

Around the World and Back Again

At a crucial point in its performance, how will Alberta Ballet land this latest *grand jeté*?

By Graham Chandler



The Nutcracker

Almost 20 years ago, a story in the *Ottawa Citizen* poo-pooed “lingering dreams among some supporters of making the Alberta Ballet Company Canada’s fourth major classical dance troupe.” But, as the old saying goes, that was then and this is now. Leaving behind headlines peppered with words like “clumsy,” “awkward,” “lacking” and “struggling,” those lingering dreams materialized. Alberta Ballet has indeed matured into Canada’s fourth major company, with 24 dancers and its own world-class school. It’s a polished international success story capable of challenging the Royal Winnipeg for Western Canada’s best.

The triumph came with internationalization. Highly acclaimed overseas tours to places like China, Egypt and Finland brought the company international stature and recognition. Foreign dancers were brought into the company. At the end of last season, its 35th, 70 per cent of Alberta Ballet’s dancers were from outside Canada: Spain, France, Bulgaria, Hungary, United States, Australia, Ukraine, England and Japan; just three were Albertans. Hiring foreign dancers and touring the world wins high visibility and a global profile, but it is costly. At the end of the 2001 season, the company’s annual budget was almost half a million dollars in the red.

Worldwide acclaim wrought other havoc. Not far into last season, Boston Ballet liked artistic director Mikko Nissinen’s work so much they wooed him away for themselves, leaving Alberta Ballet to look for a new one. If that wasn’t enough, long-time executive director Greg Epton quit and his replacement lasted but a few months before Ann Lewis took the reins. And there are more key personnel changes. The School of Alberta Ballet hired a new principal

and, for the first time, a marketing manager.

Success has had a price: a nagging deficit and loss of key artistic and executive staff have left the company at a crossroads.

Personnel changes in ballet companies, particularly of artistic directors, have a record of creating season-long storms. Artistic directors are ballet company cornerstones, their quarterbacks, keys to creating an all-important dialogue between performers and audience that keeps seats filled. They're intensely creative people who build their own visions by moulding their troupes. Twenty years ago, in the middle of the company's last major financial crisis, then artistic director Brydon Paige was working mostly with local Alberta talent, supported by Alberta Ballet's founder, the late Ruth Carse. He started into a doggedly determined makeover of excellence which began to fill seats, at least with *Nutcracker* fans. The efforts were applauded, but the company continued to struggle on a repertoire of traditional shows loved mostly by the over-40 crowd. The board recognized a need to attract the younger set and debunk the myth that ballet is for the elite. They hired a new artistic director named Ali Pourfarrok, who took over at the start of the 1988-89 season. "I looked at the audiences here and realized the audience for the ballet was too old," he told a *Globe and Mail* reporter. When Pourfarrok began supplementing the traditional classical repertoire with more modern dance expressions, it set off a series of storms in the dance corps.

Pourfarrok brought Alberta Ballet contemporary works along with neoclassicism, which adapts the classics like *Swan Lake* for dance steps taken from jazz, world or other dance forms. He hired versatile international dancers to pull off the repertoire change. His fresh approach wasn't a novel idea in the world of ballet—famous choreographer George Balanchine had been doing it in the U.S. since the 1930s—but it was an effective way of broadening ballet's appeal. Despite an initial statement that "It's a nicely toned company. I don't see any immediate, drastic thing I should change," Pourfarrok's introduction of the new moves made for a turbulent opening season. First, principal dancer Mariane Beausejour quit over the management change and dancer Claude Charon was fired. That was just the start. By the end of the new director's first season, 13 of the 16 dancers had been replaced, the majority by international dancers. Pourfarrok deflected criticism by saying the company needed more contemporary works and had to stop trying to "reach for grandeur without having the means or numbers to do that."

