

## Darker themes resonate in fresh Sleeping Beauty

VICTOR SWOBODA  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Sleeping Beauty has never been quite so wide awake. Tonight, La La La Human Steps performs here to a modern reworking of Tchaikovsky's tune-filled score in the final performance of Édouard Lock's contemporary homage to ballet, *Amjad*. Next week, for the first time, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens dances to the original Sleeping Beauty score in a marvellous version of the famous tale that Swedish choreographer Mats Ek – one of the world's great dance artists – created for Hamburg Ballet in 1996.

In 2001, Montreal saw Ek's *Sleeping Beauty* danced by Cullberg Ballet, the company that he led for eight years. It generated considerable buzz. Ek turned the central Aurora character into an obsessive modern-day figure who falls desperately in love with Carabosse, a male here instead of the traditional female witch. Aurora falls "asleep," not from Carabosse's magic potion, but from his illegal drugs.

As sordid as that might sound, the themes in Ek's *Sleeping Beauty* and his other classical ballet re-interpretations – *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* – resonate in the original tales that inspired them.

"Fairy tales have subjects that are heavy," observed soft-spoken, gentlemanly Ek, 64, during a recent conversation at Les Grands' studios. "Life and death. Love and hate. Revenge. Family situations. There's often a crucial movement – a dark spot – where somehow an irrational force makes a metamorphosis of the story."

Ek has the rare talent to create gestures that suggest those irrational forces. In times of elation, *Sleeping Beauty*'s protagonists slide or spring across tables, crawl on all fours, even walk on walls. In distress, their arms and legs twist and turn like marionettes.

At other times, classical ballet bursts back into view – pirouettes, long leg extensions and grand leaps that take Ek back to his days dancing for Cullberg Ballet. Despite a hip replacement, Ek said that today he executes double turns in the air "better



ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE

Choreographer Mats Ek shows move to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens dancers rehearsing *Sleeping Beauty* in Montreal.

than when I was a professional dancer – I'm more relaxed and less ambitious."

Ek draws freely on classical and contemporary movements according to his needs.

"Do I find my movements within an established vocabulary that's already connected to meaning, or do I find a choreography that's more alien, but is its own language with its own expressivity? It's been a long journey for me to understand things like this."

Whatever the gesture, it's there to help tell a story.

"Storytelling – that's what comes closest to me. When I started, it was not perceived as something one should do. It was somewhat old-fashioned. Storytelling (in dance) is not easy. You must understand what is mimicked gesture and what is choreography. To me, there's a difference."

Ek got into dance through a circuitous route that proved ideal for a creator of psychological ballets. Although his mother

was Cullberg Ballet founder Birgit Cullberg, Ek chose to start in theatre (his father was actor Anders Ek). For several years during his 20s, he worked as an assistant at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre for no less than legendary film director Ingmar Bergman, also a major stage director.

At theatre rehearsals, Ek learned a valuable lesson when Bergman failed to get directions across verbally to the actors.

"Impatiently, he'd get up and do it – 10 seconds of showing what he thinks you should look for. Those moments were stunning because they were just so damn good. It came out of frustration, but it worked perfectly. I understood that the limits between thought and physical embodiment grip each other in a very intriguing way"

*Sleeping Beauty*, Thursday to Saturday, May 9, and May 14-16 at 8 p.m. in Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts. Tickets, \$17.72-\$85.05. 514-842-2112.

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Choreographer Mats Ek