

The Gazette

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LES GRANDS BALLETS TAKE PARIS

A three-week sojourn in Paris by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens opens with an energetic performance of the modern dance *Minus One*. **Page D1**



GRANDS BALLETS CANADIENS PRESENTS SATISFYING SHOW

Gala opening of three-week Paris season

VICTOR SWOBODA
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

PARIS — At the gala opening of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens' three-week season in Paris on Monday, the unexpected star was 72-year-old Taeko Kurokawa.

Plucked from a near-capacity audience of close to 3,000 inside the cavernous Grand Palais, sweet-faced Kurokawa and a score of other amateurs briefly joined the company's dancers onstage in the cha-cha and mambo sections of Ohad Naharin's

multi-faceted *Minus One*.

At the end, Kurokawa and Les Grands' young Jean-Sebastien Couture swayed alone to an infectious Dean Martin vocal.

Under a spotlight's glare, Kurokawa shyly returned to her seat as the audience hugely applauded one of its own.

This charming pro-am moment always brings smiles to the audience. But there was much more to applaud and appreciate in an opening-night performance that rose to its historic occasion.

Having performed *Minus One*

at home and on tour for the past six years, most of the company's dancers know its many precisely timed jumps and steps like the back of their hands.

But there was nothing complacent or routine in their performance on Monday. Quite the contrary. In its controlled yet go-for-broke energy, ensemble precision and finely chiselled solo interpretations, this performance was the finest, most satisfying *Minus One* that this writer has seen.

Three things might explain why — the special occasion, the grand location and the choreographer's presence.

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BALLET

Effect of flying objects in the open space
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JESUS VALLINAS

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens' opening show in Paris drew a crowd of close to 3,000 to the cavernous Grand Palais.



JESUS VALLINAS

Night descends on cue in the building's space as the work delves into darker artistic territory.

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This was the first time in more than three decades that the company performed in art-conscious Paris, where even metro stations sport Rodin statues.

Les Grands came as the featured performer in *Les Étés de la Danse*, a summer series that sold a lot of tickets last year when it presented the virtuoso dancers of the Cuban National Ballet.

The location was the Grand Palais, the Art Nouveau edifice near the Champs Élysées whose imposing facade of stone figures, mosaics of Zeus and other mythological figures, grandiosely bleats Art. Walking past the Corinthian columns into the immense main hall is like entering an aircraft hangar. Look up and you see a spider-web of glass and steel topped by a central dome. *Les Étés de la Danse* producer Valéry Colin admits that tourists sometimes buy performance tickets just to see inside the Grand Palais.

Flown in from his native Israel, Oharin, along with artistic director Gradimir Pankov, rapidly adapted *Minus One* to a stage that was really not more than a raised platform without wings or a top. They won arguments with local stage officials to keep the platform low, to reduce the number of loudspeakers to prevent reverberation and to leave the lighting towers bare (the locals wanted to "hide" the towers,

as though somehow they would disappear).

Oharin omitted the usual opening solo that charms the audience as they take their seats (a 10- to 15-minute solo works in the 1,500-seat Théâtre Moinonneuve, but 3,000 people need half an hour to be seated. As it was, the show began at 9:45 p.m., fifteen minutes late).

The work started instead with the full company of dancers in

identical black dress seated in a semi-circle. The dancers' repeated falling and retaking of their seats was executed with exceptional energy. It was as though they were announcing that this would be no ordinary performance. When during the course of the number, the dancers threw their shoes, jackets and pants in turn in the centre of the stage, the effect of flying objects in that open space was all the

more vivid and dramatic. It helped that dusk's light was still coming through the building's windows even at that late hour.

Then night descended almost on cue even as the work delved into darker artistic territory.

With an interpretive commitment that characterized virtually all of the soloists that evening, Robyn Mathes and Jeremy Galdeano went through a slow duet that showed both the agree-

able and nefarious sides of courtship. In the section called *Black Milk*, one admired how the five male soloists ominously carried out their male bonding with subtly timed glances, then launched into vigorous, intricately coordinated jumps.

Even Guillaume Pruneau, normally so aloof, seemed mesmerized by a ritual suggestive of fanatical rites. Three of the quintet - Hokuto Kodama, Mariusz Ostrowski and Anthony Bougiouris - will be gone after this tour, and to see them for the last time was to appreciate how well they have understood the demands of intelligent choreography like Naharin's. It's not the beauty of separate gesture that counts in good choreography, but how the gesture is linked to another gesture sometimes far down the road.

Minus One is a blend of both the comic absurd and some rather serious themes by a choreographer who can masterfully raise and relieve tension. A lesser dancemaker would have ended the show on the happy mambo note to let the audience go home smiling, but Oharin continued with some short, slow female solos and concluded with an ensemble number danced to an ironically orchestrated version of *Que Sera, Sera*.

The show had minor lapses.

Without any theatre wings, the plumed cabaret performer on stilts couldn't cross the stage to

interrupt someone else's number as she normally does. Instead, she came on, sang, and left. What was once an absurdity became just silly and pointless, and this in the city that invented plumed cabaret girls.

And why, when the show is in Paris, were most of the dancers' recorded confessions still heard in English? Surely they could have re-recorded them in French, as one anglophone dancer chose to do. The audience was a mix of young and old, fashionably and casually dressed. Who knows how many understood the often humorous English texts (and virtually only Montreal dance fans got the joke when Couture walked up and announced, "My name is Shawn Hounsell," referring to a former company member).

As impressive as the extensive scaffolding supporting the seats might have appeared, the seats themselves were narrow and caused many a knee to the back.

The dancers took several bows to the audience's applause. At deadline, no local reviews were available. One hopes that the dancers can maintain the same intensity in this program and in the two others to come. Three weeks to go.

Victor Swoboda, The Gazette's freelance dance critic, is on tour with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens as a guest of the company.