

# EMERGENCE OF NEW DANCE IN OTTAWA

## A CITY AWAKENING 1970-80

By Judith Davies

The social climate of post-sixties idealism and the creative seeds sown during the 1967 Centennial celebrations nationwide saw an artistic confidence in a Canadian voice and identity in the Arts. The 1970's witnessed an unprecedented establishment and collaboration between visual artists, musicians, the theatre and dance in Ottawa. The 1967 unveiling of the National Arts Centre gave legitimacy and presence to a city that, previously, had little artistic stability, particularly in dance.

How this emergence of New Dance awareness in the city in the 1970s grew and flourished was a result of a number of social, economic, political and artistic factors, some of which will be considered in this presentation. Foremost will be the consideration of those artists who were the catalysts.

As a preamble, it should be noted that there had been a strong Ballet presence since the 1940s in Ottawa. Nesta Toumine, formerly of the Ballets Russe, had established the Classical Ballet Studio and had attempted to launch a professional Ballet company in Ottawa without success. The integrity of her work, however, provided a foundation for many dancers who went on to professional careers in Canada and abroad. She was also instrumental in bringing dance artists to Ottawa to both teach and perform. An example was Birouty Nagys, a German expressionist dancer-choreographer from Montreal, who gave frequent workshops to Mme. Toumine's students in the early 1960s. Her modern choreography with these dancers was performed in Montreal in 1965.

The denouement of the story of Dance in Ottawa from 1967 to present draws a strong parallel to the story line of the 1973 book by Dr. Oliver Sacks and subsequent 1990 film 'Awakenings'. Dr. Sacks had been treating a number of patients in New York who were suffering from severe catatonia as a result of *encephalitis lethargica* contracted in the 1920s. His administration of the drug L-Dopa, then in an experimental stage treating Parkinson's disease, saw a miraculous recovery by all patients to normalcy. For a brief period, they were able to renew relationships with loved ones and rekindle a zest for life. Sadly, as the story reveals, each patient one by one became immune to the effects of the miracle drug, and once again lapsed into catatonia.

What conditions existed prior to the 1970s "awakening" and what "drug" was present to facilitate these events?

During the sixties, a number of social changes converged to provide a climate for creative expression. The Women's Movement, and an evolving emphasis on higher education and its accessibility meant that emerging artists and dancers, particularly women, were able to take a no-holds-barred approach to where, how and what they wished to express. Modern Dance was an accepted curriculum in many American universities, and the establishment of same in Canada would quickly follow.

The subsequent youth/hippie movement of the 1960s had infiltrated all aspects of the Arts, and The open-border policy between the States and Canada at the time saw artists able to move with impunity between major cities. Ottawa was not exempt.

A small coffee house established in the sixties in Ottawa on Sussex, Le Hibou, became a major venue for artists as diverse as Muddy Waters to Jimi Hendrix, and a very young Bruce Coburn. Harvey Glatt and his wife Louise figured prominently in the music scene in Ottawa at that time, and Harvey had invested in Le Hibou. The Coffee House hosted a coming together of new theatre and music, both anglophone and francophone, at a time when Quebec was in turmoil.

Among the younger educated establishment in Ottawa, there was a desire to promote this electric coming together of new young artists, and to participate through new ideas in education for their children. What would have been labelled suspiciously communist in the fifties had become an anthem in the sixties. Families were empowering their children to explore their creativity in as many diverse ways as possible.

In 1964 a young Australian dancer, Elizabeth Langley, came to Ottawa after studying at the Graham School in New York City. Arriving at a time when "there were a lot of people looking for something to do", she taught Creative Movement at a summer arts camp. She soon joined forces with Harvey Glatt and was given a job managing at Le Hibou. Peter Jenkins, a young elementary school teacher with a passion for dance, recalls meeting her there. Elizabeth had begun to teach in Ottawa a group of like-minded students, in a church basement, and was also teaching modern dance at the School of Physical Education at Ottawa U. Peter joined with enthusiasm. He was later to pursue a degree in Dance at York University, and travelled with former Langley student Penelope Stella to Papua, New Guinea, to teach and to archive Indigenous Dance.

