

Celia Franca: Ballet Mistress to Artistic Director in One Leap

By Carol Bishop-Gwyn

When the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company brought its magical, romantic "white ballets" to Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre in November 1949, eight times the number of tickets available could have been sold. To celebrate this success, a reception for the company and for invited prominent Torontonians was staged at Boris Volkoff's ballet studio on Yonge Street. The British dancers were offered a lavish buffet of assorted foods (some prepared by Canada's own culinary star, Kate Aitken), also a range of hard liquors and of soft drinks, as well as cigarettes. One delicacy that may have puzzled the visitors were the plates piled with sandwiches made from the three pounds of peanut butter donated by the Red Spot Nut Company.

In a particular way, supply and demand were exactly matched that evening. The Sadler's Wells dancers had left a country still gripped by the grim "austerity" of wartime-style food rationing. But if the English visitors were starved for rich foods, their Canadian hosts were starved for culture. While booming economically, and with all kinds of consumer goods again available, Canadians, whether in Toronto or elsewhere, lived in a country that was still provincial, repressed, and known for little else but wheat and hockey players.

And there was another factor. The beauty that the Torontonians had just enjoyed had come to them from their "Mother Country". That connection was now fraying, but it was nonetheless substantial. Britain still meant the finer things of life, most especially artistic productions and creations as confirmed by the touring Sadler's Wells Ballet, as well as by all those who had come over to develop Canada's small roster of cultural organizations, such as the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Canada had money. Britain had culture. The two were about to be brought together into a creative whole.

For several years, a number of Canadians had been discussing the possibility of creating a national ballet company. Many small companies did exist in Canada at this time. The Winnipeg Ballet Company, which had staged its first performance on June 11, 1940, was indeed the second-oldest company in North America. Companies existed in Halifax, Ottawa, Montreal, as well as the Volkoff Canadian Ballet in Toronto. When the third Canadian Ballet Festival was staged in November 1950, (the occasion of Celia Franca's first appearance in Canada) 13 Canadian companies took part and presented 23 original ballets. But all were small, were in precarious financial condition (no government funding was yet available), were at best semi-professional and could not afford to pay their dancers on a sustained basis. Canadian dancers of real talent, such as Melissa Hayden and David Adams, had to leave the country to pursue their careers.

As the first sign of a stirring of ambition, the Canadian Ballet Festival Association (CBFA)ⁱ submitted a report advocating the formation of a national ballet company to the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (the so-called Massey

Commission of 1949-51, out of which would come, in 1957, the Canada Council). It proposed assembling a company from the best dancers across the country and using the choreographic repertoire of Canada's best choreographers.

A parallel initiative was taken by Stewart James. An officer, he had been wounded in the fighting in Burma and after demobilization had taken up dancing at the Volkoff studio to regain his strength and stamina. There, James turned into a balletomane and took on the unpaid job of business manager to the Volkoff company. He wrote a paper, "The Case for Ballet in Canada", and advocated a professional company of up to 16 dancers who would receive salaries for a 40-week season. For the key post of artistic director, James' principal recommendation was, naturally, Volkoff. He wrote in his paper: "Boris Volkoff, whose reputation removes any doubt as to his claim for this position."ⁱⁱⁱ

Volkoff's claims to the position were indeed considerable. A Russian émigré, he had opened a ballet school in Toronto in 1931 and he had introduced classical ballet to Toronto audiences. He was founder and co-director of the Volkoff Canadian Ballet Company. Lastly, and not least, he was exceptionally well-connected socially. His wife, a former student, was Janet Baldwin whom he married in 1936 just before taking a troupe of dancers to the Berlin Olympics. A descendent of the 19th-century politician Robert Baldwin, Janet Volkoff was a member of Toronto's social elite and she persuaded a number of influential society women to join the board of the CBFA.

