

ance magazine

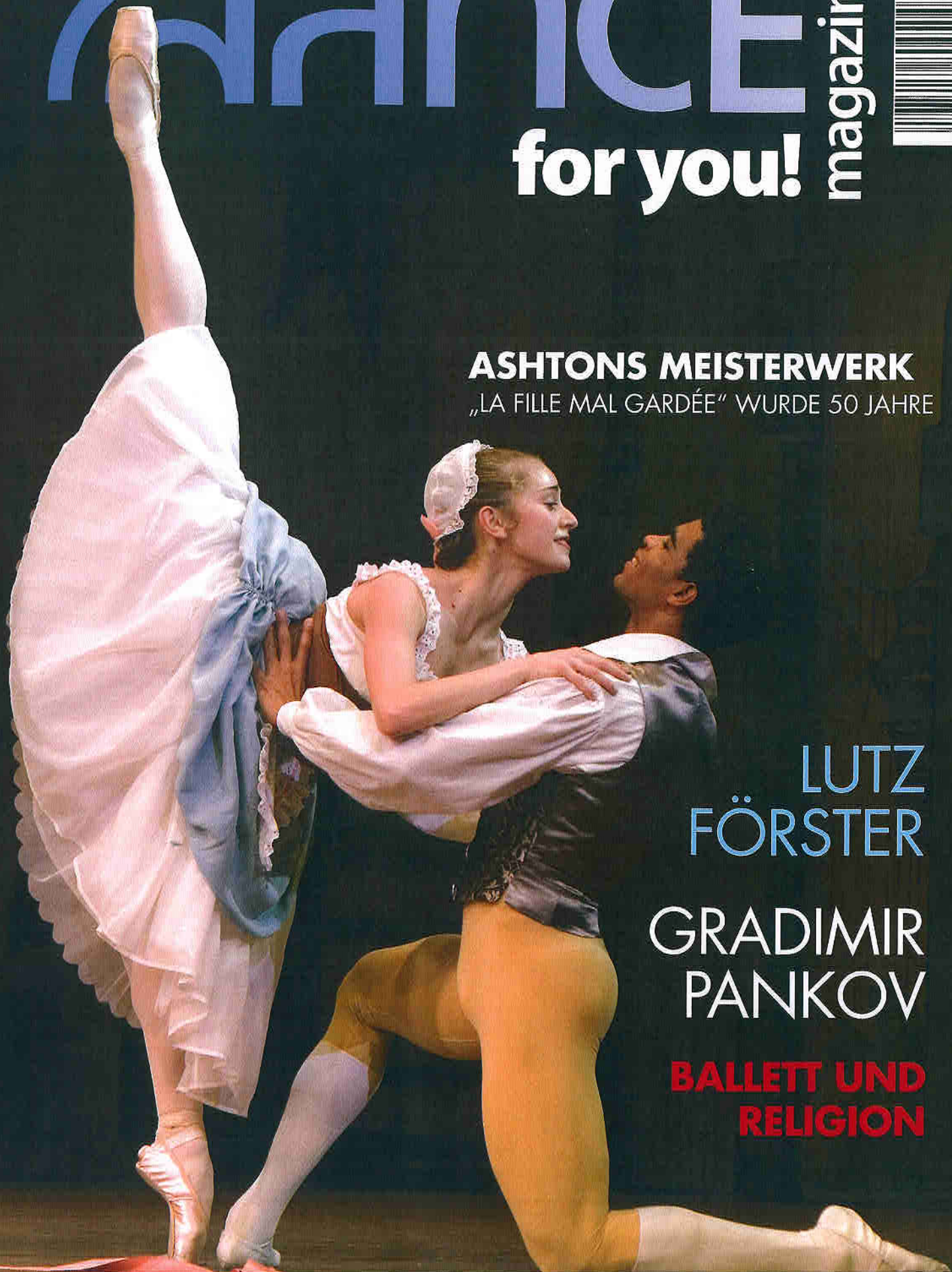
for you!



