

## Teaching classes, Paris Opera backstage tour keep members of Les Grands Ballets busy

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**P**ARIS - "Can I audition for you while you're in Paris?"

The French dancer was very pretty, no more than 20, and already knew, she said, some members of Les

Grands Ballets Canadiens. She looked expectantly at artistic director Gradimir Pankov, and her eyes showed clearly what she wanted. He'd just finished teaching a company class open to the public on the improvised stage of the Grand Palais, where the company is performing until early

August. For an ambitious young dancer, it was a chance to approach the head man.

"Ask your friends what time class starts on the 28th and come along," Pankov said gently but noncommittally.

It was last Wednesday afternoon. Normally, classes are held in the morning, but in Paris, where performances start at 9:30 p.m. and end at 11, classes are scheduled no earlier than 1 p.m. so dancers can sleep in and get a late breakfast.

"After a show, we're really hungry, and we can't sleep because we're full of energy. So you get to bed late," said first soloist Callye Robinson.

Wednesday afternoon was sunny and very hot, typical of the Paris weather this week. Gustave Eiffel made the Grand Palais an impressive place - it overwhelms each time you enter it - but its glass-and-steel design leaves no little nooks in which to hide when sunshine streams in. So it was hot for the 300 or so people who took their seats at the first of six free public classes. As Pankov put the company through its paces over the next hour, the dancers kept doffing pieces of clothing. Some ended up in nothing more than shorts. In the audience, meanwhile, people often shifted seats, seeking vainly for a patch of shade.

"Eiffel made it very hot. Sorry, I can't do anything about it," Pankov told the crowd.

Despite the heat, no one left. Ballet class is one of those special human activities that fascinates the layman fan.

With expert company pianist Nora Mativetskaya accompanying on stage, Pankov led the routine at the barre, followed as always by a rou-

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Les Grands' Gradimir Pankov on the daytime conditions at the Grand Palais

tine of movements in the centre of the stage.

"Pirouettes en dehors, pas de bourrées, pirouettes à la seconde, repeat en dehors," Pankov instructed. Occasionally to audience delight, he also demonstrated the steps.

Due to the company's emphasis on contemporary works, this was a rare chance to assess how well the dancers execute classical figures. Generally they had good, long body lines during stretching exercises at the barre, especially important because this is not a tall company. Pirouettes were satisfactory, although some had difficulty with a clean turn à la seconde (leg raised at a 45-degree angle). Admittedly the heat on the floor made turning difficult, though veteran Anthony Bougiouris made multiple pirouettes and jumps look easy (raising yet more regret over his impending departure).

As the dancers in separate flights performed a series of big jumps, jete en tournant, the audience applauded.

Hot and presumably tired, the dancers left class to return four hours later for that evening's show.

After a spectacular premiere of Ohad Naharin's Minus One on Monday, the Tuesday performance before less

than a capacity audience betrayed a slightly dimmer spark of energy. This is normal. A grand premiere adds its own peculiar tension. A perfectionist when it comes to getting the rhythm of his shows right, Pankov cut two very brief solos in a long section that makes its point without them.

Pity that he didn't cut the plumed singer on stilts. But one person's goose is another's gander. The critic for *Le Figaro* singled out stilt girl for praise along with the number that involved audience participation. More such theatricality would have enlivened the show, wrote *Le Figaro*. Yes, and largely killed its artistic integrity.

Not surprisingly, Quebec's culture minister, Christine St-Pierre, heaped praise on the company and its Paris tour at an afternoon reception at the Quebec delegate-general's residence, an elegant building among the gated embassies on Avenue Foch near the Arc de Triomphe in the swanky 16th district of Paris. Quebec is opening a residence for its artists in London to go along with those in Rome, Paris and New York, she announced. Not a word, though,

about when a new home for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in downtown Montreal will be announced. Sources say that the minister supports the project, but details need to be worked out.

Thursday morning, the dancers got a private guided trip through Garnier's famous Paris Opera house. The immense stage. The wood-paneled library with exhibits preserving the company's long history (time for Les Grands to do the same before it's too late). Oohs of delight from the women on entering the wardrobe department, where swan tutus were suspended upside down like flowers from the ceiling, and costumes from productions years ago hung in century-old wooden cabinets. And there were aahs of appreciation for the Paris Opera Ballet dancers who were executing perfect pirouettes during class in a practice room named after legendary dancer Serge Lifar.

Appreciation well-deserved. But the classically minded Paris dancers could never do Minus One.

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