

In honour of **Gradimir Pankov's** 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as Artistic Director of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, the company's team decided to tell the full story of his career, through a **portrait in four parts** written by journalist and author Aline Apostolska. An episode will be published in each of the programs for upcoming Les Grands Ballets shows. The four parts are: **1938–1967: The Birth of a Vocation; 1967–1980: Spreading His Wings; 1980–1999: The Strategy of an Artistic Vision; and October 1999–October 2009: Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal.**

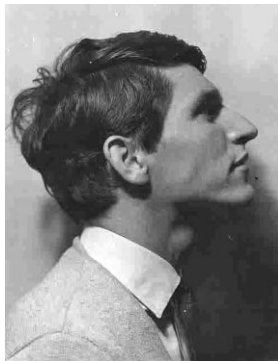
## 1. Gradimir in four parts The Birth of a Vocation

When people talk about Gradimir Pankov, they usually highlight his international, European and North American career, his rigour, his visionary spirit, his drive to build, his taste for adventure. In taking up the artistic direction of Les Grands Ballets in the fall of 1999, he would imbue the troupe with all these characteristics.

After all, isn't one of his main models for inspiration Alexander the Great, a fellow native of Macedonia? A history buff and reader of Shakespeare, Gradimir recognized in his illustrious historic ancestor a curiosity about others, a cross-cultural vision, a conquering audacity, and a sense of knowledge-sharing, of pedagogy. He also admires Napoleon Bonaparte, a free spirit,

discoverer and conqueror, a fine strategist and a driven worker.

Gradimir Pankov was born October 25, 1938, in Skopje. Since 1991, Skopje has been the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, an independent state, but at the time of his birth, that was not the case. In 1938, Macedonia was a region of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, named as such since 1929; a Serbian king reigned. The year 1938 wrote quite a chapter in the history books: Austria was annexed by Germany, the Munich Agreement



Gradimir Pankov, 1959

was signed under Hitler, and the first pogroms took place. The Second World War was brewing. The Serbian king began by signing an accord with the Axis (Germany, Italy and Japan) and then dis-

avowed the pact following a people's protest. The reaction was swift: in April 1941, Axis troops invaded the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which surrendered. The dark years of German occupation lasted until 1943, where partisans led by Josip Broz Tito succeeded in driving out the enemy and proclaiming the birth of a socialist federal republic on November 29, 1943. Earlier allied with the USSR, Tito, now the head of the new State, broke with that country violently in 1948.

Gradimir was 10 years old. He had lived out his first decade in the middle of these upheavals, in a middle-class family with a devoted father and a protective mother, with whom he remained close all her life. Macedonia became a republic (here, we would call it a province) among the six included in the young Yugoslavian federation. Culture was open to everyone. Literature, theatre, music, and also athletic education were encouraged. It was a new, self-directed country that boasted the rigour and discipline of the Soviet spirit while remaining open to the West. This is the fertile soil on which Gradimir grew up through his formative adolescent years. In keeping with the family tradition, he prepared to enter a career as a dentist, but he also became a regional swimming champion. Life flowed as smoothly as the Vardar River that ran through his hometown.

1955: American Ballet Theatre danced Erik Bruhn's *Les Sylphides* at Skopje Theatre. For Gradimir, then 17 years old, it was a revelation. Without missing a



Gradimir Pankov, 1953

beat, he enrolled at Skopje Conservatory and undertook a full Russian-style training in classical dance, music and dance teaching, studying under professors Mila Jovanovich and Olga Milosaljeva. He was expected to enter a career as a pianist, but he chose dance. Starting the following year, while pursuing his studies, he joined the Macedonian National Ballet. Gradimir graduated in 1959 and made an impact as a dancer, touring Yu-



*Le Combat de Tancredi et de Clorinde, 1965*

goslavia. But destiny was keeping watch. After a year of mandatory military service, he came back to Skopje just as an earthquake razed the city in July of 1963. The theatre was destroyed, with no hope of speedy reconstruction despite international funding. He was obliged to go elsewhere. He began by dancing as a guest artist for various Yugoslavian ballet companies. In Belgrade, he admired the dancing of Martha Graham. He then left the Yugoslavian territory, marrying his dancer fiancée to bring her with him. He danced in countries from Egypt to France, from Switzerland to Belgium; he discovered Bêjart, and

earned kudos as a dancer. Offers and opportunities rained down. He needed to make a decision.

