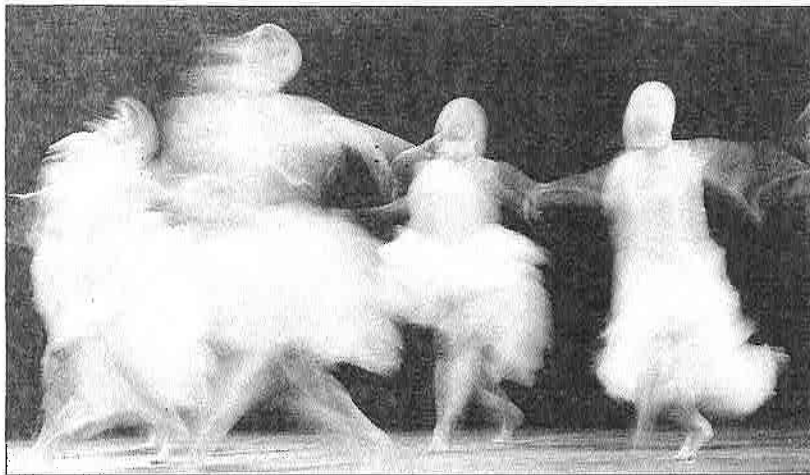


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LES GRANDS BALLETS CANADIENS ON TOUR



GIL COHEN/MAGEN REUTERS

Dancers from Les Grands Ballets Canadiens rehearse an open-air performance of Stijn Celis's *Noces* in Tel Aviv on Sunday.

HISTORIC VISIT has a few hiccups, but final ovation says it all

First steps into Israel

VICTOR SWOBODA
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

TEL AVIV— It took the Israelites under Moses 40 years to reach the Holy Land—less time, one has to say than it took for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (founded in 1957) to make its first historic appearance in Israel. If Moses had his struggles with Pharaoh, Les Grands' premiere performance on Monday night at the Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance and Theatre in Tel Aviv in its own way also represented a triumph over adversity.

The specially constructed outdoor stage, with 1,300 graded seats on risers, promised to transform two staples of the company's touring repertoire—Stijn Celis's *Noces* and Mauro Bigonzetti's *Cantata*—into an out-of-the-ordinary experience. It turned out to be a mixed blessing.

A cacophony of ambient noise—barking dog, whining child, loudly conversing patrons at an adjoining restaurant—broke the solemnity of the opening of *Noces*, when dim male figures in black and female figures in white skirts were supposed to enter in silence to take their positions for the stark, sexually divided marriage ritual to come. Things didn't settle down until about one-third of the way through the half-hour piece, when a new plague descended.

First Isabelle Paquette fell to the floor just as the separate lines of men and women confronted and challenged each other, then John Hall and Jean-Sébastien Couture took a tumble in such unison that anyone not familiar with the piece might have thought it was choreographed. The slippery floor took the air out of the show's balloon somewhat as the dancers tried gingerly to find their footing after a thin layer of water formed when the warm, humid air of the day condensed just as the show began at 9 p.m.

On many other occasions—

most notably at the premiere of its big season in Paris last summer—Les Grands has performed *Noces* as the carefully crafted, intensely unified choreographic masterpiece that it is. Regrettably on opening night of a historic visit, the Israeli audience could not get the full impact of either the dancing or the work's stagecraft, especially its use of lighting to contrast male and female rivalries.

"Is it better in a real theatre?" asked spectator Yonathan Wexler, an Israeli computer technician who's attended dance shows with his wife, Elisheva, for the past 10 years, often driving one hour to Jerusalem, where dance festivals are normally held. ("They hold the festivals in Jerusalem on purpose," confided Wexler, "to get the bigger Tel Aviv audience.") Undaunt-

"Culture exchanges ... open roads between different countries."

JON ALLEN, CANADA'S AMBASSADOR TO ISRAEL

ed, Elisheva said she enjoyed *Noces*, and thought the open-air setting brought a sense of freedom to the performance.

"Given the circumstances, the dancers did very well," artistic director Gradimir Pankov remarked at intermission, when he ordered brooms out and stage lights on in an effort to dry the stage. Ironically, the dress rehearsal had gone without a hint of problem the previous night, when a steady breeze dried the stage.

Pankov was in nail-biting mode, he admitted later, as a chorus of dancers and four singers from southern Italy intoned the Neapolitan song in Italian dialect, signalling the start of *Cantata*. Pankov confessed that he had visions of his dancers hobbling on stage on crutches as they continue a three-week tour that also takes them to Egypt, Slovenia and Germany. He

need not have worried much.

Cantata's vigorous stomping, heavy hopping and frequent clutching and unclutching between partners unfolded with a vivid energy appropriate to a work that, like *Noces*, pits men against women. At times the gesturing excitedly verged on recklessness. (This was best exemplified by the flying hair and utter abandon of Navarra Novy-Williams, a demi-soloist who leaves the company this year to work with Ohad Naharin and his BatSheva Dance Company in their attractive studio quarters at the Suzanne Dellal Centre.)

Noteworthy were Lenaig Guegan's successive passionate duets with Robert Deskins and Hall, and a slow, slinky solo by Paquette, who performed despite her injury and won audience applause. ("Luckily I had to use just my right arm,"

for The Gazette.

"I want to give especial thanks to the Suzanne Dellal Centre, who have been bringing Canadian companies here both with the government of Canada's help and without the government of Canada's help for years," Allen said to the crowd, alluding self-deprecatingly to the fact that Ottawa gave no money for this latest tour to Les Grands, whose executive director, Alain Dancycer, managed skilfully to get funds from Jewish groups, Canadian and Egyptian corporations, and Quebec.

"Culture exchanges are just as important as political and economic exchanges because they open roads between different countries," Allen said afterwards, adding that he hoped more Canadian groups on the scale of Les Grands could come. (Smaller Montreal companies like La La La Human Steps and Compagnie Marie Chouinard have appeared in Israel.)

"Two main cultural groups were invited to Tel Aviv's 100th-anniversary festival—Les Grands Ballets and La Scala from Milan. An incredible honour," Luciano del Negro, director of the local Quebec-Israel Committee, said, noting that a Quebec ministerial delegation in September ratified a new Quebec-Israel economic and cultural accord that had originally been signed 10 years earlier.

In her review, local dance critic Ruth Eshel remained unsure about where she would put Celis's *Noces* among "older, excellent versions" of the work. As for *Cantata*, which she'd seen performed by Bigonzetti's Aterballetto group, Eshel wrote of dancers "shining in their freshness."

Next stop for Les Grands: Jerusalem.

Victor Swoboda is reporting on Les Grands' tour at the invitation of the company.

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