Elizabeth was a driving force in Dance in Ottawa from 1965 to 1978. She drew on the resources of the artistic community at large, as well as her students' imaginations and creativity. Projection and experiments in on-site improvisation were signatures of these years. Children's classes often included adults and vice versa. Elizabeth observed a tremendous energy and that "many Ottawans were essentially bored, and seeking a creative outlet and stimulation".

Elizabeth continued as an independent, self-producing with other dancers. The performances of "Xochipilli Dance Co." at Carleton University in 1969 for example, were produced in collaboration with Richard Jones, an American dancer/teacher who had worked with Luigi and was teaching jazz in Ottawa at the time. By 1970, Elizabeth had moved into Pestalozzi College, a Rochdale-styled commune/apartment complex on Rideau St. at Chapel. The building had an on-site theatre and a library and was headquarters of GO (Gays in Ottawa) who she recalls had 'the best dances in town', especially at Halloween. Elizabeth's teaching always focused on 'trust and

empowerment' and 'dancing in your own body'. She often taught lying on the floor so that 'students wouldn't copy her'.

Elizabeth's student choreographies were honest and explorative. There were continuous performances of student works as well as her own choreography at Ottawa U, on-site and at Pestalozzi Theatre until 1978.

In 1971-72, a new dance studio opened on Rideau St., the Dance Centre, founded by myself and Joyce Shietze, an NBS graduate. Our immediate objective was to offer classes in both modern dance and in classical Ballet. We were quickly inundated with students of all ages, in both idioms. A sharing of many of Elizabeth's students in the modern dance/improvisation program was mutually beneficial.

The Theatre Department of the NAC established The Student Young Company in 1971-72. Under the direction of Denis Hayes, formerly of the Theatre Department at St. Xavier University in Nova Scotia, the program auditioned high school drama students for its original productions, and toured Ottawa area schools. Having trained in the U.S., Denis was adamant that all his participants, himself included, take movement/modern dance. Denis and his students enrolled in classes at the Dance Centre and in exchange he taught theatre improvisation, and so the program at the Dance Centre grew, Denis introducing such actors as Cheryl Cashman to teach workshops in Improvisation.

Judie Colpman Brown, a former NBOC dancer, also taught and Frank Canino from the Ottawa U theatre program was evident in many classes. Within a year, the Dance Centre was hosting workshops with Judy Jarvis, with whom I had danced in her first company in Toronto, and advanced students were participating in a fusion of classical Odissi and modern choreography with Anjali (Anne-Marie Gaston), an attempt at cross-cultural collaboration. We quickly outgrew the premises and moved to a larger studio space on Sussex Drive, right over Le Hibou!

The 1970s were a heady time for the Dance Centre. Carla Murgia, a graduate in Dance from Temple University joined the faculty in 1973 and choreographed several on-site works as well as teaching Horton based classes.

The National Arts Centre began showcasing more and more contemporary dance companies. However, the most heavily attended events were still those of the large classical companies. Finally in 1973, an attempt was made to establish a classical company resident at the NAC, the Ottawa Festival Ballet, under the artistic direction of Brian Macdonald. The company premiered MacDonald's "Star Cross'd" at the NAC, but the endeavour was short-lived, and the NAC subsequently cancelled the project. The NAC was observed by the local arts community as having lost its focus on supporting any grassroots companies. Indeed, the Studio at the NAC had originally been mandated to serve such a purpose. This perception would re-surface many times in years to come.

By 1974, the Dance Centre was approached by members of the community, with an interest in Dance in Education, to consider forming a semi-professional small group of dancers that would do educational performances primarily in schools, much the same as The Student Young Company at the NAC had been doing.

The Dance Centre Workshop Company was founded by myself and Joyce as artistic directors, and consisted of Advanced students of the Dance Centre and guest artists. It debuted formally at Carleton University with a mixed program of classical excerpts, and original choreography by myself and Leslie Link, formerly a dancer with Paula Ross and Le Groupe. The workshop performed locally in educational programs primarily over the next year and a half with the classical component being phased out and replaced entirely with original choreography in the neo-classic vein, along with contemporary works. The company continued to take tentative steps to becoming fully professional, and with the support of the Ontario Arts Council in 1976 was renamed the Ottawa Dance Theatre.

