

Take 110 international student dancers, mix well and jetez

Canada's National Ballet School prepares for its Assemblée Internationale

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From Thursday's Globe and Mail

Published on Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2009 5:42PM EST

Last updated on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009 2:51AM EST

Reading the students of Canada's National Ballet School for high-profile stage appearances is challenging enough. But when you add 97 more dancers-in-training from around the world, it becomes a logistical nightmare.

The organizational complexities alone could explain why the Assemblée Internationale, a cornerstone of the National Ballet School's 50th-anniversary celebrations, has become something of a magnificent obsession for Mavis Staines. The school's artistic director has spent the last five years planning the event bringing together students from 13 professional training academies – from Winnipeg to Havana to Stuttgart – for an intensive round of classes, performances and symposia under way this week.

“It's a whole perspective of ballet in one building. We are each other's competition, but we're also the next generation.”

— Sara Coffield

“I believe in the benefit of exchanges,” says Staines. “I also think it's important that students explore the shift from studio to stage.”

That shift will partly be on show tonight, when each school stages works from its own repertoire, mainly by well-known choreographers.



Five years in the planning, this week's National Ballet School 50th-anniversary celebrations bring together dance students from Winnipeg to Havana to Stuttgart for both classes and performances.

But the real test of how well the puzzle that is the Assemblée fits together will be performances of student choreography on Friday night and Saturday afternoon: Staines's grand plan mandated that each student dance have an international cast.

Therefore, each school filmed its piece on DVD with the cast wearing numbers. Students learned their steps by watching their number – designating the dance role assigned to them – move onscreen.

"Some schools were very detailed in the DVDs," says Shaun Amyot, the NBS staffer in charge of casting the Assemblée. "The NBS sent in the whole piece, plus separate footage of each of the seven couples. Stuttgart included comments on the choreography, while Hamburg had various versions shot from different angles."

Of course, even a detailed DVD can't explain the nuances of a dance. Student choreographers say they noticed each school produced a very different use of the body. The Cubans, for example, are more direct in their approach to movement. So while the cast learned their steps, they didn't know the quality of movement – where the impetus came from, which aspects of the choreography to make the priority, or how to connect steps.

"There is only so much you can learn from a video," says student choreographer William Bracewell of London's Royal Ballet School.

As for which dancers should be in which productions, Amyot had to gather information on everything from students' heights, to partnering skills, to who excelled at turning, and the like. "I couldn't put a short boy with a tall girl," he says. "I also had to match the role to the strength of the individual dancer."

Then came another problem: Four schools chose not to bring a student piece. That meant "leftover" students, and Staines was determined that every student participating in the Assemblée would appear in new choreography.

To make it all add up, two more pieces were created by NBS students – and Amyot gave birth to the aptly named *Improvisation A109*, a work for 22 dancers. All told, a staggering 110 dancers will be onstage for the student choreographic concert. "I'm holding my breath until the performance," says Amyot. "The greatest unknown is: Can they do the roles?"


That's a big unknown for such an important week of performances in the NBS's history. So why bother with hurdles like international teams and DVD-based learning?


For a start, the Assemblée mirrors real life. As student choreographer Alex Lantz of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School explains, choreographers coming to a company usually don't know the dancers. And according to Staines, "Learning roles from DVDs is the most common tool in dance. DVDs to a dancer are what scripts are to an actor."


There are also larger payoffs for the students. As Myles Thatcher, a student from the San Francisco Ballet School, points out, the program gives students a glimpse of the training at other schools. "By watching others," he says, "I know where I need to step up my game."

Sara Coffield of the NBS agrees. "It's a whole perspective of ballet in one building," she says. "We are each other's competition, but we're also the next generation."

The repertory concerts take place tonight. The student choreography concert premieres Friday night and repeats at a Saturday matinee. All performances are at the Betty Oliphant Theatre at 404 Jarvis St. in Toronto(416-964-3780).

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