

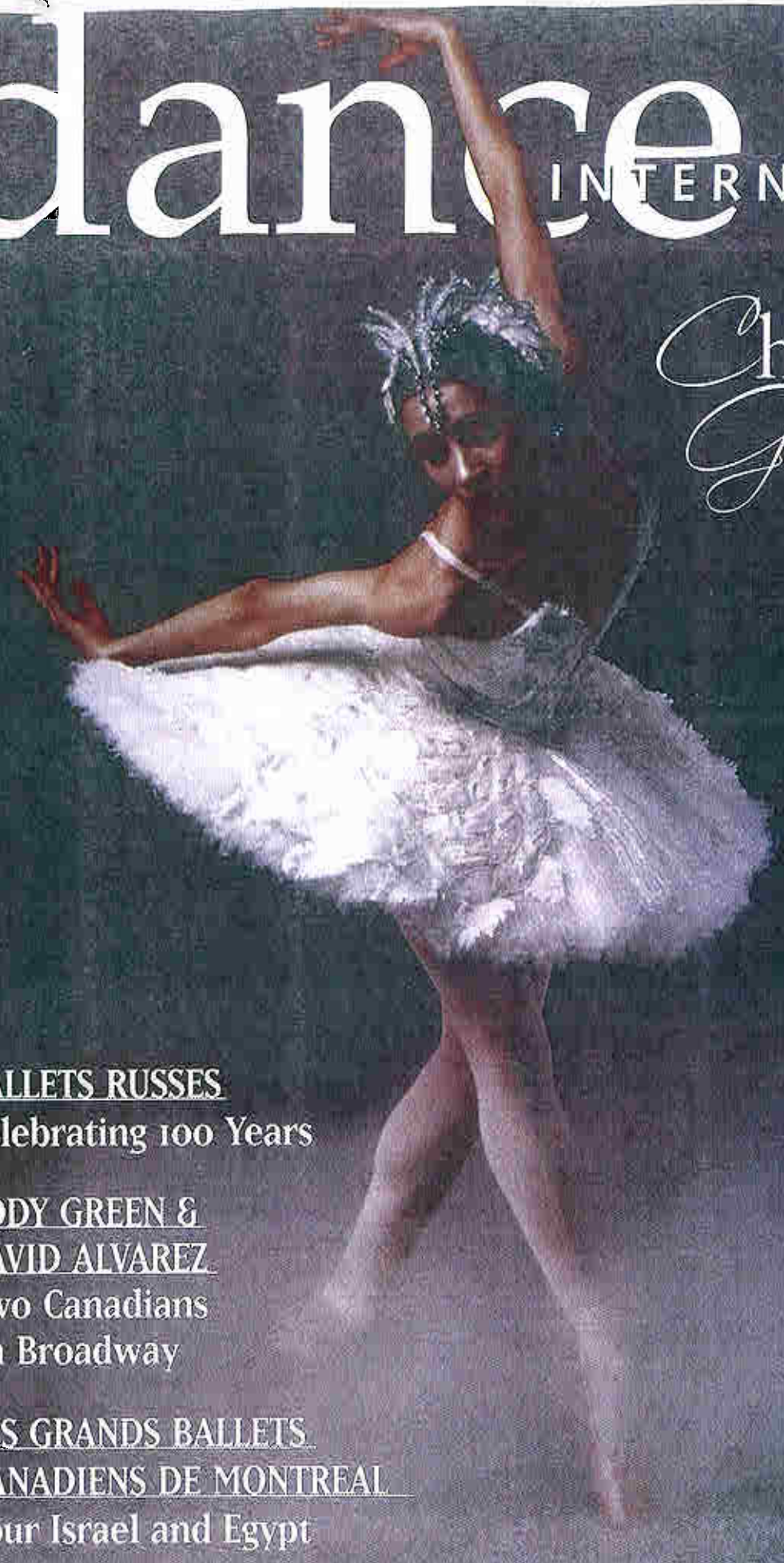
# dance

INTERNATIONAL

\$7.50 • FALL 2009

[www.danceinternational.org](http://www.danceinternational.org)