In 1975 Richard Pochinko, a renowned clown and mask teacher, had been working with The Student Young Company, but was discouraged with its direction. He received funding to establish the Theatre Resource Centre in an old convent, in Ottawa's West End. It was to be a study and resource centre for actors, clowns and dancers.

Montreal choreographer, Linda Rabin, who had studied at Julliard and worked with Batsheva in Israel, was working with Brian MacDonald and Judith Marcuse at Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Linda had gone to Vancouver to teach with Ellen Pierce when she was approached by Pochinko to co-direct the Dance stream with Ellen at the Theatre Resource Centre in Ottawa. She agreed, and the Theatre Resource Centre became a Mecca for young professionals as well as aspiring professionals. Linda Rabin made reference to the fact that this was "virgin territory in the 1970s. The Canada Council was promoting not only choreographers but teachers".

Unfortunately, once again, the artists at the Resource Centre disbanded to other projects and cities. Richard re-established his Centre in Toronto. It had been in Ottawa for one year. Cathy Kyle, a student at the Dance Centre, was granted permission to participate, and recounts that her classes at the Theatre Resource Centre were innovative and challenging.

The Dance Centre continued with workshops, with Murray Louis, and Toronto Dance Theatre which inspired students like Cathy to go to New York and overseas for further study. In 1978, she rejoined the ODT and in the summer of 1980, joined Le Groupe. She attributes this early training in Ottawa "to providing opportunities and opening doors to potential other than Ballet".

In 1977-78 dancers were auditioned for ODT and given meagre salaries for a September to April season. In 1978, Joyce resigned as co-artistic director and I became solo director, both of the performing Company and of the school, renamed the Ottawa Dance Centre. ODT then began a series of educational tours, performances and residences throughout Ontario.

I first met Nikki Cole in 1970 as a fellow dancer with Judy Jarvis' original company. Nikki had been approached in London, England by Elizabeth Langley to come and teach a workshop in Ottawa. Serendipity ensued, and I invited Nikki to teach at the Ottawa Dance Centre and to set a choreography on the Company. Gloria Grant, the Artistic Director of Ballet Ys (also a former performer with Judy Jarvis), introduced me to Gail Benn, then Ballet Ys' Ballet Mistress. Gail was also invited to work with ODT, and moved to Ottawa to take a full-time position with the Company. Ottawa Dance Theatre premiered at the National Arts Centre during the 1979-80 season, with original works by Benn, myself, and Conrad Peterson from Les Ballets Jazz. Ottawa by now had had a resident professional dance company, for three years!

The Legacy of this period witnessed young dancers from ODT and the Dance Centre move on to establish themselves elsewhere. Included are Grace Miyagawa to Toronto Dance Theatre, Sylvie des Rosiers to Concordia and then Le Groupe, Bill Douglas to York University and subsequently Dancemakers and Montreal to form his own company, Ted Marshall to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Michelle Proulx to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, and Debbie McLaughlin to Judy Jarvis. Dancers who had performed with Elizabeth Langley and studied at the Dance Centre / ODC have carved out careers on two continents, the list continuing, to include Penelope Stella (Simon Fraser University), Christopher House (TDT), Randy Glynn (Halifax) and Elaine Rudnicki (Le Groupe and later to Paris). The faculty was further enriched by teaching workshops in the late seventies and early eighties with Patricia Fraser, Pat Minor and Carol Anderson. Dancemakers had also guested with the ODT fall season.

Le Groupe de la Place Royale's move to Ottawa in 1977 was preceded by an established reputation in Montreal, and had become known for its 'boldly innovative approach to dance-making, particularly in the use of mixed media and new technology'. In the mid-seventies, the Company was impacted by what was perceived as a change in support shifting to Francophone companies by the Quebec government. With the support of the Canada Council intact, Le Groupe's transition to the Capital was swift, and their studios on Spark St. quickly drew students to their classes, and audiences to their workshops. Students moved freely between the Dance Centre and Le Groupe for classes.