Shortly after the triumphal success of the Sadler's Wells Ballet in Canada, Janet Volkoff and Stewart James began to lobby actively for the creation of a full-time, professional, ballet company. In a February 8, 1950, letter to CBFA board member Aileen Woods, James wrote, "We feel that the time has come when Toronto needs, wants and is willing to support a company." That spring, Woods, James and Janet Volkoff, held a series of meetings with interested, and influential, friends, such as Hugh Lawson, Bobs Lash, Sydney Mulqueen and Pearl Whitehead.

It was Aileen Woods who came up with the inspired idea of creating a Ballet Guild of Canada, which would create a network of committees across Canada to raise funds (all from private sources) and later to look after the dancers when they came to town.

The group was influential, enthusiastic, but also amateurish. James had been shrewd enough to befriend the Sadler's Wells Ballet's business manager during the company's stay in Toronto; he now sent him a long list of rather naïve questions, including about the role and function of a ballet mistress. In the summer of 1950, James traveled to England at his own expense to study the organization of Sadler's Wells. His main interest in terms of personnel was in a possible ballet mistress on the assumption, as had been held from the beginning, that the artistic director would be the experienced, well-known and handily available Boris Volkoff.

Back in Toronto, Aileen Woods and her expanded committee developed what one described as "a sketchy [organizational] set-up" Among its components: James was to be offered the job of business manager and advance booking agent; Janet (Baldwin) Volkoff would act as wardrobe mistress and be responsible for public relations; Boris Volkoff would be a choreographer. This

last proposal constituted a radical change: suddenly, Volkoff was no longer the prime candidate for the post of artistic director.

Dance writer Max Wyman called Volkoff the right man at the wrong time. He was a passionate and fiery Russian, well-respected for his artistic capabilities but also regarded warily for his temper, for his well-known love of liquor, and, no less, for all the rumours about his infidelities. By early 1950, Volkoff's marriage to Janet was coming apart. Her friends, all of them the city's nicest and richest, gathered protectively about her, leaving Volkoff out in the cold. The marriage ended in September 1951, with one of Boris Volkoff's dancers, Mary McMillan, named as his lover; Janet gave evidence that Volkoff had threatened her with bodily harm. Essentially, Volkoff had made himself socially unacceptable to be the leader of Canada's first professional ballet company—most especially so created for the Canada of the 1950s.

(In fact, at this time a second potential artistic director had just arrived in Toronto. Early in 1950, Gweneth Lloyd, co-founder of the Winnipeg Ballet, moved to the city to start a branch of the Canadian School of Ballet based on the Royal Academy of Dance curriculum. As an accomplished choreographer, and now herself readily available, Lloyd automatically would become a potential candidate.)

There was, though, a potent reason why the Guild Committee was looking further afield than at either Toronto itself or at the entire country. The group, essentially conservative and with a limited familiarity of ballet, wanted what they had seen when the Sadler's Wells Ballet had brought its "white ballet" to Toronto. They wanted, that is, the tidy, controlled, English style, with its emphasis on lightness, precision and speed and with its classical repertoire of romantic fairytales. They wanted, really, not so much an artistic director as a director who could give them, and Canada, a particular form of the art of ballet: the distinctively English form.

The story goes that Stewart James, during his stay in London in mid-1950, called on Sadler's Wells artistic director Ninette de Valois and presented to her a list of possible candidates. De Valois looked down the list, and then looked up: "Celia Franca, if you can get her." Neither then nor later was it entirely clear whether James was asking de Valois' advice about a ballet mistress or an artistic director. Franca herself said later that when James first approached her he seemed to be still operating on the assumption that the director would be Volkoff.ⁱⁱⁱ

That de Valois would have recommended Franca was in no way surprising. She knew Franca, and she thought highly of her, if within certain limits. By 1950, Franca had demonstrated, if not excellence as a classical dancer, then most of the other qualifications required of an artistic director. Her qualifications included intelligence, determination, ambition, organizational experience as a ballet mistress, and as well the mysterious, almost uncanny, ability to learn all the parts of any particular ballet (what she called her "brain box"). A member of the Sadler's Wells Ballet during the war, Franca had left in 1946, and after choreographing two ballets for the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, she had occupied herself with a number of ballet companies and had helped create dance programs for BBC-TV. As for de Valois' personal assessment of Franca, she said later, "From the day she joined the company, I liked Celia. A very handsome girl she was. And she had much to offer. Brainy. Dedicated. Self-disciplined. Well-balanced. Had strength of character and good taste."

