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Canada's National Ballet School's 50th Anniversary – Assemblée Internationale (A Gathering of Professional Training Academies)



Photographers are Lisa Fleischmann and Timothy A Campbell

Assemblée Internationale, or AI for short, is Mavis Staines' magnificent obsession. Five years in the planning, AI is the cornerstone event during the 50th anniversary celebrations of Canada's National Ballet School. As envisioned by NBS artistic director Staines, AI brought together students from 13 professional training academies for one intensive week of classes, performances and symposia. In real terms that meant 97 students came from Europe, San Francisco and Winnipeg to join with the NBS senior classes. Says Staines: "I believe in the benefit of exchanges. I also think it's important that students

explore the shift from studio to stage."

Each school brought existing repertoire to be shown over two nights at the school's Betty Oliphant Theatre. The idea here was the presentation of dances representative of the heritage, history or ethos of the training. In fact, the number of dancers required in each repertoire work was the number of students who attended the AI from each visiting school. (For a complete list of schools and description of the choreography, please see the list at the end of the article.)

The pièce de resistance, however, was the performance of student choreography. Each student piece was required to be 4 to 8 minutes in length with 6 dancers minimum. Staines' ingenious grand plan mandated that each student dance have an international cast, and figuring out that Rubik Cube fell to NBS staffer Shaun Amyot, head of the school's post secondary program. (Amyot also did the figuring to compile the roster for the daily classes to be international affairs as well. These mixed groups rotated through teachers from all the schools.)

The student choreography process began with DVDs. Each school filmed its piece with the cast wearing numbers. Each choreographer was allowed to keep a peer (or, in some cases, a couple) in the piece. Amyot then assigned the other roles to different schools. Those students then used the DVDs to learn their parts in the dance. "Learning roles from DVDs," says Staines, "is the most common tool in dance. DVDs to a dancer are scripts to an actor."

Says Amyot: "Some schools were very detailed in the DVDs. 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." It was the schools that sent in only one version of the entire dance that presented problems.

Amyot then had to get information on each visiting dancer such as their height, partnering skills, who excelled at turning and the like. "I couldn't put a short boy with a

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tall girl, for example," he says. "I also had to match the role to the strength of the individual dancer."



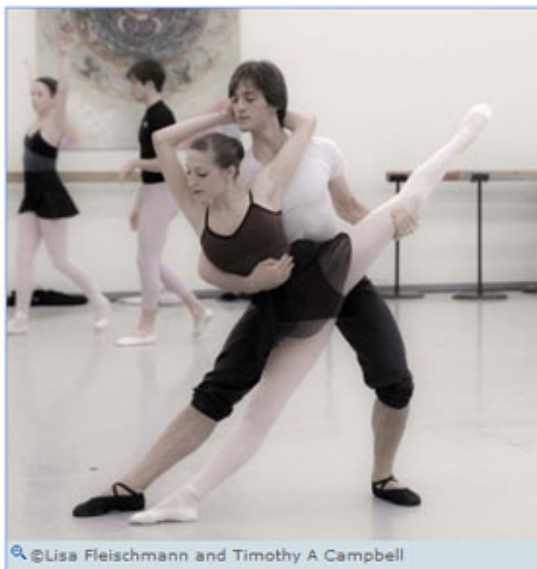
And then there were the special needs. For example, NBS student Robert Binet's "Surge" was so complex, that he requested a couple from the other schools rather than individual dancers. The partnering would have been too difficult to put together in a week. As for costumes, the choreographers submitted the type of dancewear they wanted (i.e. spaghetti strap leotards), or brought special items with them. The Hamburg choreographer, for example, brought oversized shirts for his cast.

A thorny problem occurred when four schools, for a variety of reasons, elected not to bring a student piece (the three Dutch schools and Dresden). Staines, however, was determined that every visiting student, and every senior NBS student, would appear in new choreography. To that end, NBS students Sara Coffield and Helen Clare Kinney, both NBS choreographic workshop veterans, were asked to create pieces. Unfortunately, there was no time to film DVDs, so the young women actually had to teach their casts the dance during the week, as well as cleaning and polishing.