By his third year the storms had subsided and the company's profile was turning around. By his April 1998 final performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, Pourfarrok's 10-year reign had elevated the company's profile to garnering top reviews from foreign newspapers like the *New York Post*. The budget had tripled, it was balanced, and



Othello

the opening of the new School of Alberta Ballet ended a decade of greatest accomplishment. Despite the stormy start, Pourfarrok had successfully mixed neoclassical works with contemporary and placed the company squarely on the international stage.

When Mikko Nissinen was tossed the artistic torch in the fall of 1998, he accelerated the company's international exposure by immediately taking them on a gruelling five-week, 13-city tour of China. And not unexpectedly, by the end of his first season a whole new round of shake-ups was under way: six dancers had lost their jobs. One was Daniela Sodero, a Pourfarrok favourite lead soloist and veteran of eight seasons. Nissinen defended the sackings by saying some of the dancers were too tall, some had too-pointed feet or were too contemporary to fit with his vision for the company. He said such dismissals were a normal part of the ballet business.

By the start of Nissinen's second season, just five

Pourfarrok-era members remained. Nissinen had replaced most of them through audition tours to Toronto, Montreal, San Francisco, New York and Miami. But it wasn't over yet. With that season just two weeks old, two more quit: dazzling soloists Jose Martin and Sonja Kostich. Then, in April 2000, came the cap. Barbara Moore, one of three remaining dancers from Pourfarrok's troupe and a 15-year veteran of the company, was given the pink slip after returning from a maternity leave. Her dismissal was widely criticized in the media and prompted Moore to launch a wrongful dismissal suit, which was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount in February 2001.

And when Nissinen arrives at his new Boston office, he'll face more of the same. He's filling the shoes of an artistic director who quit after mere weeks on the job but not before firing nine dancers. Prior to that, she had been booted from the Australian Ballet after 14 years and

left the Royal Danish Ballet after just two, with a year left on her contract. Boston's executive director abruptly announced she's quitting too.

It's an inescapable element of the ballet world and Alberta Ballet is not immune to it. Anne Flynn, associate professor and head of the dance program at U. of C., helps explain why. "In ballet, the artistic process is not like being a painter or writer," she says. "A collaborative process between the choreographer, the artistic director and the dancers is important to the creation of the work."

"Let's first bring ballet to those who pay the taxes." — Jean Grand-Maitre, artistic director, Alberta Ballet

So, effects of a change in artistic directors ripple down—there may be dancers who came to Alberta Ballet because of Nissinen. Dancers get used to one person. Therefore, personality does matter; a director needs to inspire."

And, she says, Nissinen inspired. He gave the dancers and choreographers a proud sense of belonging to a world of ballet, rather than the second-string local dance troupe Alberta Ballet was once reputed to be. Under his direction, the company presented 14 world premieres. He continued the tradition set by Pourfarrok. "The development work that Pourfarrok did was important in terms of moving from the local to the international stage," says Flynn.

I wanted to hear it from the outgoing director himself. In his cramped third floor office of the Nat Christie Centre, Baryshnikov posters adorning the walls, Mikko Nissinen focuses intently on my questions, then looks out the window composing his responses. I ask about his impact on the dance corps. "Every director brings personal skills, tastes and products to a company," he says. "When someone new comes in, it can bring lots of energy, which is a healthy aspect. But no two people are alike. Adjustment and reassessment are needed."

What does he think the new director will have to do? "With all the elements in place, the key is not to lose momentum," says Nissinen. "It's like dance itself."

The appropriately named Jean Grand-Maitre, who takes over from Nissinen on July 1, is Alberta Ballet's first Canadian artistic director in 15 years. I ask him how he expects to deal with the inevitable storm that artistic director changeovers bring. "I'm not going to terrorize," he says, "especially with the funding situation. There will be dancers leaving but I'm not getting rid of anyone. There are a lot (of artistic directors) who make the mistake of firing dancers and hiring new ones. It creates a negative attitude. Loyalty and trust are important."