In 1967, at the age of 29, Gradimir chose to leave his home country. Southern Europe saw his birth and education, and served as a springboard that launched him into Northern Europe. Now, he spread his wings and set a course for Germany.

ALINE APOSTOLSKA, journalist and author

## 2. 1967 - 1980 : Spreading His Wings

1967: Germany was the first country in Northern Europe to call upon Gradimir Pankov to transcend his existing boundaries, by inviting him to dance outside the Macedonian National Ballet where he had his start at age 18. The move was not only a geographic one, but above all an artistic one. Gradimir agreed to leap into the unknown, placing his faith in the stimulation and emulation he would experience thanks to the destabilization produced by his self-chosen exile and by the risk he was taking in facing the culture of a foreign country.

From a Slavic-Eastern culture, he jumped into a Nordic one. On the heels of his classical Russian training, he turned to contemporary dance which, at the time, was mostly the realm of the Germans (Kurt Jooss and Pina Bausch in the tradition of Mary Wigman), the Americans (Martha Graham, Alwin Niko-

lais and Merce Cunningham, as well as George Balanchine), and a few others, such as, for example, a Russian political refugee, Rudolf Nureyev, and a Frenchman, a philosopher's son who was a

mediocre dancer but a genius choreographer, Maurice Béjart. For the world of dance, which has always reflected great sociological changes, the 1960s and 1970s were a veritable cornucopia of abundance. In bidding adieu to the warm, green waters of the Lake Ohrid of his youth, Gradimir burst into the deep blue ones of the Baltic Sea. There, he reaped plenty of discoveries.



Gradimir Pankov, Ballet Master and Associate Director of Ballet of Dortmund Municipal Theatre, 1977 © Ingolf Haas

Still today, when he is asked about the great artistic revelations of his lifetime, after dancer Erik Bruhn and choreographer Martha Graham, he cites the Béjart of the era (his idolized dancer at the time), Jorge Donn, and choreographers Kurt Jooss and Pina Bausch. And Nureyev, while



*Orphée et Eurydice*, 1972

specifying that he should have known to stop dancing in time. Not to allow oneself to dance for too long—that is a lesson Gradimir would apply to himself, at the appropriate moment, and that he believes each dancer should think about. He also thinks that dancers, beyond their technique, are above all the expression of their personality, and must choose roles with that in mind.

As for him, from 1967 to 1976, he danced the roles of the classical repertoire—roles that were suited to him and to his temperament. With Nuremberg

Ballet, as well as those of Karlsruhe and Wuppertal, and for Theater am Gärtnerplatz in Munich and Nationaltheater Mannheim, he performed the role of impetuous Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Oiseau bleu pas de deux in *Sleeping Beauty*, the peasant in *Giselle*, but also *Petruschka*, *The Afternoon of a Faun* and *Pulcinella*.

He reflects on the place each dancer holds within a company: “There are no major or minor roles,” he says, “there are only minor or major artists. There is also no such thing as a star dancer and



Gradimir Pankov in Rome, 1971

a secondary dancer. The star is the company. Roles must above all suit each person's temperament." This is a philosophy to which he would adhere as a company director, and that he first applied to himself. At 40 years of age, with worsening back pain, he decided to stop dancing.

But he had a few other tricks up his sleeve. More and more, teaching stimulated him, and he yearned to direct a troupe. Opportunities arose. From 1976 to 1980, still in Germany, he became Ballet Master and Associate Director of Ballet of Dortmund Municipal Theatre. As such, he worked side by side with the company's dancers and actors, and took part in certain choreographies and

opera productions, including *Eugene Onegin*, *Don Giovanni*, *Carmen* and *La Belle Hélène*.