Even with the Coffield and Kinney pieces, there were still left over students. At this point, Amyot stepped up to the plate. His "Improvisation AI09" for 22 dancers allowed every participating student, as Staines says, to be involved in a collaborative creative project. A staggering 110 dancers performed on stage for the student choreographic concert. Given backstage staff, the complement of personnel was just shy of the fire code regulation of 130 people. Says Amyot: "I held my breath until the performance. The greatest unknown was, can they do the roles?" The answer is, they could.

I met with seven student choreographers - Robert Binet and Sara Coffield (NBS), Alex Lantz (Royal Winnipeg), William Bracewell (Royal Ballet), co-choreographers Viktoria Falck-Schmidt and Ida Praetorius (Royal Danish) and Myles Thatcher (San Francisco) - after their first rehearsal, and the buzz in the room was palpable.

Here is a summary of that discussion.



The students immediately noticed that each school produced a very different use of body. For example, the Cubans are more direct in their approach to movement. While the cast had learned the steps, they didn't know the quality of movement, or where the impetus came from. Each dancer had prioritized different parts of the choreography, accenting some movement over others. Students had not picked up details like connecting steps or the positions of the arms, for example. Lamented Bracewell: "There is only so much you can learn from a video."

Lantz saw the experience as a mirror of real life because choreographers coming to a company usually don't know the dancers. Binet saw the major challenge as making different dance backgrounds blend together. For Thatcher, the fascination was seeing each school's training through the bodies of their dancers, and more to the point, getting out from the bubble of his own school. "By watching others," said Thatcher, "I know where I need to step up my game."

"It's a whole perspective of ballet in one building," remarked Coffield. "We are each other's competition, but we're also the next generation." The young Danish women saw AI as the common denominator. "Essentially, we're doing the same ballet training," said Praetorius. And Falck-Schmidt added: "It's a small world."

As a bonus, members of the Monaco Dance Forum will select one of the student-created choreographies that they find the most exciting and which best showcases the dancers. The group performing this work will be invited to Monaco in March, 2010, to perform as part of the Tremplin Jeunes Ballets event. The group invited to Monaco will be known as the Assemblée Internationale, a project of Canada's National Ballet School. (At this point, the choice has not been made.)

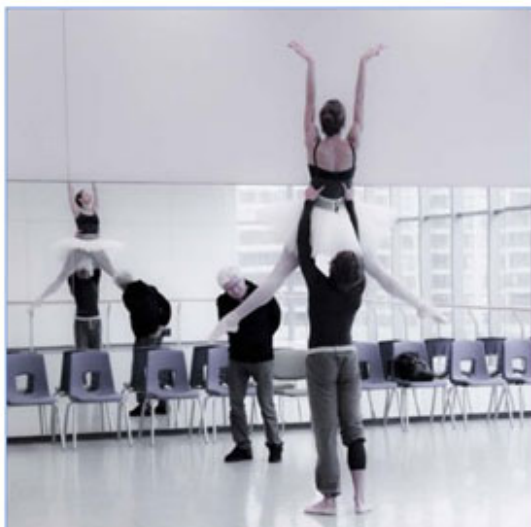
It's interesting to note that there was internationalism within internationalism as various schools brought students from countries other than their own locale. The Cubans spoke no English, and NBS had to scramble to find Spanish speakers from both the student body, their parents and outside. The one translator the Cubans brought with them couldn't be in more than one place at a time. The student choreographers report that without verbal communication, they had to demonstrate to the Cubans in their casts with infinite clarity and precision, and this took up precious time. The French were slightly better in English skills, but many NBS people, both staff and students, are bilingual. The Germans, Dutch and Danes all had fair to excellent English skills.

Luckily, Amyot had the presence of mind to assign NBS students as covers. It's flu season in Toronto which knocked out some visiting and local dancers, and so the covers took over the roles and nailed them, one might add.