And Grand-Maitre evidently gives convincing per-

formances. “I sold myself to the board on three goals,” says the 38-year-old Quebec native. “Firstly, I’m here to serve the company and not myself. Secondly, I’m here to motivate and inspire the company. And finally, I believe in fiscal responsibility.” So, will the transition be a smooth one this time? When I ask Grand-Maitre about eliminating the deficit without compromising the international touring record, he hints at changes.

For this, his first full directorship, he has a strong new vision for Alberta Ballet. “Most of all,” he says, “ballet has to be successful at home base. Second is national touring including smaller cities, with productions that can adapt to smaller stages, like *Romeo and Juliet*. And third is international. That’s how to do it without a deficit.” I ask him if relegating international touring to last place might threaten Alberta Ballet’s international stature. “I foresee international touring after the next two years,” he says. “But let’s first bring ballet to those who pay the taxes.”

Only 20 per cent of Alberta Ballet’s budget comes from government coffers, so sponsorships are vital. Touring attracts sponsorship, but red ink repels it. Visibility is near the top of every CEO’s list when they’re deciding which nonprofit arts organizations to support. Attaching a corporate logo that’s spotted all over the planet spells visibility. But fiscal responsibility is near the top too—those same CEOs won’t be seen investing in an organization that can’t manage its own budget.

Alberta Ballet is no stranger to budget deficits, albeit not recently. In the early 1980s, when the company was running cash flow deficits amounting to 25 per cent of annual budget, an accounting firm commissioned by the Alberta government expressed “grave concern” for its very survival. The fledgling organization responded by can-

At the end of the 2001 season, the company was almost half a million dollars in the red.

celling performances, dispensing with live orchestras and, on occasion, dancing without sets. But such drastic measures aren’t in the cards this time. They’re attacking it differently, by lending an ear to their potential sponsors.

Ann Lewis, Alberta Ballet’s executive director since last December, knows what today’s corporations want to see: things that all astute investors want to see, like business plans, forecasts and balanced budgets. “It’s a return on investment thing,” says Lewis, who spent a year and a half as the ballet’s board chair. “CEOs want to know what our best practices are. And our structures and internal processes to make them happen, sustainably. They want strategic growth, not a *jeté* [a graceful aerial jump where a ballet dancer launches on one foot and lands on the other] where you come down again.”



Clockwise from top left: 1. The corps de ballet performing George Balanchine’s *Rubies* in China 2. The company at the Canadian Embassy in Egypt: F. Chevenne-ment, H. Myers, S. Varga, G. Larsen, Mrs. Beauchemin, Mikko Nissinen, L. Walsh, J. Kerwin,

Arts organizations like Alberta Ballet face different internal problems than charities do. “It’s always a healthy debate—the artistic side versus the marketing side,” says Lewis. “We always need to balance what the public wants with what the arts funders want. We start with a three-year artistic plan, then the yearly repertoire is approved by the board.”

Lewis comes well armed. About six years ago she helped form an innovative consulting company in Calgary designed to show nonprofit organizations how to forge links with corporate, public and education sectors. She knows the fundraising business. “In my experience, those (nonprofit organizations) with the most success had the better chance at attracting funding,” she says. “My intentions are to make Alberta Ballet the model of a nonprofit business.”

In 1990, when Alberta Ballet merged with the struggling six-year-old Calgary City Ballet, the primary reason for their moving from Edmonton to Calgary was the Nat Christie Centre. Calgary City Ballet had raised the \$1.7-million to renovate the old CN railway station on 18th Avenue S.W. into one of Canada’s best rehearsal and practice studios. But there was another, perhaps more significant reason that relates to economics: Calgary was considered a much better city for fundraising, its tally of corporate head offices second only to Toronto’s.