Destiny once again knocked on his door when, in 1980, he met Czech choreographer Jiří Kylián, who invited him to join Nederlands Dans Theater. Gradimir's German period was coming to an end. He needed to fly again. He headed still further north, toward Holland, then Finland and Sweden—across the continent from his birthplace.

ALINE APOSTOLSKA, journalist and author

### 3. **1980 - 1999 : The Strategy of an Artistic Vision**

1980: In his early 40s, Gradimir Pankov took a major turn, the third of his career. Professionally speaking, he engaged in multiple experiences and encounters, refined his artistic vision and teaching abilities, and filled his address book. In his private life, divorced from his first wife, he lived with a German actress before meeting his second and current wife, Margret Kaufmann, who was one of his students before becoming his close colleague. He travelled back and forth to visit his mother and his family in Macedonia, oscillating between Nordic temperatures and the continental climate of Southern Europe. His life could have continued this way, but once again, destiny knocked at his door, in the person of Czech choreographer Jiří Kylián.

Gradimir and Kylián felt numerous affinities. Both were born in Slavic cultures, trained in Russian-inspired classical dance, and confronted with other Western schools (Kylián studied at Royal Ballet of London's school). They both

stood at the crossroads of knowledge and forms. Kylián invented a singular choreographic vocabulary based on classical elements and enriched with various other sources (Czech folk dance, Limon and Graham techniques), which favoured expressive and physical power. In 1980, Kylián, who had recently taken the position of Director at Nederlands



Margret Kaufmann and Gradimir Pankov, Stockholm, 1985

Dans Theater in The Hague, asked Gradimir to join the company both as a professor and as Artistic Director of what was to become NDT II, the company's junior dance troupe. From Germany, Gradimir migrated to Holland, where a new artistic network awaited him.

He met Mats Ek of Sweden, with whom, as with Kylián, he remains friends to this day. Brother of a dancer and son of Birgit Cullberg, founder of Cullberg Ballet and herself a choreographer, Ek took up dance at the age of 26, after studying theatre. In 1973, he joined Cullberg Ballet, and directed it sporadically. He initially launched his career as a choreographer



Gradimir Pankov, Artistic Director at the National Ballet of Finland, 1981 © Enar Merkel Rydberg

by revisiting great classic ballets with a contemporary approach before producing his own creations.

From 1981 to 1984, Gradimir took the reins of National Ballet of Finland in Helsinki. He rejuvenated the company, freeing it from the fetters of Soviet tradition and focusing instead on the new generation of Finnish choreographers. In Helsinki, he presented, among others, *Cain and Abel* and *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Ek, *The Green Table* by Kurt Jooss, *Orpheus* by Toer van Schayk, *Symphony in D* by Kylián, as well as creations by Roberto Trinchero and Marjo Kuusela.

In 1984, after seeing Gradimir at work in Finland, Ek offered him the position of Artistic Director of Cullberg Ballet. Gradimir filled that role until the age of 49, in 1987. While on tour with Cullberg, he made his first trip to Canada in 1985, stopping in Toronto, Ottawa and Montréal. At that same time, he was asked to teach and direct Ek choreographies for other companies, such as *Cain and Abel* at Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève. Then, a new offer came his way from Switzerland.

Hugues Gall, then Artistic Director of Grand Théâtre de Genève, asked him to take the helm. Gall would direct Opéra de Paris for 10 years starting in 1995.



Gradimir Pankov in *Cain and Abel*

Gradimir agreed to lead Ballet de Genève, seeing an opportunity to develop a strategy forged from his experience. In Geneva, he invited Kylián, Ek and Christopher Bruce, but also commissioned works from the new generation of choreographers who, today, enjoy international careers, such as Ohad Naharin and Kim Brandstrup. He organized choreography workshops that brought new talents to light, for example Stijn Celis and Didy Veldman, who were at the time dancers for the company and who would become his protégés, right up until Montréal.