*Chan Hon  
Yoh Retires*



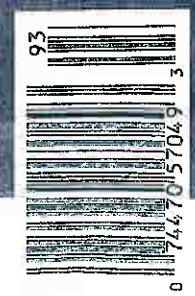
BALLETS RUSSES  
Celebrating 100 Years

CODY GREEN &  
DAVID ALVAREZ  
Two Canadians  
on Broadway

LES GRANDS BALLETS  
CANADIENS DE MONTREAL  
Tour Israel and Egypt

REID ANDERSON  
At Stuttgart

NICOLO FONTE  
In Demand



Critical commentaries from Vancouver, the Prairies, Toronto, Montreal, San Francisco, New York, Denmark, Australia, Norway, Britain, Italy and Spain ... and all the latest dance news, films, books and reviews

# Performing in the Middle East



by Victor Swoboda

## Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal's tour to Israel and Egypt

**L**es Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal have travelled to many countries during the company's 52-year history, but never to Israel or to Egypt — two key destinations on the company's 21-day tour in June.

Such an ambitious tour would be noteworthy under any circumstances — the last big Canadian company to dance in Egypt, for instance, was the Royal Winnipeg Ballet some 15 years ago. But the tour took on special significance coming at a time when federal government cuts to arts touring programmes were making

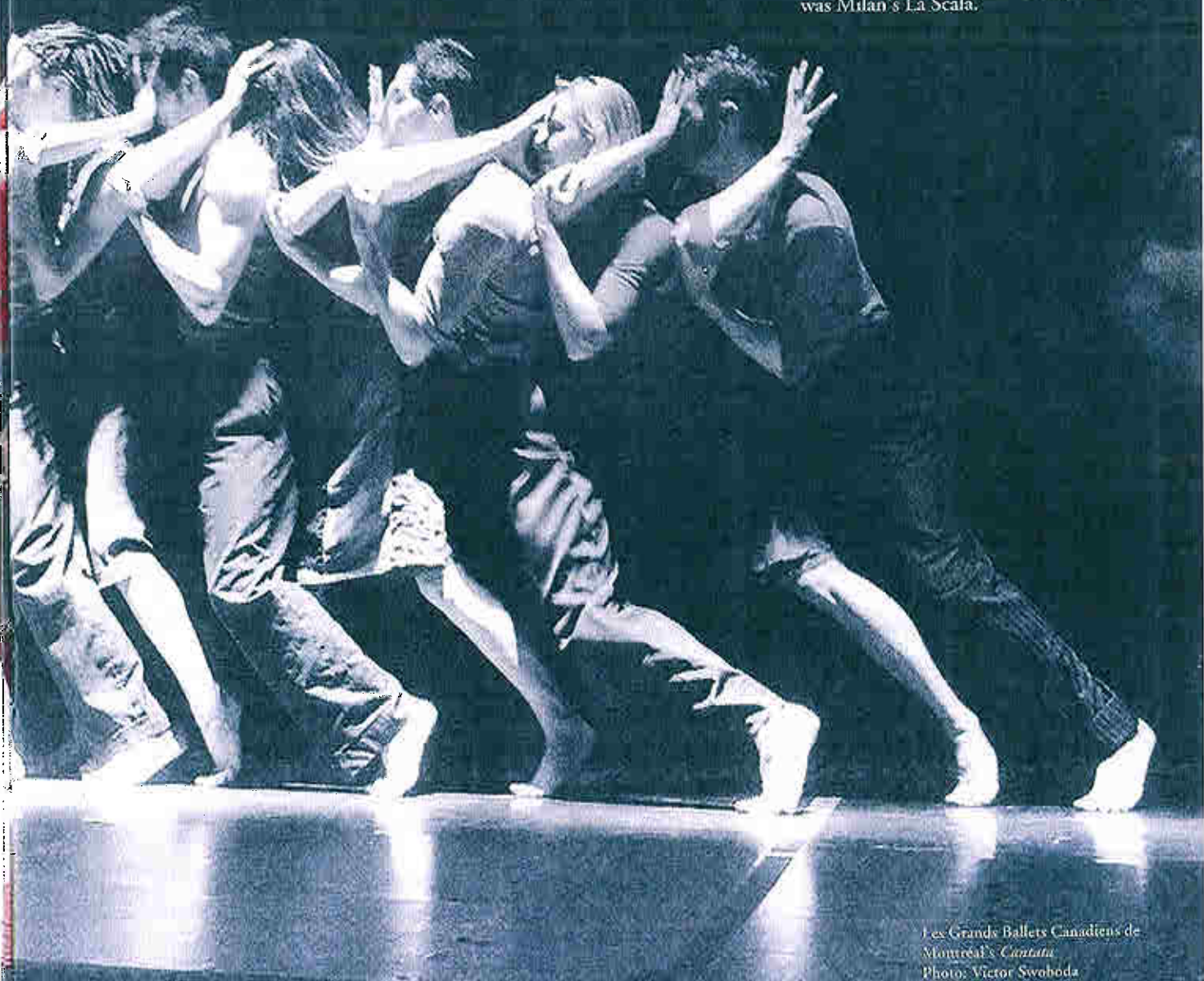
headlines. Logistically, the tour was a triumph of planning and inspired improvisation in the face of some unexpected hurdles. Artistically, Les Grands experienced the kinds of difficulty that companies inevitably face when performing on strange stages in front of unfamiliar audiences.