But just when it gets more critical to attract sponsorships, the oilpatch cuts budgets by 25 per cent. As well, Lewis says that since September 11, a lot of corporate charity has been channelled to the United States. “In Calgary we have our Canadian oil and gas companies, but there is a lot of recent merger activity—which actually reduces the over-



Rubies in China 2. The company at the Canadian Embassy in Egypt: F. Chevenne-ment, M. Blades 3. S. Matthews 4. G. Larsen and M. Henderson at pyramid in Egypt.

all amount of funding available.” Solid corporate support is a moving target. “Times are changing philanthropically,” she says. “If we don’t adapt to our environment, we won’t be the leader out there.” There’s a lot of competition, too: fine arts, theatre, contemporary dance, symphonies and other large arts organizations, all of whom have been experiencing their share of funding woes.

At this crossroads, Alberta Ballet can choose a more indigenous path. Grand-Maitre believes there’s a good artistic climate in this province for such an approach. “There’s a dynamism building here,” he says. “The cities are still young. Calgary and Edmonton are developing, and young people aren’t biased or jaded about the arts.” He likes attitudes here in the West. “I prefer this open and fresh approach. I’ve worked in Paris and Stuttgart and it’s so opinionated there. And Toronto is so Broadway.” Quick off the mark, he’s setting the tone by his choice for the season opener: Agnes de Mille’s *Rodeo*, about the adventures of an awkward and tomboyish cowgirl hopelessly in love with her rancher’s head wrangler.

Having created works for companies like the Paris Opera Ballet, La Scala Milan and the National Ballet of Norway, Grand-Maitre has solid international experience. But to pursue his vision of a more Canadian company he says he would like to see more Canadian dancers in Alberta’s corps. Although he’s not planning to fire just to rehire, “I would take a Canadian-trained dancer first, unless an international one was extremely strong,” he says. He likes the successful approach used by the National Ballet of Canada, citing the example of their principal dancer Karen Kain, who was with the National

from the age of 11 to 40. “You see the whole metamorphosis of dancers from beginning to end. It creates a loyal family to the company,” he says.

That’s where he sees the role for the company’s sister organization, the School of Alberta Ballet. Anne Flynn explains company ballet schools’ traditional roles. “Historically, companies have had their own style,” she says. “School is where you trained that style.” As head of the university’s dance program, she works closely with the school. This year, the U of C awards the first BA Dance (Ballet) degrees in Canada to graduates of a special collaborative program with the school. “University has never been part of a professional ballet dancer,” says Flynn. “We’re training different kinds of dancers—[having] a liberal arts degree will make them different dancers.” And having a degree helps in today’s highly competitive dance world, she adds.

Defining a Canadian style into which the School of Alberta Ballet can shape its dancers presents some challenges. Murray Kilgour, new principal of the school, elaborates: “We want to produce Canadian dancers for a Canadian audience. But first we have to find out what is a Canadian style or identity in ballet. Canada is diverse, made up of different nationalities.” Kilgour arrived with impeccable credentials: he had danced as a soloist with the National Ballet of Canada and Britain’s Royal Ballet, taught at the Royal Ballet school, China’s National School, Britain’s Central School of Ballet and even trained the dancer in the final scene for the popular movie *Billy Elliot*. “I was trained as a Canadian and danced in many European countries, so I understand Canada’s past,” he says. He’s hoping that many of his graduates will also first gain some overseas experience, then come back to Canada with an expanded perspective about what it is to be Canadian.

Indeed, with Canada’s increasingly multi-ethnic population, clearly an international influence will be critical to defining that elusive Canadian style. In support of that, the school offers a number of contemporary dance forms, which include a veritable United Nations of dance, as demonstrated in their UN Day presentation at Calgary’s Devonian Gardens last October. Dances ranged from French and Austrian to Irish folk and traditional American jazz, but the dancers were Canadian.

It all adds up to a potentially refreshing new blend of the international and the Canadian. Given the record, it could be a few years and a few heartaches before it’s achieved, but Alberta Ballet may be able to pull off their next lingering dream, creating a new direction for ballet in Alberta and in Western Canada—“Canadian ballet can go forward,” sums up Kilgour, “but changed in a Canadian way.”

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