

Raising the expansive glass roof in Paris

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Les Grands Ballets

Canadiens Le Grand Palais, Paris

PARIS: Last week, French President Nicolas Sarkozy hosted delegates at the inaugural meeting of his dream-child Union for the Mediterranean under the expansive glass roof of the landmark Beaux Arts-style Grand Palais. On Monday night, bigwigs, littlewigs and would-be wigs of both the political and cultural kind gathered in the same historic building for a more overtly jubilant occasion, the opening of L'été de la danse de Paris, a summer festival featuring Montreal's creatively adventurous Les Grands Ballets.

A pre-show gathering for champagne-sipping VIPs was attended by Canadian ambassador Marc Lortie, Quebec culture minister Christine St-Pierre and a host of local artistic luminaries who munched on foie gras and caviar before joining an audience of more than 2,500 for a rousing performance of Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin's Minus One.

Naharin created the 85-minute work for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in 2002 by sampling and reassembling sections of his earlier ballets. It forms what amounts to a cavalcade of human experience, from pain and sorrow to hilarity and ecstasy, with several stops at various emotional conditions along the way. Minus One has become a popular signature work for LGBC but despite repeated performances the company still attacks Naharin's gutsy, often athletic choreography with passionate intensity. Through ensembles, solos and plentiful costume changes, the dancers held the audience spellbound. Even the moment when Naharin sends the dancers into the crowd to extract innocent civilians as onstage partners went over charmingly. Unlike Canadian audiences, Parisians are not given to instant standing ovations, but the energetic finale had fans on their feet, cheering with delight.

Reviews from the major local critics are not expected until later this week, but the response from radio and television commentators has so far been positive, with the quality of the dancing and distinctiveness of the repertoire as a common theme.

This is important for festival organizers as well as LGBC, which hopes critical success in Paris will lead to more European touring opportunities. Bleacher seating for 3,000 has been erected inside the cavernous Grand Palais. With a total 16 shows, that's a lot of tickets. The fact that curtain time is an unusually late 9:30 p.m. — because of the glass roof they have to wait until dusk — presents its own challenges in terms of attracting patrons. For the same reason there are no matinees, but LGBC, heavily promoted throughout the Paris region with huge posters and television ads, is doing its bit by inviting the public to watch daily company classes and rehearsals. And, as a bonus, those who do buy tickets to a performance can also enjoy a post-show dance of their own, courtesy of leading Quebec DJs.

For the dancers, performing in Paris, even if it is in an unusual, improvised venue, is a treasurable experience. As company veteran Jeremy Raia put it during a lunch party yesterday at the Avenue Foch residence of the Delegate General of Quebec, "we've toured to a lot of foreign cities during my 12 years with Les Grands, but Paris is a dancer's dream come true."

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens presents Minus One until July 26 followed by two different programs until Aug. 9 at Le Grand Palais (Avenue Winston Churchill, Paris). Tickets can be purchased online at fnac.com or by calling 011-33-892-687-100.