Canada’s National Ballet School: A History

Established in 1959, Canada’s National Ballet School is one of the world’s foremost training institutions for aspiring young dancers and teachers. Attracting students from across the country and around the world, NBS is the only ballet academy in North America to provide elite dance training, academic instruction and residential care on the same campus. The School’s progressive curriculum, with its emphasis on the physical and emotional well being of the student, has put NBS at the forefront of dance training internationally.

In 1951, a young Celia Franca travelled from England to Canada, after receiving an invitation to help establish a National Ballet company in Canada, one that would reflect a similar ethos and performance calibre as Sadler’s Wells Ballet, the company she had danced with. Already in Toronto at that point was a young dancer named Betty Oliphant, who had arrived in the city in 1947. Once Franca had established the fledgling company, she hired Oliphant to be one of her Ballet Mistresses. It was agreed that the Company would need a summer school program to assist in their training regime, as both Franca and Oliphant had extremely high expectations of their dancers.

At the 1958 Annual General Meeting of The National Ballet of Canada, Franca argued for the need of a ballet school to train dancers to join the Company. A sub-committee was formed, and after some study they gave the project the go-ahead. The Quaker Meeting House at 111 Maitland Street was purchased for $80,000 to serve as the first location of the School. A house on Jarvis Street (410 Jarvis) was rented to serve as the School’s first residence. Betty Oliphant was appointed the School’s first Principal. Doors officially opened in September, 1959, with 27 full-time students, all female, and 202 after school students (193 girls and 9 boys). The academics at the school were shared with nearby Jarvis Collegiate, where students studied math and science, as there was no math and science teacher at the School.

Oliphant held her position as the Artistic Director of the School, while also the Associate Artistic Director at the Company. She performed both roles until 1975, when she retired from the Company to focus more exclusively on the School. Oliphant was very well-regarded for her teaching skills, and was sought after on an international basis as a consultant to ballet schools. After receiving an invitation from Erik Bruhn in 1967, she reorganized the Ballet School of the Royal Swedish Opera and in 1978 did the same for the Royal Danish Ballet School. She remained Artistic Director of Canada’s National Ballet School until her retirement in 1989.

By 1962 the school’s enrollment had grown to 67 full-time students (62 female, 5 male) with 14 foreign students and 288 recreational students (276 girls and 12 boys). Following its 1963 incorporation as a Not for Profit Organization, the School expanded into buildings purchased around the 111 Maitland Street location. In 1983, 406 Jarvis Street was remodeled into Ivey House. In 1984, the School celebrated its 25th anniversary with a Gala performed by both students and graduates at the O’Keefe Centre (now the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts).
1988 saw the opening of the Betty Oliphant Theatre on Jarvis Street. 1991 welcomed the return of modern dance instruction at the School, eliminated since 1971. The renowned dance artist Peggy Baker spearheaded the re-introduced program.

Mavis Staines graduated from the School in the 1970s, and went on to dance with both The National Ballet of Canada and the Dutch National Ballet. An injury cut short her performance career, so she returned to Canada and enrolled in NBS’ Teacher Training Program. She joined the School as a member of the staff in 1982, in 1984 became its Associate Artistic Director and in 1989, following Betty Oliphant’s retirement, became the School’s Artistic Director.

In 1999, to commemorate the School’s 40th Anniversary, Staines, NBS staff and a Dutch joint working group coordinate the Not Just Any Body conference to advance Health, Well-Being and Excellence in Dance and Dancers, a unique conference that brings together dancers, dance teachers and dance educators from around the world.

In 1993, The Prix de Lausanne visits NBS and invites it to become a Partner School. Mavis Staines is appointed a juror for the Prix de Lausanne, and goes on to serve as a juror 3 times, chair the jury for 2 consecutive years, and eventually becomes the first person in the Prix’s history to serve as its President for two successive years.

In 1996, the School introduced evening and Saturday Adult Ballet classes, led by Robert “Ballet Bob” McCollum. The Adult Ballet program has grown into one of the School’s most popular, and now boasts close to 700 students.

In 1998, the student Choreographic workshop, named after Stephen Godfrey, became an annual event. That same year, NBS opened its retail wing, The Shoe Room. In 2008, The Shoe Room celebrated its 10th anniversary by launching both a cross-Canada pointe shoe fitting tour and a new website, theshoeroom.ca, which enables orders to be placed easily from around the world.

In June, 2003, the school had a sod-turning ceremony to mark the beginning of Project Grand Jeté, an ambitious $100 million capital expansion project. Phase I, a new state-of-the-art dance training facility (The Celia Franca Centre) and restoration of two heritage buildings for academic classrooms (The Margaret McCain Academic Building) and administration offices (Northfield House), was completed in 2005. Phase II, the refurbishment of the School's original Maitland Street buildings for expanded residence facilities, was completed in 2007, and resulted in the transformation of the Maitland Street properties into an expanded residence that encompasses a mix of heritage buildings and new architecture that provide secure, comfortable living quarters for more than 100 children from across Canada, the United States and around the world who call NBS ‘home’.

Since its completion, Project Grand Jeté and its architects, Kuwabara, Payne, McKenna Blumberg Architects as well as Goldsmith, Borgal and Company Architects, have won several prestigious international architectural awards, including the coveted Institute Honor Award for Architecture from the American Institute of Architects (AIA), making NBS the sole Canadian building honoured in 2007 and only the fourth since the AIA first bestowed the awards in 1949.

NBS grads can be found as dancers, choreographers, artistic directors, teachers and administrators in over 65 dance companies world-wide and even more schools around the globe. NBS celebrates its 50th anniversary beginning in September, 2009.