

Setting the Barre

Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet tours through the Maritimes this week, with two stops in New Brunswick. While the esteemed company brings its stunning show to our stages, Salon offers this behind-the-scenes glimpse at life inside one of the world's premiere dance companies.

Story by: Georgia Rondos



It was easy to spot the Royal Winnipeg Ballet building from a distance. Four giant banners hang on the outside, advertising the company's upcoming performances of *The Princess and the Goblin*, a full-length contemporary work by world-renowned American choreographer Twyla Tharp; the Christmas staple, *The Nutcracker and Moulin Rouge*, a 20th century ballet featuring long, supple and sexy cancan legs. A work by a contemporary choreographer, new and traditional full-length ballets - this is the variety of style that keeps things fresh, versatile and audience-friendly, and gives this company the esteemed title of being the longest running company in North America.

I was in Winnipeg from Oct. 9-20, honoured and excited to be the first choreographer from New Brunswick to be invited by Canada's Royal Winnipeg ballet to set a work as part of a residency with the company's Aspirant program.

Inside the building, past the box office and into the large foyer, photos are mounted on the wall of the company's founders, Gweneth Lloyd and Better Farrally, and Arnold Spohr, artistic director from 1958-1988. Alongside them are images of past performances, lists of past and present staff, teachers, dancers and supporters that have all contributed to making the company what it is today – a Canadian gem. What a joy it is to come and be part of this history, even for a brief time.

The company's downtown building opened in 1988. It houses 10 studios of varying sizes (including a performance studio), a box office, male and female change rooms for the company, school and staff, lounge areas, administrative and production offices, and a wardrobe department. Peering into the archival room stacks of boxes and files line the walls. According to the woman tending the office, the room is a relatively "new addition to the building and a very necessary one," to chronicle all documents and long history of the company, "especially since the company is having a 75th anniversary very soon." In the staff office, artistic director Andre Lewis says he remembers the "company performing in Saint John many years ago, in a high school or something like that." I tell him we have a beautiful theatre now, it won't be as disappointing. I mention I'm with Port City Dance Academy and he says. "Oh, yes, Liam Caines." And Seth Buckley, I proudly add.

Both Caines and Buckley are former students of the south end Saint John academy. Caines is now a dancer with the company, and will be performing as part of the company's Maritime tour, which stops in Fredericton on Nov. 9, and Saint John on Nov. 12. Buckley is in his final year at the company's school.

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet School was added in 1970 under the Direction of David Moroni, who is retired now and living in Fredericton. The school holds auditions across Canada for its four-year program. Those who make it into the school undergo an annual evaluation for re-entry.

The dancers I am working with are graduates from the school. They stay on to work and perform with the company for a year and then audition for companies.

Approaching a studio, former dancer Caroline Gruber exits after teaching her class. Over a decade ago, Gruber was in Saint John for a memorable performance at the dancing bodies Living Art show.



More than 2,000 kilometres apart at our nearest points, New Brunswick remains very much an active part of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. When teacher Oleksandra Kondratyeva hears I am from New Brunswick, she asks about Atlantic Ballet Theatre of Canada. She knows dancer Evelina Sushko with the company. They trained together at the Kiev Ballet School. Sushko was a few years younger and came to Canada before her, but Kondratyeva danced with Sushko's husband. Now Sushko's husband, Kosta Voynov, also dances with Atlantic Ballet Theatre.

In the studio, Aspirant program director Stephane Leonard's morning class begins a few exercises at the barre. They are a strong and nice group of dancers to work with, but I will have to be discerning and choose the four to best fit my choreography.

For those who don't know the ritual of dance class, dancers usually come in early, sit on the floor to stretch and warm up before class begins. They are then given a series of exercises at the barre for half an hour or more. Usually, dancers then move to the centre of the class and are given exercises and combinations that require more mobility. But this is an advanced group, and after the barre work they sit on the floor to put on their pointe shoes. Their bodies are warm enough to execute sequences that involve bigger and more strenuous movements.

Closer to the end of the hour-and-a-half class the dancers perform jumps and turn combinations, which require more endurance from the diagonal of the room. These are performed individually or in small groups.

Leonard dissects each exercise so the dancers understand how to improve. They each repeat movements several times for him to watch and comment. Leonard notices one of the girls in not pointing her feet sufficiently. He tells her, jokingly, that he has brought his sledgehammer. "If I hammered those toes, you will certainly feel it and not forget to point." Everyone laughs but the message is delivered: each and every body part needs to work at its maximum at all times.

Things are incredibly busy inside the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Dancers of all levels are housed in the building; those within the company, staff, maintenance, the professional division and the school. All of these people are co-ordinated into daily technique classes,

rehearsals, academic study, meetings with teachers, teachers in meetings, physiotherapy treatments, daily duties, etc.

