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THE GAZETTE

CULTURE



DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Hervé Courtain and Xuan Cheng in rehearsal for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens' *Romeo and Juliet*: It is Cheng's first role with the company after suffering an injury as a member of the corps de ballet.

Xuan Cheng's youthful passion is no act

VICTOR SWOBODA
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

It's the kind of story that Hollywood biopics thrive on. A young ballerina with high hopes enters a company as a member of the corps de ballet, but suddenly an injury shatters her dreams. But she ultimately overcomes the injury and, in her first role, the corps member is cast as the lead in a big production.

This fairy tale will come true next week for 24-year-old Xuan Cheng when Les Grands Ballets Canadiens mounts Jean-Christophe Maillot's splendid contemporary ballet version of *Romeo and Juliet* for the third time

ballet world ever since she began dancing at age 5 in Human province at the charmingly named Little Swan Art School, where her father tutored local children in painting and calligraphy on weekends.

But in 2006, she got an offer that she couldn't refuse. Her performance with Guangzhou Ballet at the St. Sauveur Arts Festival attracted the attention of Montreal choreographer Edouard Lock, who hired her to dance in *Amjad*, his new work for La La La Human Steps, a company that she'd seen only in videos.

It was like jumping from a soft-riding Buick into a fast-moving Porsche.

"I said, 'Okay, I'm going. I don't know

injured a ligament during class. Her first season's outlook appeared bleak and she did not perform along with the other new dancers at the Fall For Dance series in New York last month (Stijn Celis's *Noce* was given a solid performance the night I saw it).

Nonetheless, artistic director Gradimir Pankov evidently saw Cheng's potential as Juliet – the expressive face with its large brown eyes, the softly rounded limbs delicately extended, and perhaps above all, a fierce willingness to imbue Juliet with her own personality.

"For me, I can't be acting. It has to be natural and real. I should forget the acting part, but do what I (myself) would do. It's not Xuan playing Juliet, it's more about how I explain myself."

Juliet is, of course, an acting role, and during rehearsal, Cheng revealed a talent that stage directors much appreciate in young actors – the ability to take direction. Maillot's assistant at Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, Giovanna Lorenzoni, ably showed both principal couples the dramatic meaning of Maillot's choreographic gestures – how to suggest Juliet's abandon, for example, by revealing the long arc of her neck as Romeo lifts her: It took Cheng several tries (and a look at how beautifully Robinson did it) but in the end, there was Juliet, all youthful passion.

"I said, 'Okay, I'm going (from China to dance with La La La Human Steps). I don't know what will happen, but I want to try it first.'"

Xuan Cheng

since 2004.

Just three years ago, Cheng was performing in her native China as a rising star of the Guangzhou Ballet. Her repertory was decidedly classical – *Sleeping Beauty*, *La Sylphide*, *Swan Lake*, along with Chinese-themed works choreographed in the classical vein like *The Yellow River*: Cheng won a silver medal at the 2004 Shanghai International Ballet Competition and the next year was a finalist at the tough New York International Ballet Competition.

She seemed destined to inhabit this

what will happen, but I want to try it first," recalled Cheng this week before a rehearsal of a duet with her Romeo, Hervé Courtain, who's danced the role previously (they alternate the leads with two veteran company members, Callye Robinson and Jeremy Raia).

Even among Amjad's virtuosos, Cheng won critical praise for her clean lines in a role that demanded rapidity, deftness and split-second timing. For two years, she performed Lock's breakneck choreography on tour without mishap. Ironically, two weeks after joining Les Grands, she

Romeo and Juliet, Thursday to Saturday, Oct. 17 and Oct. 22, 24, 29, 30 at 8 p.m. in Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts. Tickets not including taxes, \$44.30-\$92.14, children, \$31.01-\$46.07. Call 514-842-2112.