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DANCE Studio LIFE

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ASSEMBLÉE INTERNATIONALE



Canada's international festival proves there are no borders, nationally or technologically, in ballet

By Joseph Carman

"THINK GLOBALLY, DANCE LOCALLY" might have served as the motto for the Assemblée Internationale 2013.

Canada's National Ballet School held the first AI ballet festival in 2009; in this second edition—held April 28 to May 4 in Toronto, Canada—17 schools from various countries joined the NBS. One hundred ninety students gathered with faculty from each school to participate in daily

ballet technique classes, rehearse and perform blended casts of student choreography, dance ballets representative of each school, and perform in a high-tech, collaboratively choreographed experimental work.

NBS artistic director Mavis Staines conceived the festival in 2009 as a way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of NBS by giving back to the professional dance community and

Photo by Joseph Hammond

2013



"Nothing is more bonding than the experience of taking a creative project from studio to stage. In that way boundaries fall, borders fall, and it really brings out the best in human nature."

Four years ago, NBS already had a summer student-exchange program in place with 20 international schools, to allow its own students to broaden their education by studying with other institutions. Building on that foundation, the AI hosted 12 schools in 2009.

This year, the 17 schools that joined with NBS were The Australian Ballet School, Codarts (Rotterdam), Dutch National Ballet Academy, L'École supérieure de ballet du Québec (Montréal), EFSA/CPD de l'Institut del Teatre (Barcelona), Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy, John Cranko School (Stuttgart), The Juilliard School (New York City), National Ballet School (Havana), New Zealand School of Dance, Palucca School (Dresden), Paris Opera Ballet School, The Royal Ballet School, Royal Danish Ballet School, Royal Winnipeg

Photo by Bruce Zinger

by offering an exploration of the range of dance experiences within the professional dance education community.

"Competitions have a very valid place in the panoply of the dance community dynamic, but I noticed that nowhere was there anything to celebrate artistic collaboration, or to promote the emerging generation of dancers in experiencing ballet as an international language," says Staines.



Juilliard student Corey John Snide (far left) said he discovered at the AI13 that dance is an international language. OPPOSITE/ABOVE: Houston Ballet II students rehearse Stanton Welch's *Fingerprints* in preparation for a festival performance.

Live-streaming allowed simultaneous performances of students in Amsterdam and on the festival stage in Toronto to be blended into one cohesive dance production.



Ballet School, San Francisco Ballet School, and The School of The Hamburg Ballet.

Staines wanted to expand the scope of the festival to reflect the accelerated global changes that have happened in the last four years. "I have worked closely with students of the school because I always want them to be part of the planning of concepts," says Staines. "It was clear that increasing ballet's accessibility and using technology in a more current and creative way were connected. I am convinced this is a sharing which should definitely remain a part of the ballet community."

Staines also wanted to make sure A113 was designed to allow time for the international assembly of artistic staffs and dancers to gather informally over coffee and exchange ideas about ballet's future.

Each day of the festival, students took ballet class with teachers from other schools, alongside peers from various schools. Students from Barcelona, for example, could study with students from The Royal Ballet School in a class taught by a teacher from San Francisco. Each technique class accommodated up to 30 students. Daily, there were three women's classes, three men's classes, and two mixed classes. Each student got a chance to attend two men's or women's classes and at least one mixed class. Students rarely had class with the exact same group and never had the same teacher twice.

Corey John Snide, one of six male Juilliard students who attended the festival, says he discovered that dance is truly

a universal language. "I took a ballet class one day with a ballet mistress from Cuba who knew no English and had a translator," says Snide, who has performed the title role in *Billy Elliot* in London's West End and in Australia. "The translator didn't need to do much. We all knew what [the teacher] wanted from her body language." (Many of the events were translated into French.)

In the afternoon, participants rehearsed for performances. Two programs titled "Traditionally Timeless" featured choreography from the existing repertoire of company schools, such as the Royal Danish Ballet School's rendition of the pas de sept from August Bournonville's *A Folk Tale* and The Royal Ballet School's performance of Frederick Ashton's pas de deux from *Rhapsody*.