MAY/JUNI 2010 ISSN 1612-8088

ASHTONS MEISTERWERK
„LA FILLE MAL GARDÉE“ WURDE 50 JAHRE

**LUTZ
FÖRSTER**
**GRADIMIR
PANKOV**
**BALLET UND
RELIGION**



“ It is important to have artistic vision but you also need an audience. ”

Gradimir Pankov

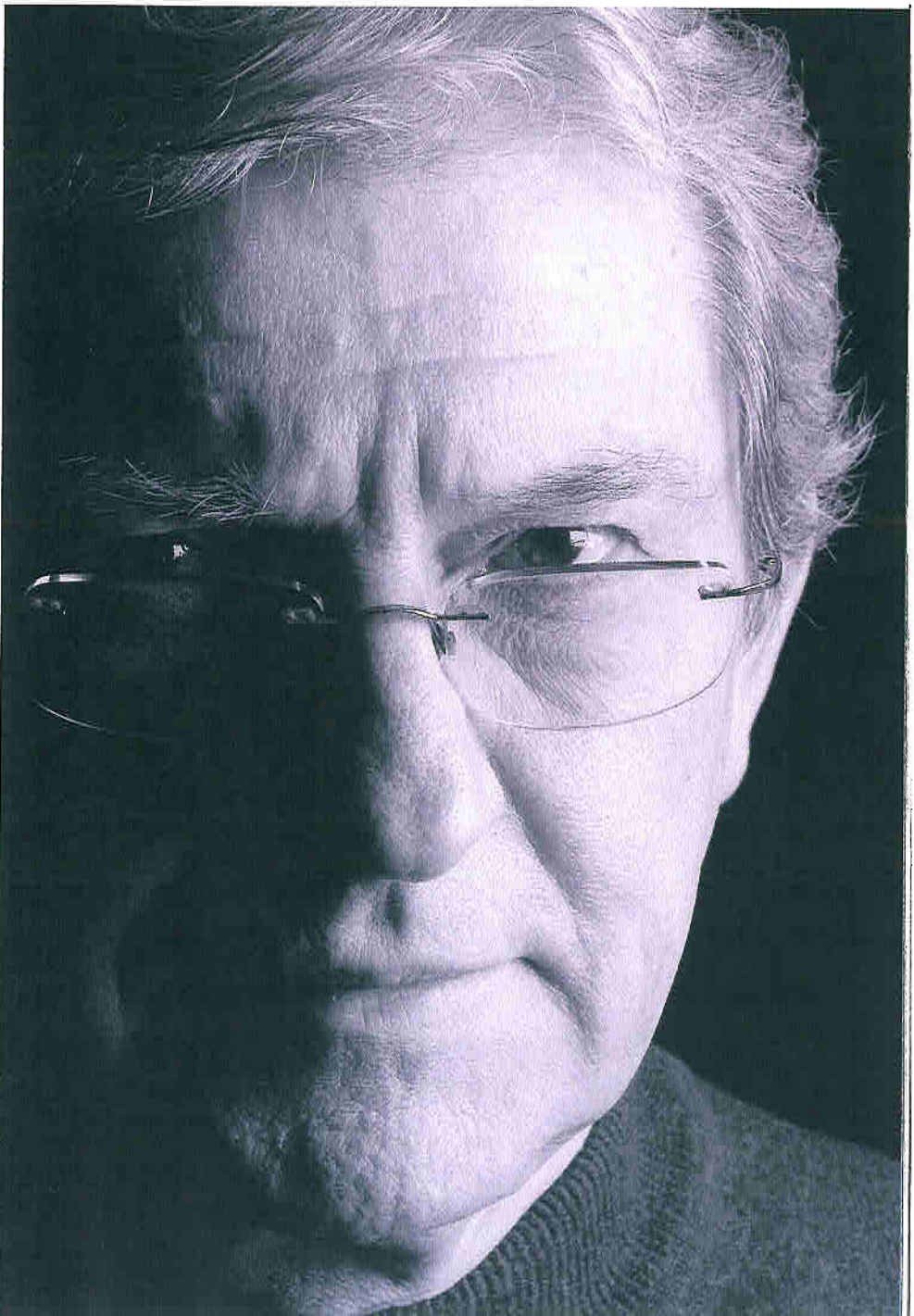
has combined idealism with pragmatism during his 10 years as artistic director of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal aiming to give the company a bold new personality.

By Michael Crabb

In 1999 the last thing Gradimir Pankov imagined he would be doing was running yet another ballet company. From a base in New York, where his wife was working with American Ballet Theatre, Pankov was enjoying life as a guest teacher and, at age 60, contemplating the prospect of a comfortable retirement. Then there came a call from the French-speaking city of Montreal and Pankov, unable to resist a fresh challenge, agreed to become artistic director of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (LGBC).

