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Review: Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in Cairo

BY VICTOR SWOBODA, THE GAZETTE



Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal perform at the Opera House in Cairo, June 9, 2009.

Photograph by: Tarek Mostafa, The Gazette

Cultural bridges are built one brick at a time, as Les Grands Ballets Canadiens discovered on Tuesday when the Montreal troupe became the first Canadian dance company to perform in Cairo in about 15 years.

The company's modern-dance double bill of Stijn Celis's *Noces* and Mauro Bigonzetti's *Cantata* was likely out of the cultural orbit of many of the invited guests, patrons and sponsors at the gala premiere, accustomed as they are to the classical offerings of the Cairo Ballet and visiting Russian ballet companies.

"It was important for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens to come so that people here could see what

Canada has to offer. We'd like the company to come back and perform next time in Alexandria as well," said Canada's ambassador to Egypt, Ferry de Kerckhove, at the post-show reception at the 20-year-old Cairo Opera House, Egypt's most prestigious stage (its distinguished predecessor burned down after a century of activity).

Arranging the Cairo expedition was no easy matter, so an extended return engagement soon might be close to impossible. Les Grands' administrators credit Kerckhove – whose daughter was once a dancer at Les Grands – with encouraging Egyptian firms and Canadian companies doing business in Egypt to donate money for the Cairo tour. The dancers and

company staff were all smiles on Saturday after their one-hour flight from Tel Aviv in the comfort of the leather seats of three corporate jets courtesy of Bombardier (regular commercial flights from Israel were unavailable on the Jewish Sabbath).

Politics holds sway over much of Mideast opinion, including opinions about culture. Les Grands arrived in the region at a time of activity that was bustling even by Mideast standards – a new government in Israel, elections in Lebanon and Iran and, of course, the speech by President Barack Obama at the American University in Cairo that was still generating Page One stories in local newspapers a week after he left.

In the days before Obama spoke, Les Grands' staff fretted that the Cairo tour might be put in jeopardy if Egypt and the rest of the Arab world felt that his remarks were untoward. But after the speech, an opinion poll by The Egyptian Gazette ("the Middle East's oldest English-language daily"), found that 77 per cent of respondents thought that Obama's speech would lead to better U.S.-Arab relations. Even a hard-nosed Egyptian political commentator like Mohamed Hassanein Heikel in the Al-Shorouq newspaper refrained from invectives, merely calling the speech a public relations exercise.

Obama managed to create a trampoline of good will that gave added bounce to Les Grands' arrival. As an aesthetic fringe benefit, his presence led to a cleanup of Midan Tahrir, the busy downtown traffic circle bordering the American University. Branching off directly from the circle is the adjoining Tahrir bridge that leads to the mid-Nile island of Gezira, where the attractive Opera House is part of a complex of cultural institutions including the National Museum of Egyptian Modern Art and the Hanagar Art Centre. Looming over them all is the 185-metre Cairo Tower.

The beautification and the newly planted flowers for the U.S. president will soon fall prey to municipal neglect, lamented the local French-language weekly, *Le Progres Egyptien*.

"I wish Obama would come more often so that they'd clean the streets again," said a local shopkeeper quoted in the weekly.

Obama undoubtedly made an impression, but it's unlikely that he expected a single visit to make an immediate, notable change either on something as large as the Mideast scene or on smaller fare

like municipal beautification campaigns. Neither should Les Grands expect to win over the Cairo dance public on the strength of a four-night stand.

Applause for *Noces* was at best polite, which was a pity because the performance was the strongest of the three that I saw during the Mideast tour. Although the orchestra-level seats were largely full – women in evening regalia and men in dark business suits (Opera House rules forbid entry to men without jacket and tie) – the balcony was virtually empty, as were much of the two lower tiers of the horseshoe-shaped house of 1,200 seats. Presumably some of those in the high-powered audience were there partly or even entirely to participate in a mini-international event rather than in an aesthetic experience. Adding to the glamour were the TV cameras recording the dance works from three angles and the reporters from two local TV stations doing interviews with the Egyptian minister of culture and others during intermission.

Without the gala's enticements, however, the company's three subsequent performances held the risk of playing to weak houses.

How much publicity was made in advance of the Montreal's troupe's appearance is an open question, but in three days of observation, I saw only one small colour ad in *The Egyptian Gazette* and a small poster amid various cultural announcements on the wall of the Riche Café, a century-old downtown restaurant hangout of famous Egyptian intellectuals and writers of an earlier era (legend has it that Nasser planned his revolution there in the early '50s).

Locals said that publicity for shows in Egypt is often through word of mouth.

At orchestra level during the second half, the audience noise intruded in the form of cellphone conversations and text-messaging while the dancers and the four female Italian singers of Gruppo Musicale Assurd gave a solid performance of *Cantata*.

Never during Les Grands' Mideast tour were there the standard North American announcements to "please turn off your pagers and cellphones." Such announcements might be considered bad form in the local cultures, but the carefully crafted dramatic tension of a work such as *Noces* is lost if there's an audience din.

Of course, Montreal's Place des Arts has its noisemakers, too (candy wrappers are an increasing annoyance) and most of the Cairo audience, it must be said, observed proper theatre decorum.

Cantata, with its live vocal Italian firepower and its free-spirited choreography fared much better with the audience, which called on the cast for three or four bows.

"Both works were excellent, especially *Noces*, with its strong structure," commented Brett North, a Canadian with Calgary-based oil company TransGlobe Energy, who, incidentally, trained for four years at the National Ballet School in Toronto.

His two Canadian co-workers were also suitably impressed, including one fellow who confessed that the program was the first ballet show in his life.

Maybe only a few cultural bricks were laid by Les Grands Ballets in Cairo, but they are bricks with which others might build a bridge.

Victor Swoboda is reporting on Les Grands Ballets Canadiens' Mideast tour at the invitation of the company