For Snide, the contrasts of traditions were striking. Juilliard brought a piece titled *Phases of Strobe*, choreographed by Juilliard alumnus Julia Eichten. "I spend 50 seconds in the upstage left corner booty-popping in jazz shoes," he says. "We followed Canada's NBS in *Giselle* on the program."

Two performances of "Choreography: Fast Forward" with the same casts included works by student choreographers from each school, performed by mixed casts of students from the various schools. The ballets had been taped in advance with dancers wearing different colored shirts or numbers. The DVDs were then sent to NBS artistic faculty member and choreographer Shaun Amyot, who cast each dance based on the international students' abilities. Videos

Photo by Bruce Zinger

were then sent to the dancers of various schools to learn the choreography, which was rehearsed live in Toronto during the festival.

Funding for AI13 was culled from private donations to NBS, so that participants were not required to pay anything. "Sixty-five corporate and individual donors stepped up to make cash gifts or donate airplane reward miles," says John Dalrymple, NBS' associate director of annual giving. "We raised an additional \$500,000 from new donors and existing supporters of the school to make it happen."

The funding provided for six students and two faculty members from each school to attend; some schools opted to pay to send more students, staff, and VIP guests. (Forty-three international faculty members attended, although the number present at one time fluctuated throughout the week.) Aeroplan, Air Canada's rewards program, donated 6 million of the 7 million reward miles needed to fly all of the participants to Toronto.

"Technology," "collaboration," and "accessibility" emerged as the buzzwords from the festival. Although the general public couldn't attend the classes or hear workshop speakers in person (tickets were sold to the public for the four student performances), they could view rehearsals,

"Nothing is more bonding than the experience of taking a creative project from studio to stage. In that way boundaries fall, borders fall, and it really brings out the best in human nature."

—NBS artistic director Mavis Staines

classes, and performances via live-stream on the NBS website, which made them available through May 31, 2013.

"People of my generation are immigrants to the land of technology, whereas the students are natives of that land," says Staines. The necessity of adapting to a constantly changing landscape has become evident, and AI13 embraced the challenge.

The prominence of technology was particularly evident in the festival's collaborative dance project, *Stream*, which

Assemblée Internationale 2013 featured an excerpt from *Giselle* presented by Canada's National Ballet School students.



Photo by Joseph Hammond



Canada's National Ballet School junior students make notes of important lessons learned during an A113 ballet class.

used a mixed international cast of students live and in virtual reality; it was choreographed by NBS' Amyot and Amsterdam-based choreographer Michael Schumacher. "Mavis wanted to push forward into technology and social media," says Amyot. "It had always been seen as a threat to ballet instead of something to enhance [the form] and bring in a bigger audience."

In 2000, Amyot had participated in a friend's dance project in Japan in which dancers in Frankfurt and New York were projected onto the stage in Tokyo via online streaming. Using state-of-the-art expertise and technology, including projectors, hardware, and software donated by Ryerson University in Toronto, Amyot collaborated for A113 with Schumacher, who was working in Amsterdam.

Amyot, who teaches the NBS Post-Secondary Program's improvisation and contemporary repertoire classes, choreographed the classically based choreography on pointe, using some movement phrases contributed by students in the Post-Secondary Program. He studied the movement, dissected it, reassembled it, and then shaped it to the music, Philip Glass' String Quartet No. 5. While in Amsterdam, Schumacher had worked with 11 Dutch dancers on choreographed and improvised material, particularly a quartet section in the fourth section of the ballet.

Thirty students from the festival, including 14 NBS dancers and 16 from Juilliard, Palucca, Codarts, Royal Danish Ballet School, Barcelona, and New Zealand (who had learned the choreography via DVD beforehand), put the ballet together in three intense days in Toronto.

"It's crazy to see how fast schools from all over the world can come together and act as one ensemble," says Snide, who was in the cast.

For the performance, the dancers in Amsterdam were live-streamed (via a Mako box by Haivision with a time

delay as low as 70 milliseconds) onto three screens, one on each side of the stage and one upstage center. "Depending on how we lit the stage, sometimes you could only see the projections, while at other times the screens were completely translucent," says Amyot. "It was hard to tell who was in the space and who wasn't."