I'm glad to report that every student choreography was worthy whether on point or off. One of my favourites was "Words Unsaid" by Hamburg's Sasha Riva, who also appeared in his piece. His cast contained students from Stuttgart, San Francisco, London, The Hague, and Toronto. The piece set to music by Ludovico Einaudi and Andrea Guerra was a moving work about loss of communication skills, and how it blunted relationships. My other favourite was by Cuba's gorgeous Denia Luisa Suárez who was also in her piece. Her other cast members included three from Toronto (because of the flu), Winnipeg and Copenhagen. "Danzón Barroco" to music by Maraca was a sly, coy, sexy piece for three couples that fused baroque and Latino accents. It was an absolute delight, and Suárez herself is a siren. The NBS's Robert Binet's "Surge" was a maelstrom of angst and formidable partnering to music by Richard Einhorn. His couples came from the NBS, Stuttgart, Royal Ballet, Paris, Cuba and Hamburg.

Joining Canada's National Ballet School for the Assemblée Internationale were:

Royal Winnipeg Ballet School
San Francisco Ballet School
National Ballet School of Cuba
Royal Ballet School (London)
Hamburg Ballet School
John Cranko School (Stuttgart)
Paris Opera Ballet School
Palucca Schule (Dresden)
Royal Danish Ballet School
Rotterdam Dance Academy
National Ballet Academy (Amsterdam)
Royal Conservatory (The Hague).



It's interesting how each school interpreted the repertoire mandate. Because the NBS was the home team, the school mounted Erik Bruhn's "Swan Lake, Act 1, Scene 11", because it had the forces for 24 swans in the corps de ballet. Bruhn had taught at the school and was a former artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada. (Incidentally, on the final night, all of AI trouped to the Four Seasons Centre to see the National's "Sleeping Beauty" choreographed by Rudolf Nureyev.)

Predictably, the Danes

Neumeier ("Vaslav"), the Cubans danced Jorge Garcia ("Majismo"), and The Hague performed Kylian (the excerpt from "Falling Angels" was sensational). Paris danced excerpts from Ivan Clustine's 1913 "Suite de danses", an homage to French classicism with the long tulle dresses and lots of quotes from "Giselle".

Dresden's "Testbild Engerlinge" was by their own professor Anke Glagow, while Winnipeg performed "Pas de Quatre" by retired school artistic director David Moroni. We also got a chance to see works by acclaimed Dutch choreographers who have never been performed in Toronto. Rotterdam brought Ton Simons' duet from "Blue Dance" and Neel Verdoorn's "Once a Tango..." (although I thought both these pieces were a bit too sexy and sophisticated for teenagers to pull off). Amsterdam performed excerpts from Jan Linkens' "For a Close Friend".

London's Liam Scarlett is a graduate of the school, a Royal Ballet first artist, and a much touted up-and-comer choreographer. What was particularly thoughtful about his well-schooled "Toccata" was that it was created specifically for AI. The students also performed a pas de deux from MacMillan's "Concerto" so the old guard was represented.

San Francisco was particularly clever, bringing both a classical piece, excerpts from "Haffner" Symphony" by company artistic director Helgi Tomasson, and a contemporary work - a delightfully cheeky Forsythe knock-off called "Fractals" by Parrish Maynard, a former SF principal dancer, now a school staff member. Apparently the clever work was created in 2008 following a school Forsythe technique workshop.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was Stuttgart performing Hans van Manen and not Cranko. I asked Stuttgart artistic director Reid Anderson (a former National Ballet A.D.) about the choice and he explained it as everybody knows Cranko, which is true, and van Manen is performed only rarely, which is also true. The Stuttgart students did a great job with van Manen's droll "In and Out".

Anderson also commented that the AI could only happen in Canada where multiculturalism is the norm. This was confirmed by José Cruz, a teacher from Barcelona's Instituto Teatro school who was an observer at AI and who overheard my conversation with Anderson. (He was sitting beside me.) Cruz felt that Europeans tended to not think outside the box to envision something on the scale of AI.

As hard as it is to believe, the NBS wants to do the AI again in the future - perhaps even yearly - which boggles the mind. Apparently other schools are inspired to host the event. That being said, it was a fabulous series of performances, and the young dancers were just wonderful. There is an awesome amount of talent coming down the pipe. It should be mentioned that the Australian Ballet School could not be at AI because it was celebrating its own 45th anniversary. The school did send a teacher, however.

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