

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

Vendredi, 07 août 2009

## Jacob's Pillow a feast for the soul

BY VICTOR SWOBODA, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE



Les Grands Ballets Canadiens perform Mauro Bigonzetti's Cantata at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts last week.

**Photograph by:** Karli Cadell, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal

---

Becket, Mass. – Les Grands Ballets Canadiens returned to Jacob's Pillow last week after a four-year absence and again triumphed. In 2005, the company's appearance at this oldest and most prestigious modern-dance festival in the United States garnered high praise from the New York Times, which alerted the U.S. dance world to a company that had been transformed and revitalized by artistic director Gradimir Pankov.

Nowhere in North America is dance as a developing art form more revered and recognized than Jacob's Pillow. The festival traces its origins to 1930, when contemporary dance pioneers Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis bought a farm in southern Massachusetts. Over the years, its barn and other farm structures were transformed into two small theatres and into display sites for

artwork and videos devoted to dance. The U.S. government declared the place a National Historic landmark in 2003.

For dance fans, a trip to Jacob's Pillow can be likened to a pilgrimage – four hours by car from Montreal, 2 1/2 hours from New York City. But the atmosphere is anything but reverential. The trees, the country air and the rusticity of the place act to relax the mind and soul. Once settled into the banked seats of the main-stage Ted Shawn Theatre, spectators are prepared to focus purely on dance.

A few days before he died at age 90 two weeks ago, the dean of American choreographers, Merce Cunningham – infirm and fragile at his home in Manhattan – watched his company perform for the last time by video feed from the Ted Shawn Theatre. So the sense of dance history – the coming and passing of a seminal figure – was at its height when, one week later, Les Grands appeared on the same stage in a double bill of Mauro Bigonzetti's works already seen in Montreal, *Cantata* and *Four Seasons*.

"Bigonzetti's really not shown in the United States at all," said festival executive director Ella Baff in a telephone interview.

In the past decade, Baff is credited with raising the Pillow's profile with an eclectic mix of high-quality programming and interactive events like film showings, book signings and talks with artists coyly called PillowTalks.

"I liked the double bill – two very different pieces. Having live music (four singers of Gruppo Musicale Assurd in *Cantata*) was really appealing."

The applause was ringing when I arrived belatedly at the end of *Four Seasons* on the third night of the company's four-night run. Strong applause was a good sign. Pillow audiences expect quality.

"We have two audiences," Baff said, "the absolute aficionados who are cultural attenders of every kind, well travelled and educated. They've seen a lot and are very critical. And there's the very occasional dancegoer or someone who doesn't know much about dance."

Under subtle lighting that gave a pleasing natural fullness to their body contours, the dancers performed *Cantata* splendidly. The work's many earthy moments when bodies slide across the floor or mount each other or bunch together had a spontaneity that was infectious.

Applause from the capacity audience was huge and prolonged.

“How we laughed and clapped,” wrote the Boston Globe’s dance writer, Janine Parker, in a laudatory piece about the premiere two nights before.

It was another feather in Pankov’s cap following Les Grands’ breakthrough performances in the Middle East in June and subsequent critical and popular European triumphs in Ljubljana and Baden Baden (where, Pankov noted, the 2,500-seat Festspielhaus was sold out for three nights).

“Gradimir is one of the most interesting figures to me in the dance world,” Baff said. “You have a conversation with him and it emerges very casually that he trained some very great dancers, directed another important company (Nederlands Dans Theater II). He’s had the kind of tenure and experience that is really remarkable and should be celebrated. He has tremendous insight into training, the craft of choreography, casting.”

Under Charles Dutoit and lately Kent Nagano, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra gained international stature. Under Pankov, Les Grands now ranks there, too.

**Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, to Aug. 30. Montreal’s Rubberbandance Group appears from Aug. 12-16 and Vancouver’s Kidd Pivot, Aug. 19-23. For information, see [www.jacobspillow.org](http://www.jacobspillow.org).**

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette