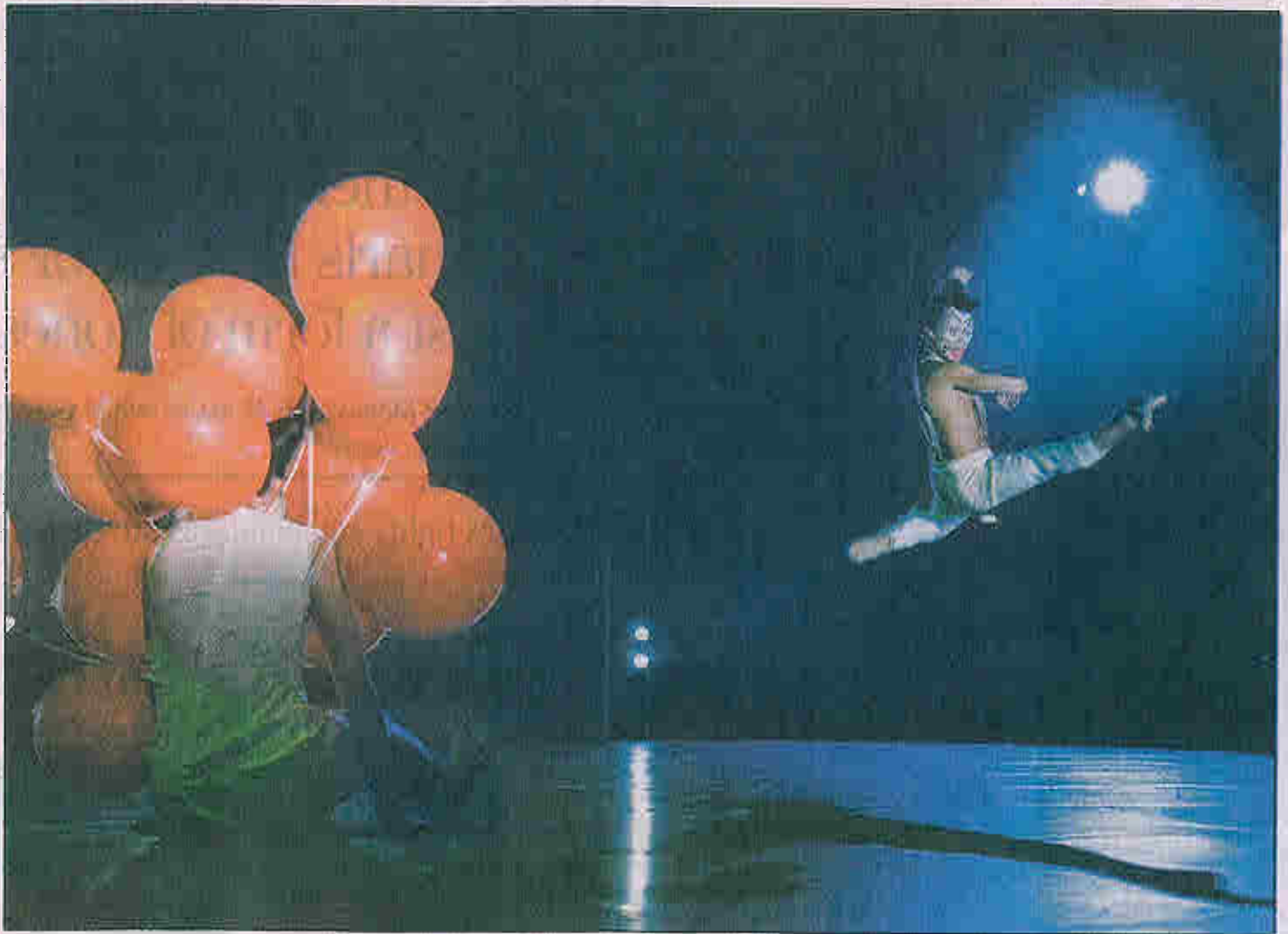


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D4 ARTS

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LES GRANDS BALLETS IN PARIS



Dancers Marie-Eve Lapointe and Herve Courtain from Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal rehearse at Le Grand Palais in Paris for their performance in *TooT* by Didy Veldman, that suffered on Tuesday trying to deal with the setting's open space.

