

## Into the Heart of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet:

### Forty Years of One Night Stands

BY JESSICA HALL-CUMMINGS



Jean McKenzie, Arnold Spohr and Sheila Kilough in *Les Sylphides*, c. 1952

To begin, I feel it necessary to state upfront that I don't know anything about dance. I have not studied the history of dance, in Canada, or elsewhere. Likewise, I know nothing about dance technique, or anything associated with the athleticism of dance. Bearing this in mind, it should come as no surprise that I did not know anything about the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB) before the night of November 1, 2008 when I was asked to attend a screening of Patti Ross Milne's film *40 Years of One Night Stands: The Story Of Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet*, and to produce a reflection piece detailing my thoughts on the film. I arrived with a notebook, a pen, and a sense of dread knowing that no one could be less suited to the task than myself.

By the time five minutes had elapsed, I had forgotten my notebook and pen. I was totally engrossed in this "pioneer tale" of how an outrageous whim sent two genteel English ladies to Winnipeg to start a ballet company and spun itself into cultural gold. Halfway through the film I realized to my utter astonishment I was totally won over and having a marvelous time ... and so was everyone else. And this meant that not only was the film accessible to me, but it was also enjoyable for the people who are part of the dance community. It struck me that this was something I *could* write about.

It cannot be underestimated how difficult it is to create a film that can appeal to people with a dance background as well as those for whom this would be a first exposure to Canadian dance. It takes a delicate storyteller to pull it off, and Patti Ross Milne with her editor Bob Lower and director/editor Jeff McKay seem to have found the perfect balance.

The film presents two distinct narratives. The first concerns a larger, overarching exploration of the genesis of professional dance in Canada. As the film tells us, "From the geographical centre of North America comes a documentary about a ballet company from the middle of nowhere that changed the face of dance forever." This is a story that culminates in the gold medal won

by Evelyn Hart and David Peregrine dancing Norbert Vesak's *Belong pas de deux* in Varna, Bulgaria, in 1980. The second narrative is humbler and more personal. It is a "pioneer tale" of aspirations, hard work and shared purpose composed of the voices of the extraordinary people who gave the company its shape and vitality. It is also the heart of the film and key to its success.

If I can return for a moment to the astonishment I felt while watching the film. It is worth pointing out that the ability of a documentary to reach out and grab the interest, and, ever more importantly, sustain the interest of an audience unfamiliar with the subject matter, is a significant boon. This is especially true when it comes to "artistic" subject matter. Art, with its often lofty ideals and aspirations, can alienate and ultimately bore an amateur audience. Patti Ross Milne stressed again and again that she did not want to make a boring film. "If I was bored, and I know dance and love the company, then there was no hope for anyone else."

Art's value is, in part, established in academic and intellectual arenas, and the method of evaluation that is stored in books and essays most people will never read. Having said this, we can all agree that an artistic background is not a prerequisite for enjoyably interacting with art. Everyone, regardless of their education, can relate to art emotionally. The connections we make between an artistic experience and our own knowledge base creates powerful sentiments that allow us to form a relationship with a piece of art without needing to understand the process in which it was conceived or in which it was made.

Key to the pioneer tale narrative is that it is designed to appeal to the audience's feelings rather than their intellectual or educational backgrounds. This appeal is largely achieved through the use of testimonials. We are made to see how important it was for those Prairie dance pioneers to share their love of dance with Canadians, which the film underlines in the descriptions of the hardships they suffered, including not

being paid for many years! And if anyone is confused as to why they should have taken on so much hardship, one has only to listen to the dancers speak with great ardour about what performing these dances meant to them and their audiences. In the end, I was able to create a relationship with the material because the dances showcased in the film were discussed in terms the average person could relate to. I had worried about technical discussions of dance choreography, or theory that would fly over my head. Instead, the dancers themselves spoke about the stories they were trying to tell, and how it felt to perform those stories through dance. In effect, they showed me how the steps I saw narrated a tale, enabling me to assess the dances in my own terms.

This worked most effectively in the perfectly edited sequence about Vesak's ballet *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Hearing Ana Maria de Gorriz (Rita Joe) speak of her impassioned journey into the centre of the character helped bring the deep emotionality of her performance home for me. The extraordinary feelings it elicited were strengthened by an image of a production in Australia that shows de Gorriz taking a bow while a wildly enthusiastic crowd fills the theatre with ribbons, as a token of their appreciation. The knowledge that other people had also formed a strong response to the piece made the performance resonate even more powerfully with me.

This kind of pattern repeated itself throughout the film and the sentiments that people recounted in their interviews took me into the heart of the RWB and revealed a story bigger than dancing and bigger than the film itself. I feel that something important has been created here for Canadians: a chance to better understand the true value of not just our home-grown art, but the vitality with which we carve out our lives in the "Great White North."

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## THE ROYAL WINNIPEG BALLET AT 70

In anticipation of the RWB's upcoming 70th anniversary, the organization has launched the **70 Stories for 70 Years** campaign. The RWB is encouraging the general public to participate.

Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet is asking alumni, subscribers, former and current staff, dancers, students, the Winnipeg community and beyond to **"tell us their story"** about the RWB. We'd like to hear a funny, interesting or touching story about an RWB experience.

The goal is to accumulate 70 stories for our 70 years of excellence in the performing arts. The RWB will use these testimonials in newsletters, on the RWB website and in other promotional materials throughout the anniversary year.

Please email stories to  
[anniversary@rwb.org](mailto:anniversary@rwb.org)

For more information, contact  
Heather Saxton at (204) 957-3447

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