Someone possessed of such a range of talents would fulfill the role of bringing British-style ballet—de Valois' style—to the wider world. In an important article published in 2000, “*Creating a Cannon, Creating the ‘Classics’ in Twentieth-Century British Ballet*,” Beth Genne commented, “Dame Ninette was in a unique historical position. She did not inherit a tradition; she created one for others to inherit”. In 1947, de Valois herself went to Turkey to establish a ballet school in Ankara. In 1958, she did the same in Tehran, Iran, sending several Sadler's Wells dancers there as teachers. In the mid-1960s, de Valois' protégé, Peggy van Praagh, became artistic director of the Australian Ballet.

Her “tradition” was the classics such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Giselle*. Her operational method was to establish Cecchetti-schools to train dancers. While Franca herself had not been trained in the Cecchetti method, right after coming to Canada as artistic director of the National Ballet she would announce that she planned to set up a summer school with “the best teachers trained in England where, it is generally considered, some of the world's best ballet is being presented.” Soon after her arrival in Toronto, Franca would partner with Cecchetti-trained Betty Oliphant in order to set up a school for the National Ballet dancers.^{iv}

It is possible, even probable, that a secondary reason persuaded de Valois to recommend Franca to Stewart James and the CBFA committee. Its motivating cause was guilt. In 1946, Franca had abruptly quit the Sadler's Wells company, explaining then and later that after looking over the cast list for the planned premiere in refurbished Covent Gardens, she had been overcome by boredom at the prospect of repeating the same minor role in *Sleeping Beauty* for weeks on end.

Another reason exists to explain her departure. Before 1946, Franca had for five grueling years faithfully served Sadler's Wells and de Valois, performing in London during the Blitz and touring the provinces in over-crowded trains and living in bug-infested rooming houses, later going on ENSA tours through war-devasted Europe. She had done this by filling in for a star dancer, June Brae who, after her marriage in 1941 refused to leave her husband in order to tour the provinces. As soon as the war had ended and the company had moved to its new quarters in Covent Garden, Brae returned to the company. De Valois chose her to replace Franca in a new ballet, *Adam Zero*, by Robert Helpmann that Franca had helped choreograph. In a letter to her friend, Doris Margolis, Franca wrote angrily, “I fear that June Brae will take back all her original roles from me. Well there is one thing I refuse to do and that is to play second fiddle to her, and to anyone else.”^v De Valois herself told Franca, “You are second cast,”—at least according to Celia's first, husband Leo Kersley.

It's impossible to be certain how much guilt prompted de Valois' recommendation. Beyond question, she regarded her highly on her own terms. As much beyond question, de Valois' recommendation was decisive. Franca attended the third Canadian Ballet Festival in November 1950 in Montreal. She wrote back to her friend Doris Margolis, “Ninette has sung my praises everywhere, so all is well.”

There was little doubt, though, that she was the committee's choice. On October 19th, 1950, Aileen Woods wrote to Franca to say, “We feel very strongly that this Professional Ballet Company would benefit greatly by having someone with your reputation and qualifications as its

Producer and Director as well as being its Ballet Mistress. Can you possibly accept this further responsibility?"

Once the festival was ended, Franca gave the press her assessment of the available talent. "In each of the companies in the Festival, I saw one or two dancers who are ready to turn professional. They are at an age when they should be dancing or training every possible day." She added, "I intend to return to Canada if it is at all possible. I love it here and am most anxious to help in any way I can."^{vi}

More candidly, she told her friend Doris Margolis, "There are many people interested in this professional company but they don't get on with each other and all have different ideas on the subject. They are sincere but only agree on one point which is that Celia Franca is essential as director so they are all trying ways and means of getting money so that I can stay."