When the company's team of Gradimir Pankov, artistic director, and Alain Dancyger, executive director, first put together the Middle East tour, they counted on the federal government's touring programme, Promart, to foot some of the travel bill. Abruptly, the

Harper government cancelled the programme, leaving Les Grands in the lurch.

"When Promart was lost, it made the project extremely difficult," says Dancyger. "How could we cancel without losing face and faith?"

Surely it would have been an embarrassment not only for the company but also for Canada to abruptly cancel a commitment to appear in Tel Aviv, where Les Grands was invited to perform as part of the city's 100th anniversary celebrations. To appreciate the extent of the honour, one has only to know that the sole other big foreign company invited was Milan's La Scala.



Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal's *Cantata*.  
Photo: Victor Svoboda



Egypt, too, offered the prestige of performing at the country's premier stage, the new Cairo Opera House, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary (a new building was erected after the venerable old opera house burned down following a century of activity).

So there was no question of cancelling the tour. But where to find the money?

Inspired by the image of Canadian artists performing for Tel Aviv's birthday as well as in Jerusalem, Canadian Jewish groups opened their wallets. Individuals and subscribers also made small gifts.

In Cairo, Les Grands found a champion in the person of Canada's ambassador, Ferry de Kerckhove, whose daughter once danced with the company. De Kerckhove set up meetings with leading Egyptian companies and with Canadian firms doing business in Egypt. In the first five months of 2009, Dancyger made three trips to Cairo to speak to local corporate executives (in Arab countries, negotiations are face-to-face affairs).

"Four hundred thousand dollars of the overall \$1 million cost was donated — that's huge support," says Dancyger. "One quarter of that came from Egypt."

The tour was on — Israel and Egypt, and then two destinations in Europe, where Les Grands has toured to acclaim in the past several years, Ljubljana and Slovenia, and finally Baden Baden, Germany.

Sponsor Air Canada flew the company's 32 dancers and its technical crew of 28 into Tel Aviv on May 28. For several dancers who were hired the previous au-

turn, it was their first extensive tour with Les Grands. Enthusiasm was high.

The programme was a sure-fire double bill that included Stijn Celis' *Noces*, a masterwork that he created for the company in 2002 (it largely launched his international career), and Mauro Bigonzetti's vibrant *Cantata*, first staged in 2001 for the now-defunct Gulbenkian Ballet.

Both works have vocal accompaniment. In the case of *Noces*, a recorded choir sings Russian folk songs related to the wedding reception depicted in dance. In *Cantata*, Neapolitan songs are performed onstage by the piercing voices of the all-female quartet from Italy, Gruppo Musicale Assurd.

Both works pit lines of men against women, so that viewing the pieces one after the other provides an extended look at two artists' different views of sexual politics. Celis, a Belgian fascinated by human psychology, presents the dancers in angular, flattened poses almost like paper cutouts (an effect emphasized by stark all-black or all-white costumes). The choreography achieves a visual equivalent to Stravinsky's driving rhythms (and Celis adds to the rhythmical power by syncopating his steps, which acts to create a slightly perverse emotional undertone).

In *Cantata*, by contrast, body shapes are loose, rounded, even ragged. While *Noces* is unremittingly grave, *Cantata's* situations go through a variety of moods — flirtatious, confrontational, exuberant and, in some notable duets and in an extending female solo, passionate.

The work's finale begins as an energetic line dance, then squeezes the dancers into a choral group for a plaintive song that finally breaks into a free-for-all dance to a pop song beat. The quick-slow-quick formula — a staple of showmen for generations — inevitably gets huge audience applause.