My few hours of allotted rehearsal time are blocked into the week's "Professional Division Daily Class and Rehearsal Schedule." In and out of the halls, stairwells, rooms and elevators on my first day, the building remains an unfamiliar maze.

During my residency, legendary contemporary choreographer Twyla Tharp is also with the company, for *The Princess and the Goblin* rehearsals. It's odd for Tharp to be creating a narrative work like this. But maybe not so out of character, considering that since the 1960s her dance style has been so varied – from avant-garde to Broadway, to Twyla Tharp Dance and the cinema.

The company takes morning classes and then rehearses exclusively with Tharp the rest of the day. This has been its rehearsal schedule for about six weeks.

That's the clout Tharp carries. Had it been any other choreographer, the company would simultaneously be rehearsing material for their upcoming tour and season.

Bumping into Liam Caines after his rehearsal with Tharp, it feels good to see him, comforting, like hearing a familiar voice on CBC radio when you are away.

I asked him what it was like to work with such a legend. Apparently, "She changes things all the time, easier for the dancers, a nightmare for the technical crew."

As a choreographer I can understand that because I, too, am known to change things. In fact, I had changed things upon arriving in Winnipeg. I had come fully prepared and with the intention of creating something completely new. I had researched music for several months and had thought a variety of possibilities for a new work.

Instead, I decided to remount and rework a choreography I premiered in 2009. The dancers' strength, technique and precision would provide the opportunity to take an earlier work further. My first day of rehearsals went well, and we spent the rest of the week learning the choreography. Each section of the choreography requires different qualities and strengths. By the end of the week I know who suits which part best.

One of the dancers had an injury but it wasn't very serious. She could still attend rehearsal to learn and mark movement. Another one of the dancers winds up sick, missing a day and returning to rehearse through laryngitis. Injuries and illness can play a big part in a dancer's life. Dance is exceedingly demanding, physically and mentally, and this is the reason careers are relatively short.

The second week, I focus on developing the movement, polishing and getting the right dynamics, spacing and precision. Stephane Leonard sits in on the rehearsals in order to learn the work as well. I will be back in Winnipeg next May to rehearse the group again, but Leonard is in charge of teaching the dancers in the meantime.



With my medium black, one sugar Tim's in hand, I head for the third floor atrium to watch company class. Below is studio 205, a big company studio with bay windows and what looks like 100 posters of past performances on the wall.

One dancer on the barre draws my eye. Every inch of her body expresses the most fluid and beautiful movement down to the smallest details. It's like a performance. This is superstar Paloma Herrera, of the American Ballet Theatre.

Another morning I watched former Royal Winnipeg Ballet dancer Johnny Chang's company class. There are 24 dancers in the company, stretching their bodies and warming up at the barre to prepare for class. High leg extensions and arabesques, beautiful port de bras, and feet; all movement quick and slow executed with precision and artistry. Oftentimes they stop part way through an exercise to work out a kink and stretch out an ache. A dancer's body is their instrument, and at this level, knowing how to maintain it in good condition is key.

After class, the dancers linger and go over some of the movement they will soon perform. They check their lines and angles in the mirror to try and find the best possible aesthetically pleasing lines from the public's perspective.

Arriving early for one of my rehearsals, the foyer and upstairs hallways were packed with parents and children. There are evening recreational division classes but Saturday seems to be the big day. Moms and dads tie shoe laces, offer snacks and juice boxes, attending to their children's needs just like Saturday mornings at Port City Dance Academy.

Sitting on the third floor atrium, I watch the Aspirant dancers in class with the fourth-year students. Saint John's own Seth Buckley is in this class. He has developed into a lean and strong technical dancer.

A group of people come in to watch as well. A woman comments, "Out of this group two, maybe three, make it into the company," and she looks at me, "Am I right?" Statistically, two thirds of the company are recruited from the school.

We watch as the females in the class perform some of the turns and jumps in groups. The boys do the travel and jump exercises separately; they perform them slower and bigger, more athletic. After class they all linger to stretch and go over combinations of moves, some partnering work and pirouettes.

Another teacher arrives for a rehearsal, and Leonard arrives to take the boys for a separate class. Male classes are generally designed to build upper body strength and bigger movement required of male dancers.

Despite the hectic schedule of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, day-to-day inside its hallowed confines everyone moves so naturally, efficiently and with such ease and flow like a well-rehearsed dance.

Georgia Rondos is artistic director and choreographer of Rondos Out of Proportion Dance Co. and resident choreographer and teacher at Port City Dance Academy in Saint John: rondosdancetheatre.com