

# The Gazette

## dance

# Three weeks in Paris

Les Grand Ballets Canadiens is this year's headliner in annual series called Les Étés de la danse

# CULTURE

# E10

VICTOR SWOBODA  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**A**fter many years away, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens has returned to Paris, the city where Louis XIV instituted ballet, where Carlotta Grisi performed the first Giselle, where Nijinsky staged his scandalous *Après-midi d'un faune*, and where Nureyev famously defected. Cultural legends swirl like lilies in the Paris air, ready to overwhelm the timorous and unprepared.

Luckily, after a quarter-century absence, Les Grands is bringing both a repertory and a cast of dancers that can compare favourably with any in the world. The company is performing for three weeks, starting Monday, as this year's guest in the annual series called Les Étés de la danse. Its previous eminent offerings were San Francisco Ballet, Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre and, last year, the National Ballet of Cuba.

Comparisons will be inevitable, particularly among the many European critics and producers who make it a point to attend Les Étés de la danse. In the past few years, Les Grands has garnered local critical success in cities in Germany, Spain and Italy. In Paris, the company has a chance to show itself before the European dance community in one shot.

The series unfolds, as it did last year for the first time, amid the cavernous Art Nouveau splendour of the Grand Palais, which has been specially adapted to accommodate a raised stage and 3,000 seats.

"It's an open space with no wings — it'll be very tricky," said artistic director Gradimir Pankov in an interview last week.

The Grand Palais is more often used for big art exhibits like the Richard Serra show last month. On the occasion of Les Grands' appearance, the Grand Palais is mounting a photography exhibit by veteran Montreal artist Jocelyne Aloucherie.

Monday's opening will be a gala affair to celebrate not only Les Grands' return, but also Quebec City's 400th anniversary. Of course, there will be the dignitaries, Quebec's delegate to France, Guy-Wilfrid Licari, and Canada's ambassador, Marc Lortie, plan to attend, as do at least four French government ministers.

Just a short walk from the Grand Palais along the Avenue de Marigny lies the Élysée Palace.

"President Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni, have been invited, too, but they receive so many invitations," remarked the founder of Les Étés de la danse, former Paris Opera Ballet dancer Valery Colin, in a recent telephone interview.

But former French president Jacques Chirac's wife, Bernadette, should be on hand — she's the series' honorary president.

For this year's edition, Colin and his colleague, Claude Bessy, considered Stuttgart Ballet, Hamburg Ballet and Australia Ballet before choosing Les Grands.

"I knew Gradimir Pankov from classes that he gave in Paris and Lyon, and recognized his qualities," Colin said. "And (Les Grands' soloist) Hervé Courtain, who once danced at Paris Opera Ballet, told me of the company's diverse repertory. I saw that the company's level is very high."

Last year, the Cuban troupe with its virtuoso solo dancers was predictably triumphant in classical works like Giselle and Don Quixote. In contrast, the virtuosity of Les Grands lies in its finely molded ensemble.

"After the classical ballets last year, this year we wanted something fresh and contemporary," Colin said.

Colin was thoroughly familiar with many of the works on Les Grands' three programs — Ohad Naharin's *Minus One*, Jiri Kylian's *Six German Dances*, and Mauro Bigonzetti's *Cantata* and *Four Seasons*. These choreographers are well-known quantities in Paris, and it will



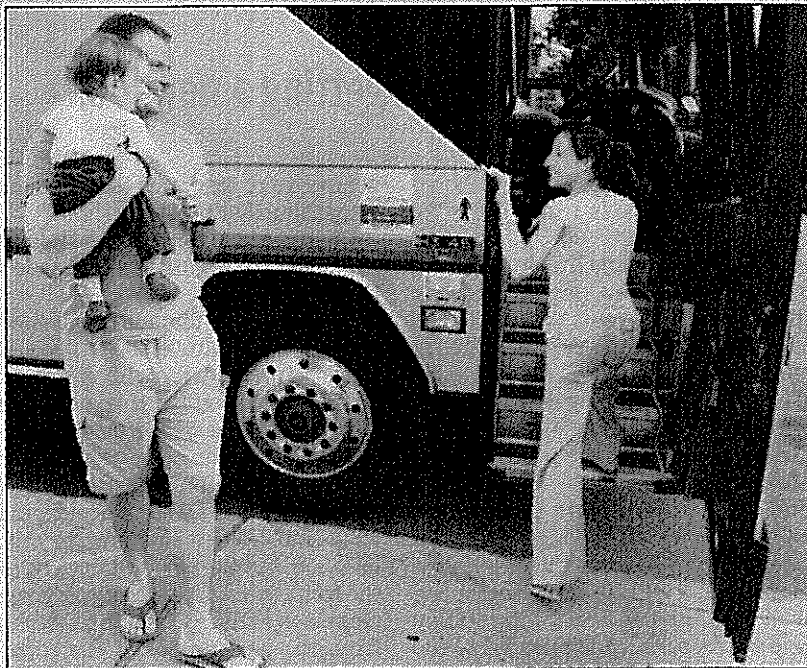
ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE  
**Les Grands Ballets Canadiens members bid adieu to loved ones before boarding bus in Montreal Wednesday en route to Trudeau airport and a trip to Paris.**

be curious to see how Les Grands' interpretations stand up in the eyes of reviewers and the public (your dance writer will be filing on-site reports in *The Gazette* throughout the three-week series).

Colin confessed that he was unaware of Stijn Celis or Didy Veldman, two European choreographers whose original creations for Les Grands, *Noces* and *TooT*, make up the second week's program. After several viewings, *Noces* still packs an artistic wallop. *Noces* and the playfully ironic *TooT*, along with the bonus *Kylian*, form a powerful bill.

For weeks, big billboards in the Paris métro and on busses have proclaimed Les Grands' arrival. But just who are they enticing? Don't Parisians traditionally desert Paris in August?

"Habits are changing," Colin remarked. "Some Parisians now go on vacation later when it's less expen-



sive. We expect a mix of Parisians and tourists."

If there's any pressure to do well in Paris, Pankov didn't show it.

"We're there only to do good performances and to please the audience," he said, then added in proper

artistic-director fashion: "Everyone just has to be healthy and not pregnant."

**Les Grands Ballets Canadiens at the Grand Palais in Paris, July 21-Aug. 9. See [www.lesetesdeladanse.com](http://www.lesetesdeladanse.com)**