists pay tribute

The gala, *Celia...a celebration*, was presented by two Ottawa-based arts ensembles, Theatre Ballet of Canada, the smallest and youngest of the country's ballet ensembles, and the Ottawa Symphony. Many of the dancers who have benefited from the contributions of Celia Franca, danced in the celebration.

There were two premieres on the program. The first was the world premiere of a pas de deux by Jeff Hyslop, *A Place to Dance*, danced by Evelyn Hart, of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Frank Augustyn of the National Ballet. The second was the Canadian premiere of Gerald Arpino's *Confetti*, presented by Theatre Ballet of Canada.

The more conventional contributions were a pas de deux from Miss Franca's National Ballet production of *Cinderella*, danced by Veronica Tennant and Raymond



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Celia Franca

Smith of the National, and *Le Corsair* pas de deux and variations danced by Karen Kain and Frank Augustyn.

A surprise addition to the program, announced from backstage by Donald MacSween, the director general of the National Arts Centre, was the second act pas de deux from *Swan Lake* danced by Evelyn Hart and Raymond Smith.

Theatre Ballet of Canada and its artistic director, Lawrence Gradus, were also represented by Gradus's now classic *Garden*. The Debussy piano pieces to which it is set, were performed by Nicole Presentey.

Brian Law and the Ottawa Symphony provided the orchestral overture and the major support for the dancers.

### Career highlights

The gala performance included a film, *Celia*, that contained highlights from film footage depicting Miss Franca's career to



National Ballet of Canada

Karen Kain as Swanilda and Frank Augustyn as Franz in *Coppelia*, with artists from the National Ballet of Canada, the company founded by Celia Franca.