

Queen of Spades not in cards outside Montreal

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MONTREAL—As Ottawa's National Arts Centre Orchestra heads west for yet another extensive tour, Canada's major ballet companies can only look on with complexions turning a deepening shade of green.

Once the life blood of Canadian ballet, touring has become – to borrow a phrase from *Porgy and Bess* – a "sometime thing," too costly to be a regular activity for the National Ballet in particular.

For its smaller sister companies in the Canadian big three, Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, hitting the road has always been easier. Today's National Ballet embraces an impressive 72 dancers, twice the number employed by Les Grands Ballets. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, historically our most portable classical dance ensemble, usually boasts fewer than 30.

If size affects portability, it also affects repertoire. The lavish full-length story ballets have traditionally been the specialty of Toronto's company, mixed programs turning up more regularly in Winnipeg and Montreal.

Until recently, that is. This year's National Ballet season opens Wednesday at the Four Seasons Centre with a mixed bill, pairing Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room* with George Balanchine's *Symphony in C*, whereas Les Grands Ballets Canadiens opened a new season at Montreal's Place des Arts recently with the Danish choreographer Kim Brandstrup's full-length *The Queen of Spades*.

Brandstrup's ballet, like Tchaikovsky's opera of the same name, takes inspiration from a fascinating 1833 novella by Alexander Pushkin, in which a poor army officer tries to pry the secret of winning at cards from an old countess, frightening her to death in the process.

Along with Didy Veldman's *Carmen* the year before, it represented a significant departure for Les Grands Ballets after decades of performing shorter works, when it received its premiere in 2001.

Its revival this season benefited from digital technology unavailable as recently as seven years ago. Trained as a filmmaker as well as a choreographer, Brandstrup has made extensive use of projections, at one point showing the drowned heroine Lisa floating on a stage full of waves.

Although the ballet's actual steps, blending ballet and modern dance techniques, look less original than the visual effects devised by the Quay Brothers and adapted by Sylvain Robert, *The Queen of Spades* is the kind of production that deserves to be seen in other Canadian cities, yet probably won't be.

Yes, it did travel to Ottawa in 2001 (Cathy Levy produces arguably the finest dance series in the country at the National Arts Centre), but the day when our three major companies could afford to host each other on a regular basis has apparently become the stuff of history.

According to the National Ballet, the simple problem is money. Each of its six Toronto programs is expected to bring in about \$1.5 million to cover basic costs. The company simply cannot make that kind of money in either Montreal or Winnipeg. True, Alberta Ballet did share a program with the National Ballet at last summer's Luminato Festival in Toronto, but Luminato paid the bills.

This all comes as a disappointment to Les Grands Ballets artistic director Gradimir Pankov, who talked up the idea of company exchanges with his opposite numbers in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta, only to

have them face fiscal reality. "They lost money and that's the end of the story," he says. "We stay in our own corner now."

Well, not quite. Pankov's company undertook an ambitious 3 1/2-week Paris season last July at the Grand Palais, and continues to alternate annual tours between Europe and the U.S. It even invites an affordable visiting ensemble to be part of its Montreal series, this season according the honour to the Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg (Feb. 16-22).

But if we consider all the artistic and financial investments made by Les Grands Ballets and other companies in their home-based productions (*The Queen of Spades* cost \$750,000 back in 2001) it does seem a pity they can't be seen regularly by the rest of the country. Even in a belt-tightening economy, our deck of cards should have room for a *Queen of Spades*.