Audience reaction to Le Groupe's performances in Ottawa was initially mixed. The avante-garde use of abstract music and movement was often misunderstood. Harvey Glatt, who sat on Le Groupe's Board of Directors, mused that "people felt that much of the work was self-indulgent, and they questioned the lack of audience accessibility". However, the presence of Le Groupe provided a vehicle for young dancers from both Elizabeth's workshops and the Dance Centre, as well as ODT: Cathy Kyle, Christopher Gower and Elaine Rudnicki all became members of Le Groupe.

In 1979-80, Elizabeth Langley left Ottawa to chair the new dance department at Concordia University, a loss to this city's dance Community but an obvious gain for Concordia and Montreal.

The potent drug of artistic energy in a new social setting of freedom of expression, coupled with an infusion of funds spurred on by the Centennial through Canada Council and the OAC, had worked! A city that had a history of virtually no municipal assistance to the arts, had developed almost in spite of itself, a strong artistic community and dance presence. Attempts to involve municipal politicians in establishing an Arts policy had failed miserably in previous decades.

Barbara Laskin with the Canada Council at the time describes the city bureaucracy in the early to mid-70s as "incestuous – with no cultural staff and no communication between levels of government re: arts funding". With the establishment of the NAC in the late 1960s "there was a perception by the private sector and some funding bodies that there was no need for a sub-structure addressing grassroots funding, as the needs of the taxpayers had already been met by the NAC."

An example of the City's mindset was recalled by Merle Adam, a former NYC Ballet Dancer and Dance educator raised in, and now teaching, in Ottawa. She recounts that in the 1950s a professional group of actors went to the City to ask for funds to establish a professional theatre company in Ottawa. The City replied "that they didn't do that sort of thing". The group of actors, which included Christopher Plummer and William Shatner, left Ottawa to pursue other endeavours!

Robert Gardiner, a retired CBC producer in Ottawa, describes the early seventies as a time when, he comments, "because of Trudeau there was a new sensitivity to the arts, and the movers and shakers of the City hooked on to the high profile of the NAC. In the late sixties and early seventies, there was money to burn made available to the CBC and other granting bodies were able to expand. The Canada Council established dance grants, there were L.I.P. grants. OAC followed suit with umbrella grants to individuals and generally grassroots subsidies."

In 1977 the then Mayor Lorry Greenberg pushed through council a small grant to ODT for local performances in schools for its spring season. It was a first for the City and a political feather in Greenberg's cap. With the election of Mayor Marion Dewar in 1978, the city's Arts community breathed a sigh of relief. A Mayor's Advisory Group, of which I was a member, was established with a mandate to explore the needs of the arts community and presented a report to the Mayor and council. The document produced was definitive and addressed a number of major issues such as space, a Municipal Arts Council, performing venues etc. One of the outcomes was the transformation of the Old City Court House and Police Station on Daly Avenue into a venue for Ottawa artists. Arts Court quickly became the new home of Le Groupe and SAW Gallery. The presence of Mayor Dewar until 1985 established municipal grants for artists in Ottawa, on an ongoing basis.

The conditions in Ottawa following the ten "Awakening" years of the seventies, need to be further examined in order to understand the significance of that period, which was unique, and its place in the emergence of dance in Canada.

In the fall of 1980 the amalgamation of Entre-Six in Montreal under Artistic Director Lawrence Gradus with Ballet Ys of Toronto, managed by Gordon Pearson took place, and the new company, Theatre Ballet of Canada, moved to Ottawa. Theatre Ballet premiered in February 1981 at the NAC, with Larry at the artistic helm and Gordon as the new manager. Ottawa was now home to three resident dance companies!

After a devastating fire at the Sussex Drive home of Ottawa Dance Theatre in September of 1980 which destroyed all its archives, sets and costumes, the company received substantial support from both municipal and provincial funding, and within three months was able to mount its Fall season at the University of Ottawa, rehearsing in temporary quarters. By the following fall, ODT was able to move into its new rehearsal and performance space in the Atelier of the NAC. In January of 1983 the company mounted a full length original ballet, "Alice Through the Looking Glass" to an original score by Ottawa composer Peter Landey performed by the Nepean Symphony. The work included both ODT dancers and ninety students auditioned from area schools. It premiered at the NAC and sold out both nights.