JOHN HALL THE GAZETTE

THE GRAND PALAIS SETTING greatly benefits some works
by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, but overwhelmed others

Dramatic contrasts

VICTOR SWOBODA SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

PARIS - The Grand Palais was hot and humid on Tuesday night, the seats were as narrow and uncomfortable as always, and the triple-bill show went on past midnight, but few in the capacity crowd of 3,500 were inclined to leave as Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal began its second week in the French capital.

The program was new to Paris but quite familiar to Montreal audiences - TooT by Didy Veldman, Stijn Celis's *Noces* to music by Stravinsky, and, as a bonus, *Six German Dances*, a pleasant little ditty by a big-name choreographer, Jiri Kylian.

It's becoming clear that the Grand Palais setting can greatly benefit some works and negatively overwhelm others. In the first week, Ohad Naharin's *Minus One* soared to new heights on the open stage set amid the vastness of Gustave Eiffel's girder-and-glass palace.

But the openness worked against TooT. The subtle lighting changes that serve so well to create different moods in a closed environment like Théâtre Molière came across faded. Some dramatic contrast was missing as the dancers in clown white-face moved from one tableau to the next. No fault of the local lighting engineer who worked into the early hours of the same morning, remarked artistic director Gradimir Pankov during the first of two 20-minute intermissions, to get the best out of the Grand Palais that he could.

Other Grand Palais issues: no one past the first few rows could have made out the water spurting during the amusing water-pistol scene, nor could they have heard the dancers' unaided voices in the "I wish that..." sequence.

If the subtitles were missing, the grand lines of Veldman's statement about the tension between individual desires and societal constraints remained largely intact. Rehearsals that lasted until 11 p.m. the previous night might explain why

built especially for the grandiose 1900 World's Fair.

With *Noces*, Les Grands came out with the same burst of collective energy that marked *Minus One*. It was as though the company knew how good it looks in this masterpiece created for it in 2002. Here the Grand Palais was a plus. It created a kind of huge universal stage for the women dancers in white and men in black who met and exchanged ritualistic greetings at a wedding party.

Le Monde criticized Minus One for its eclecticism and lack of stylistic unity.

the performance lacked a degree of spontaneity that could have given this light-hearted work with serious undertones more zip.

The chorus line finish, in which the dancers slowly approached the audience while grinning grotesquely, ended with warm audience applause.

After 45 minutes of sitting still in the heat, many audience members hurried to the bar. A few even made their way to the Grand Palais's other wing to look at the art installation by the fine Montreal artist Jocelyne Allouche. Nine separate black-and-white panels showed different views of high-rise balconies - a collective "balconville." Set on a low raised platform, the small installation unfortunately looked isolated and lost in a setting

Were the dancers particularly energized by the knowledge that choreographer Celis was in the audience? They were exceptionally good, too, when Naharin attended the premiere the previous week. If only the choreographers could always be present.

Applause were enthusiastic, with here and there the first bravos that this writer has heard in Paris. Could any of them have come from some of the ten impresarios and scores of critics invited for the occasion? Presenting the company in a high-profile Paris series like *Les étés de la danse* could, company execs hope, lead to new tours abroad (Israel has been spoken of).

Normally on tour, the Veldman/Celis bill suffices, but in Paris, where those choreogra-

phers are little known, *Six German Dances* by the famous Czech choreographer Jiri Kylian, was added. On a program that started ten minutes late at 9:40 p.m., *Six German Dances* began several minutes before midnight.

This short work for eight dancers in Mozart-era dress has been amusing audiences for more than 20 years. But dancers can easily ruin its off-beat, sophisticated humour if they add the slightest broad spin. Les Grands on Tuesday brought it off with a splendid balance of control and frivolity.

The audience applauded appreciatively, recalling the dancers several times.

Just about everyone in central Paris has seen a scene from this work, with advertising from Les Grands on the side of busses and on métro billboards (most spectacularly at the Champs-Élysées station, where the image repeats half the length of the station).

If audiences have turned out in large numbers for the company's shows, the local critical reaction has been tepid. *Le Monde* criticized *Minus One* for its eclecticism and lack of stylistic unity. Such insistence on classical purity completely misses the point of *Minus One*, whose contemporary aesthetic uses different styles to raise and lower tension. But we must remember that we are in Paris, where it was the classical purists who chased artists like Édouard Manet to the *Salon des Refuses*.