The dancers didn't know quite what to expect before they got onstage for the dress rehearsal on the morning of the performance. "There were a lot of chances to improvise and feed off the dancers in Amsterdam," says Snide. "We watched the screen as they improvised and tried to mimic, counter, or react to their movement. I've never heard of such a thing in the dance world before—dancers on two different continents making it all happen in one piece. It was a launch pad for something really incredible."

At the end of the festival, all the dancers were presented with a "Creative Challenge," originally envisioned by Staines. "We threw the gauntlet down to the students for the next 12 months to commit to creating a new dance work that would be performed in a public context outside of a proscenium theater," says Dalrymple. Students will create work within their schools and are encouraged to collaborate with other artists, such as composers, musicians, designers, videographers, and computer animators.

"The idea was to get them thinking about how to make ballet more accessible and how as an artist you get your hands dirty in the creative process," Dalrymple says. NBS has created online tools, like a video channel, to help them incubate their work. The task is to perform the collaborative piece somewhere in their community, where it will be recorded and shared in May 2014.

Choreographer Wayne McGregor was invited to speak about rethinking traditional uses of ballet. "Young artists are always trying to think about what the next generation of the dance world is going to do to further the art form," says Snide. "After [McGregor] spoke, we broke into groups

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"Mavis [Staines] wanted to push forward into technology and social media. It had always been seen as a threat to ballet instead of something to enhance [the form] and bring in a bigger audience."

— NBS faculty member Shaun Amyot

Photo by Joseph Hammond

ASSEMBLÉE INTERNATIONALE 2013

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to discuss how this could happen. We discussed doing something in a staircase or putting classical ballet in a completely non-classical place like a factory, or using a traditional space in a non-traditional way. One friend said he wanted to see a dance where the audience was onstage and the dancers were in the audience."

The festival activities raised questions and offered ideas for ballet's future. "There's that stereotype of ballet being fussy and that only elderly people like it that bugs every ballet student, whether you're from Holland or Toronto," says Dalrymple. "These young students love ballet and have dedicated their lives to it. They think there's so much to the art form that people don't understand. I think the big revelation was that the students realized they can't look at us and say, 'When are you guys going to change that?' It's largely up to them. While people like Wayne McGregor have many decades left in their careers, [these students are] the ones with the greatest opportunity to make ballet what it needs to be—more broadly accessible without losing or diminishing all the things that make this a compelling art form."

Staines' initial fears that some artistic faculty, especially from traditions 250 years old, would disdain the use of technology turned out to be unfounded. Staines says some faculty came to her hours after arriving at the festival to say they thought the technology could be used regularly to share classes for pedagogical purposes, somewhat comparable to video consultations in the medical world. For

example, if Elisabeth Platel of the Paris Opera Ballet School were giving class at a particular time, teachers could watch and learn from it or even broadcast it for their students.

The discussion about the next festival, which could happen in 2016 or 2017, included the possibility of other schools hosting the festival. Some students loved the process so much they want it to occur annually, although that would be difficult to sustain financially. And Staines and Dalrymple both expressed a desire to include schools from Asia, South America, and Africa. (A school in Beijing had been scheduled to attend but canceled due to a change in the school's leadership and a conflict.)

Moving ballet deeply into the 21st century means utilizing creative thinking.

"Increasing accessibility through the media as a starting point for people 30 and under means we're going to see ballet as an integral part of society," says Staines. "That's going to be tremendously beneficial for audience development and funding and for drawing youth to have [dance] in their lives recreationally or to consider as a profession. I think the creative challenge concept is going to be something that links artists globally and pushes people to take ballet outside of traditional spaces more and more."

For anyone who loves ballet and frets about its future, Staines has a reply: "We can use the themes of accessibility, relevance, and using technology to highlight ballet as something which is as powerful today as it was 100 years ago." ♦



Students from 11 countries traveled to AI 2013 to take class from internationally known teachers such as Christopher Powney (right), Dutch National Ballet Academy artistic director.

Photo by Emily Bartosiewicz