The Dewar years in Ottawa were kind to dance but there were undertones of dissent both at the Board of Directors level of ODT and Theatre Ballet, and politically at the municipal level. Signs of the youthful euphoria and creative energy, the "drug of the 1970s", were showing signs of no longer being effective.

A new Mayor appointed in the fall of 1985 had different priorities, mainly City infra-structure, not the Arts. Again, Robert Gardiner suggests that "politics had always killed the Arts in Ottawa – whoever was in power politically had a lot to do with the atmosphere regarding funding". With three dance companies trying to retain a foot-hold in Ottawa, petty jealousies began to colour what in the seventies had been an enriching give-and-take between dance artists and studios. The recession of the mid-eighties and its effect on federal and provincial monies, with subsequent fall-out at the municipal level, would also be a factor. Marnie Edwards, a dancer and dance educator with ODT from 1977-84, notes that "everyone was fighting for the same piece of pie".

Diana Kirkwood, who had sat on the Boards of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Theatre Ballet/Ottawa Ballet and ODT, mused that "fund-raising in Ottawa had always been difficult – that the NAC, in the corporate sector's view, overrode any support for local or grassroots companies. It was a constant battle." Confusion ensued within the Boards of the dance companies as to their role – often Boards would attempt to assume the role of Artistic Director.

In spite of five years of touring success under Prologue to the Performing Arts, a repertoire that included works by Anna Blewchamp, Christopher House, Carol Anderson and Serge Bennathan, as well as the presence of former Les Grands and Theatre Ballet dancer Dwight Shelton as resident répétiteur and choreographer, in 1985 ODT was on shaky ground, with government cutbacks at all levels. A controversy within the private sector with a political axe to grind, persuaded the new Mayor and Council to revoke an assistance grant awarded to ODT to offset the cutbacks. It was the kiss of death and ODT closed its doors in 1987. The school, Ottawa Dance Centre, has continued to present day.

In 1989 Larry Gradus resigned from Theatre Ballet, and Frank Augustyn was appointed Artistic Director. The company was renamed Ottawa Ballet, hoping to raise its local presence and support. In 1993, after struggles within the Board and lack of funding, Frank, too, resigned. Within a year the Company folded, and Le Groupe was the 'last man standing'.

Peter Boneham's struggle with both the City and his Board of Directors was typical for companies that had attempted to survive in Ottawa since the 1970s. When the company moved into Arts Court, Peter cites his struggle with the City to recognize that "the grants received by the City were having to be used to offset the larger rental fee for the facility, *from the City*. It was a no-win situation and was abated somewhat by installing a smaller 'Studio A' to lessen the financial burden.

The history of Le Group Dance Lab from 1990 to 2005 has been well documented. The artistic impact was recognized but the financial needs were a constant struggle. In 2005 a search for a new Artistic Director was instigated, with Peter remaining as Senior Artistic Adviser. Communications between the Board and Peter deteriorated – he was often not advised of major Board decisions. He eventually asked for his name to be removed from all promotional material.

In 2008 the new Mayor of Ottawa threatened major cutbacks to the arts. This furthered paranoia amongst Le Groupe's Board. Ironically the financial status of the Company, according to Peter, was stable at the time. He further notes that Ottawa had proven itself generally "anti-art, with little or no artistic conscience". Peter Boneham further chalks up the final demise of the company, announced July 31, 2009, to "an inefficient Board and therefore subsequent administration was questionable."

Echoes of the past were rumbling. A testament to the mindset of the current Ottawa arts policy was proclaimed as recently as a few months ago, when the City proudly announced that it was no longer at the bottom of the list of Canadian cities' per capita funding for the Arts – it had achieved second-to-last!

In the movie "Awakenings" the closing shot is of the doctor and his patient settling down with a Ouija board, which had been used as a therapy tool prior to the L-Dopa experiment. The doctor places his hand on the hand of the once again catatonic patient and says to him, "Let us begin..."

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