In 1996, he left Ballet de Genève, choosing to devote himself to teaching dance for various companies, including Cullberg Ballet and Royal Swedish Ballet, Ballet Gulbenkian (Lisbon), Nederlands Dans Theater, Opéra de Paris and Opéra de Lyon, and also for American Ballet Theatre of New York, where he settled with his American wife. He felt began to feel more like a teacher and artistic director than a choreographer. He imagined that he would soon retire and pursue a dream close to his heart: he wanted to have a dog, like he did in childhood, and to take it for walks in the park.

## 4. 1999 - 2009 : Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal

### Gradimir in four parts

Enjoying his retirement, teaching dance and walking his dog in Central Park—in 1999, this was how Gradimir Pankov expected to spend his future. But that would have to wait. In the spring, when he was in New York City preparing to leave with Cullberg Ballet on its Edimbourg Festival tour, he received a call from Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

Gradimir first encountered Montréal in 1985 during the Canadian tour of Cullberg Ballet, which he was directing at the time. The city's charm and pluralistic culture seduced him, but he hadn't thought of working here. Les Grands Ballets board offered him the position of Artistic Director.

True to his usual need to let a decision percolate before making a commitment, he held back from answering.

At the time, Lawrence Rhodes was providing artistic direction for Les Grands. Over the preceding decade, aside from the annual return of Fernand Nault's *The Nutcracker*, Rhodes had called upon the talents of local creators such as Ginette Laurin, Paul-André Fortier, Édouard Lock and James Kudelka, but also on those of European choreographers. Some Les

Grands Ballets dancers were well known, including Anik Bissonnette, who had danced with the company since 1989. As he got to know the company better, Gradimir Pankov was drawn in by its eclecticism and by its high potential, and he decided to take the job.

Today, when people ask him what made him decide to agree to become Artistic Director with Les Grands Ballets, he answers that it was the first time he'd been given the opportunity to direct a company that didn't belong to a theatre or opera he would have to work with. As a result, he had some elbow room, and could, as he says, "put into practice my 40 years of experience as a dancer,



Gradimir Pankov, 1999

teacher, ballet master, choreographer and artistic director." He could also make the most of the ties he'd established with various choreographers over the decades.

His artistic vision focuses on creation and risk-taking. With Executive Director Alain Dancyger and the whole team, he got to work starting in the 1999-2000 season. He was demanding and efficient, but took the time to observe each



Gradimir Pankov and Shawn Haunsell, 2001

dancer. He wanted to make Les Grands Ballets into a contemporary creative company with a single classical exception, *The Nutcracker*. A full metamorphosis.

As the man who talks about “choosing a dancer first for his or her personality,” he held auditions each year, and in a decade he has completely changed the composition of the company, opting for high technical skill and interpretive versatility on the part of each performer. This was necessary in view of the variety of choreographers from whom he com-

missioned work: Jiří Kylián of Czechoslovakia, Mats Ek of Sweden, Kim Brandstrup of Denmark, Ohad Naharin of Israel, Nacho Duato of Spain, and choreographers from the new generation whom he had met for the most part during his work in Europe—Belgium’s Stijn Celis, Italy’s Mauro Bigonzetti, France’s Jean-Christophe Maillot and Kader Belarbi, and Holland’s Didy Veldman, as well as China’s Shen Wei, Americans Christopher Wheeldon and Adam Houghland and Canadians Peter Quanz and Shawn Hounsell.



Mauro Bigonzetti, Pierre Lapointe, Gradimir Pankov, 2007 © Christine Bourcier

After Bissonnette, the company's last *prima ballerina*, decided to leave in 2007, Gradimir moved Les Grands Ballets into the state of mind he'd held dear for a long time: that the company as a whole should become the star. The reputation of Les Grands Ballets has grown internationally, in the United States and throughout Europe, and the company appeared for the first time at Les Étés de la danse de Paris festival in 2008, as well as touring the Middle East for the first time, visiting Israel and Egypt in 2009.

Gradimir Pankov has made his mark over the course of his first decade with the company. A significant decade for him professionally, with his artistic team. A decade marked also, on a sadder note, by the death of his mother, with whom he had always sustained a strong relationship despite his international travel.

After the 2009-2010 season of celebratory restagings, what will he do next? He will forge ahead, of course. And his dog will have to wait.