Both works have had critical and popular success on tour, most notably last year when they were part of Les Grands' programme at the Grand Palais in Paris. So there was every reason to expect success again. Nature, however, managed to spoil the company's premiere performance in Tel Aviv. The city's famous Suzanne Dellal Centre — Israel's pre-eminent contemporary dance venue and home base for the Batsheva Dance Company — set up bleachers holding 1,300 seats in the courtyard, affording a splendid view of the temporary outdoor stage. But by 9 p.m. curtain time, the stage that had baked under daytime heat was cooling in the dark of the evening. A thin film of condensation covered the stage. The previous night, all had gone well during the dress rehearsal, when a constant breeze served to keep the stage dry. But with no wind at the premiere, the stage was an ice rink.

Isabelle Paquette was the first to fall, throwing her shoulder out in a bad landing. Later, John Hall and Jean-Sébastien Couture took simultaneous tumbles almost as though choreographed. Gingerly, the company soldiered on, fearful of wet spots.

The outdoor setting posed other problems, too. Ambient sounds punched into

Stravinsky's music — conversations from an adjoining restaurant, a child's high-pitched voice from the house next door, a dog barking. Amid the wide space of the outdoors, Marc Parent's carefully designed lighting lost much of its dramatic impact. A plain wall served as the backdrop, providing none of the intimacy of the real décor (the canvas backdrop decor could not be used out of fear that the wind would blow it down).

So it was a watered-down *Noces* that the almost-capacity audience saw on opening night. *Cantata* fared much better even though the dancers had to watch their step on a stage that was still treacherous despite efforts with brooms and overhead lights at intermission to dry it out. With a shoulder swelling from her fall, Paquette nonetheless danced the female solo with verve (a shoulder bandage peeked out of her evening gown at the post-show reception).

The company left most of the stage problems behind at their single matinee performance in Jerusalem the following Friday. The setting was Sherover Hall, a 1,000-seat venue that is part of a multi-theatre complex where plays are staged and the Jerusalem Symphony performs. Les Grands was there as part of a cultural series called the Israel Festival whose other offerings included Nacho Duato's company from Spain and the Alvin Ailey

Dance Company. The full house applauded both works with enthusiasm.

An hour-long flight from Tel Aviv to Cairo the next day turned into an unexpected highlight of the tour. With commercial flights grounded on the Jewish Sabbath, Les Grands' dancers and staff were shuttled onto private leather-seated executive jets courtesy of Bombardier. Those aboard the second jet got a further treat — an impromptu song fest by Gruppo Musicale Assurd. It was a jovial dance company that eyed the pyramids from a low height during landing.

In Egypt rehearsals were not slated for a couple of days, so company members had time for some fun. A chartered bus took them for a closer look at the pyramids and adjoining sphinx. Encouraged by the local hawkers, several dancers mounted camels and rode off caravan-style across the sands. Later the dancers wandered through the stall-lined alleys of the big outdoor Khan el-Khalili bazaar, loading up on scarves, shirts, headdresses and silver jewellery.

Proud of its history — old posters in the foyer recall the world premiere of *Aida* more than a century ago — the gleaming new Cairo Opera House sits among a complex of cultural buildings on Gezira, the island in the middle of the Nile in central Cairo. Les Grands was booked for no less than five consecutive nights. Fill-

ing the horseshoe-shaped 1,000-seat theatre posed a considerable challenge for a company completely unknown to the local audience. The audience, moreover, was accustomed to classical ballet danced by its local company and by visiting companies from Russia. Contemporary ballet is still a novelty in Cairo.

The gala premiere was attended by a well-dressed crowd of sponsors and the city's business elite, which was to be expected because of the event's international cachet — ambassador de Kerckhove was among the audience and hosted a post-show reception. Then again, the Cairo Opera House will deny entry to anyone without a jacket and tie.

Both *Noces* and *Cantata* received splendid performances marred only slightly by a temporary problem with the sound system. More distracting, though, were the sounds coming from some of the audience members — cell phone conversations and text messaging. Apparently asking people to turn off their cell phones and to refrain from talking during a performance is considered bad form in the Middle East (no such requests were made either in Israel or Cairo). Silence is essential, of course, if one is to appreciate properly a solemn work like *Noces*. In any case, the audience response to *Noces* was tepid. A strong positive reaction to *Cantata* — three curtain calls — almost made up for it. ▽