More than a decade later Pankov is still enjoying the challenge. In March he and his American wife, Margret Kaufmann, now a company ballet mistress, put a symbolic stamp on their time in Montreal by becoming Canadian citizens. Under Pankov's direction the 34-dancer company has become one of North America's most artistically exciting companies. As he studied its past, Pankov concluded that LGBC, which historically had tended to be torn between tradition and modernity, needed to establish a clearer identity. "I wanted to make Les Grands Ballets different from other North American companies," Pankov explains.

In his mind, that new identity needed to be more attuned with Montreal's international image as a centre of dance innovation. Montreal, after all, is home to such internationally recognized avant-gardists as choreographers Marie Chouinard, Ginette Laurin and Édouard Lock. In broad terms the city's cultural sensibility has been more aligned with European than North American cultural values. Before Pankov's arrival LGBC, with its eclectic repertoire, often seemed out of step. Pankov's solution, one clearly supported by his board of



directors, was to provide the company with a repertoire that was fresh, different and decidedly contemporary. His own background put him in a unique position to do that.

Gradimir Pankov was born in the former Yugoslavia, in Skopje, Macedonia. His passion for dance was ignited in his late teens when he saw the great Danish-born star Erik Bruhn performing in Skopje with American Ballet Theatre. As a late starter Pankov was fortunate that the Macedonian National Ballet was trying to recruit more male dancers. He signed up for an intensive program and went on to train at the national ballet academy. During military service he also saw the celebrated companies of American modernists Martha Graham and José Limon and came to appreciate the expressive power of an aesthetic that was a world apart from the decorous formality of classical ballet. In 1963 an earthquake in Skopje killed more than 1,000 people and devastated much of the city, including its opera house. Pankov was forced to find work elsewhere and within

four years had left Yugoslavia permanently. Starting with the Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe, he danced with several German troupes before retiring from the stage at age 40 to join Jiří Kylián's Nederlands Dans Theater as a company teacher and director of its junior troupe. It was the start of a new career that took Pankov from Den Haag to directing posts with Sweden's Cullberg Ballet, the National Ballet of Finland and finally to the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève where he remained until 1996.

Along the way Pankov formed close artistic relationships not only with acknowledged master choreographers such as Kylián and Mats Ek but also with a younger, emerging generation — Ohad Naharin, Kim Brandstrup, Stijn Celis and Didy Veldman. As a result, Pankov arrived at LGBC with an impressive Rolodex of artistic contacts. Among the 13 works he has commissioned for the company and the 19 existing ballets he has acquired, all the above named choreographers are represented. Others have included Jean-Christophe

Maillot, Mauro Bigonzetti, Shen Wei, Christopher Wheeldon and Kader Belarbi.

Unlike his experience in Europe, however, where large public subsidies make the need to sell tickets less urgent, Pankov has always understood that adventurous programming must also have audience appeal. One way he has achieved this is to program works with that recognizable titles — *Romeo and Juliet*, *Carmen*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Rite of Spring* — but that are radically different in concept and execution. Another successful policy has been Pankov's goal to make LGBC a star in its own right, regardless of the choreography. The polished quality of the dancing is a testament to Pankov's exacting standards and keen theatrical sense. His goal has always been to develop dancers who understand how to communicate with the audience. Even when critics have had reservations about the work, they almost invariably praise the dancing. Pankov's leadership has not passed without criticism.





Despite its unquestionable artistic achievements and enhanced international profile, some have argued that Pankov, as head of an organization that receives significant federal government support, has largely failed to foster Canadian creativity, preferring to program the work of choreographers familiar to him from his years in Europe. A choreographic competition Pankov organized in 2008, though successful as an event, has failed to produce an in-house choreographer. The season Pankov has announced for 2010-11 features work by German choreographers Christian Spuck, Marco Goecke and Stephan Toss.

Pankov is quick to bristle at such accusations. "You can't just produce a choreographer from nowhere," he asserts, adding that an artistic director "must have the freedom to choose what is suited for his company and his public."

As he prepares to take LGBC for performances at the Venice Biennale in late May, Gradimir Pankov takes pride in having transformed Les Grands Ballets Canadiens into a company that can hold its head high in the wide world of dance. ■