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Les Grands Ballets in Jerusalem

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Ballet dancers of the Canadian Grand Ballet of Montreal perform *Noces*, a choreography by Stijn Celis during a rehearsal for the Israel festival in Tel Aviv May 31, 2009.

Photograph by: Gil Cohen Magen, Reuters

JERUSALEM – What a difference an indoor stage makes. After performing under difficult – even precarious – conditions outdoors in Tel Aviv earlier in the week, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens took the same double bill to the Sherover Theatre in the Jerusalem Center for Performing Arts on Friday (June 5) and largely triumphed.

To a Montrealer, the centre instantly recalls Place des Arts, both in style and vintage. Situated in the tony Talbiyeh district some 25 minutes' walk from the ancient walls of Old Jerusalem, the centre has three separate adjoining theatres hosting drama, dance and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. The three theatres also stage an annual cultural festival whose high-profile

dance offerings this year include Alvin Ailey, Nacho Duato's company from Spain, and Les Grands making its first appearance in Jerusalem.

A rare matinee performance was scheduled because by late afternoon on Friday, Jerusalem pretty well shuts down in preparation for Shabbat. But before the performance, the centre was a busy place as festival-goers entered from the wide plaza and passed through a perfunctory security check (in contrast, the air raid sirens a few days earlier in Tel Aviv had The Gazette dance writer wondering whether the city was under attack – turned out it was a nationwide exercise).

Many patrons arrived early to mill about the on-site book shop and café, wander

among an eclectic display of contemporary sculpture, or inspect old theatre costumes like those from a 1941 Israel Workers' Theatre production of King Lear or the sculpted corsets that gave enhanced bare breasts to actresses in Gilad Evron's 1992 play, Yehu. In an adjoining alcove, a crowd attended a vernissage of fine watercolours by an artist identified, like the Centre's sculptures, only in Hebrew (credit the festival, however, for producing a splendid-looking bilingual program for Les Grands' show).

One felt suitably primed for a cultural event by the time the curtain of the big stage rose on the three dimly lit male figures in Stijn Celis's *Noces*. Lighting designer Marc Parent admitted before the show that the theatre's lighting system was less sophisticated than in Theatre Maisonneuve, where Les Grands perform in Montreal. But adjustments were made and the important lighting cues that give a peculiar dramatic glow to the work's wedding party of men and women dressed in black and white were managed with proper finesse, a noteworthy achievement since there'd been insufficient time for a complete run-through.

Adjusting to local theatres is often a struggle on tour – almost half of Les Grands' 60-member touring contingent are technical and production people who ensure the dancers look good and perform in safety. The Sherover Theatre's stage floor was discovered to have a weakness – during Les Grands' tests, one tech's leg went through a plank. A new plank went in before Les Grands laid down its portable dance floor (some dancers said later that the underlying floor "felt hard").

With a solid floor beneath their feet instead of the virtual skating rink that they faced on the outdoor stage in Tel Aviv, the dancers largely gave *Noces* the due worthy of a masterwork that most of them have performed scores of times. Of course, the presence this time of the "barn" backdrop created some context for the two hanging chandeliers (the backdrop was absent in Tel Aviv

because of windy conditions, leaving the chandeliers looking like forlorn props from *Sleeping Beauty*).

At work's end, the near-capacity audience in the thousand-seat theatre gave appreciative applause.

"I liked the choreography very much, but there was something I didn't like about the dancers – I can't explain what," said a frequent dance-show goer, Metzada Gelber, at intermission, adding, "This was the only show in the festival I chose to see."

Abigail Wytzhthum-Chem, a local Pilates teacher and former dance student who was only mildly impressed by the Festival's *Duato* programme, was pleased that *Noces* was not what she'd expected.

"The choreography was different. I'm used to more fluid contemporary dance – this was all about stiff angles," she said. "The company had good team work and I liked the way the lighting helped make it dramatic. The ending when the dancers move off slowly was quite effective."

After intermission, Mauro Bigonzetti's *Cantata* followed with the dancers visibly buoyed by the audience's response to *Noces*. In the opening choral number accompanied by the invigoratingly resonant Italian female quartet, Gruppo Musicale Assurd, some of the dancers sounded off-key. But dancing, they were back in their element, especially Vanesa G. R. Montoya whose fluid arms and sensitive musical timing imposed her special personality on the late female solo (earning her a deserved burst of applause). As in Tel Aviv, John Hall and Robert Deskins provided strong partnering in their successive duets with Robin Mathes (mistakenly identified as Lenaig Guegan in *The Gazette's* story of the Tel Aviv performance).

Applause, let it be said, was highly enthusiastic, with some cheers, and at least four return calls. Let it also be said that this was an audience with a high proportion of men, unlike the audience at a performance of the new work by Ohad Naharin performed in Tel Aviv a few days earlier by his *Batsheva Dance*

Company. There, by The Gazette's count, the audience was at least 90 per cent women.

"Women are generally the ones who attend cultural events here. If men come, it's just to accompany their wives," commented the Pilates teacher Wytzhthum-Chem. "Maybe Israeli men think it's not macho."

Les Grands will see what kind of audience attends the performance at its next, very different stop on Tuesday – Cairo.

Victor Swoboda is reporting on Les Grands' mideast tour at the invitation of the company.

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