Franca returned, and she did stay. The National Ballet of Canada was formed. Its, and her, debut was on November 12, 1951, at Eaton's Auditorium. The evening's program comprised entirely dances from British ballet companies, as well as one choreographed by Franca herself.^{vii} Many years later, after retiring, she answered an interviewer's question about those early months and years: "The real problem was the Volkoffs, the Gweneth Lloyds and all those people... whatever was going to be happening, they wanted in on it—and I didn't want to have people hampering me. You cannot have a ballet company run by three people—three artistic directors. I had a vision of what I wanted to do, and I didn't want any outside influences."

She did it, that's to say, her way.

ⁱ The Canadian Ballet Festival Association was initiated in 1948 by Winnipeg's Gweneth Lloyd, Betty Farraly and David Yeddeau and Boris and Janet Volkoff in Toronto.

ⁱⁱ In this document three women, Madame Orientes, Miss W. Canetta and Miss. M. McBurney, were put forth as possible ballet mistresses.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is substantiated both by a conversation James Neufeld had with Franca (Neufeld, 11) and a note Stewart James wrote to Aileen Woods in which he stated that he had written to Franca on approximately September 20 (1950) to offer her the position of ballet mistress and assistant to the director. Franca wrote back to James and amidst several queries asked to know her exact relationship to the Director and the dancers.

^{iv} Franca herself took the Intermediate level Cecchetti examinations on November 1, 1953. Her examiner, Margaret Saul, passed her with the general remarks "well known and executed except for minor details."

^v Franca continued to vent her spleen, in that letter "Can you believe it? Well, unless I do the first night of Bobby's new ballet. I'm leaving. I'd rather starve than be 2nd cast in a ballet which is really nice. The cheek of these bloody dancers. They desert the ballet for years on end and when it suits them they expect to come back to as high a position as they had before. Poor old Franca has slaved her guts out to keep up the dramatic standard in a shit company and then is expected to step down to make room for a shitty dancer who doesn't love ballet at all except when she's fed up with husband and child and feels like a bit of easy money and glory. Why should she have the press notices. She's done nothing to deserve it. She deserted the ballet when it needed her. I stepped in and filled a gap – and that's the thanks I get for it – 2nd cast. I'd rather not do it at all. The regular ballet goers will now think

that I was only the Queen in *Hamlet* and the *Gorbals* because June Brae wasn't there. Mind you, that's just about right but I don't see why the audience should know." (LAC Vol 20/12)

^v Reporting to the English *Dancing Times* Celia was more critical. "The dancers are basically strong and have balletically suitable physiques, but there is evidence of some bad training; hollow backs, over-developed thighs and strained arms being the results.

^v Of the 28 charter dancers, seven came out of the Boris Volkoff ballet school. As well she employed several of Volkoff's artistic staff including set designers James Pape and Suzanne Mess and pianist, Margaret Clemens.

References

Bowring, Amy. Unpublished book manuscript. "*Hopeful Innovations*": *The Canadian Ballets Festivals and the Professionalization of Dance in Canada*.

Genné, Beth. *Creating a Canon, Creating the 'Classics' in Twentieth-Century British Ballet*. *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research.*, Vol. 18, No.2 (Winter 2000) pp. 132-162.

Neufeld, James. *Power To Rise: The History of the National Ballet of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

Rutherford, Paul. 2005. "The Persistence of Britain: The Culture Project in Postwar Canada." In Buckner, Philip, editor. *Canada and the End of Empire*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 195-205.

Author Bio

Carol Bishop-Gwyn is a writer and dance historian working on a commissioned biography of Celia Franca, founder of the National Ballet of Canada. She holds two post-graduate degrees in dance history (M.F.A., York University; M/Phil, University of Surrey, England) She has taught at York University, Ryerson University and the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. She is also working on a biography, *Wilde Women*, about three 19th C. women who left colonial Canada to win international acclaim in their artistic fields and during the process were all profoundly affected by events concerning Oscar Wilde. Bishop-Gwyn has worked as a broadcaster and producer for CBC National Radio and as a freelance magazine writer.

© Carol Bishop-Gwyn 2008