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## When your troupe dances in France it's hard to look askance



Michael Crabb, National Post

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LES GRANDS BALLETS CANADIENS

Le Grand Palais, Paris

Tonight Les Grands Ballets Canadiens moves into one of the most coveted spots on the international touring circuit. The 34-dancer Montreal troupe opens a three-week season as the featured attraction of Les etes de la danse de Paris, a three-year-old festival designed to write some action into the French capital's previously vacant summer dance card.

Huge posters announcing LGBC's 16-performance engagement at the historic Grand Palais have been conspicuously plastered around the city for the past month. The popular weekly Paris Match has already devoted a full page to LGBC and the current issue of the prestigious French journal Danse carries a six-page cover story. Critics, presenters and impresarios from across Europe and abroad are expected to be part of the festival audience. Says LGBC's executive director, Alain Dancyger: "This is a historic milestone for the company. It positions us at a certain level. To use an apt French word, you could say it's our consecration."

Apt indeed. The art of ballet, now practised worldwide, may trace its roots to Renaissance Italy, but its true spiritual home is Paris. The Paris Opera Ballet is not only the world's oldest but also, by wide agreement, its most refined classical troupe. Paris audiences are notoriously discerning and demanding. No wonder foreign dance companies feel compelled to test themselves in La Ville-lumiere. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet blazed a Parisian trail for Canadian dance with a critically acclaimed season in 1968. The National Ballet appeared in Paris in 1972. LGBC's last visit was in 1974. Since then, where ballet is concerned, Canada has largely been a blank for Parisian dance fans.

Fortunately, despite Paris's rich ballet heritage, LGBC is unlikely to become the victim of odious comparisons. Nowadays, it makes no pretense to be a traditional classical troupe. Throughout its 51-year existence LGBC has always been drawn towards the innovative and unconventional, rarely more than under its current artistic director, Macedonian-born Gradimir Pankov.

Pankov, 69, came to Montreal in 2000, already well-seasoned as an artistic director in Europe and closely attuned to that continent's more progressive aesthetic leanings. While some Canadian observers have questioned Pankov's apparent disregard for local choreographic talent, he forged ahead to reshape LGBC as a creative, contemporary international ballet company. Pankov has given LGBC a fresh look by acquiring or commissioning works from such established avant-garde choreographers as Israel's Ohad Naharin, Italy's Mauro Bigonzetti and France's Jean-Christophe Maillot, and by championing the work of lesser-known Europeans Didy Veldman and Stijn Celis. Like many European troupes, LGBC is notably multinational. More than 75% of its dancers hail from outside of Canada.

Its vibrantly distinctive personality and interestingly varied repertoire are what convinced the Paris festival's founding director to book LGBC. "Artistic quality was the sole criterion," Valery Colin says. With a total capacity of 48,000 seats for LGBC's Paris season, Colin has every reason to hope local audiences agree with his choice.

As for Pankov, he remains philosophical. "It is good to be judged by other publics, other critics. So many different reactions can only be good for the company." - Les Grands Ballets Canadiens opens the first of three different programs at Le Grand Palais (Avenue Winston Churchill, Paris 8) today. Tickets are available online at fnac.com or by calling 011-33-892-687-100.

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