

*Alberta dance melds traditional influences  
with a pioneering spirit*

## Experiments in Cultural Fusion

by Pamela Anthony

One night I saw native dancer Lyle Trotter and Brian Webb dancing in the lights of a pickup truck, next to a huge concrete cage and a fire, smack in the middle of several acres of dirt parking lot.

Their shadows danced with them, stretching out to the endless deep blue of the night sky. The drum sounded, and an uncertain circle of people gathered to watch. It was a deliberate collision of cultures, a rough-edged experience that stripped away the veneer of performance and revealed something elemental about why dance is important.

This outdoor installation piece, created in collaboration with visual artist Blair Brennen, was one of the first pieces of performance art I'd seen—and still one of the best—that addressed the unique sense of place, and of scale, that living in Alberta evokes. It also illustrated the possibilities and contradictions, inherent to this place, that exert a unique influence on artistic expression.

Titled *I wanted to know (the exact dimensions of*

*heaven)*, the dance was mostly an intimate portrait of an individualistic character and spirit—romantic, passionate, quirky, bold—yearning to communicate and relate to “the other.” But it was also a clear-eyed examination of the here-and-now: Alberta is home to people unresolved in their coexistence, of structures often ugly and ideas that need to be challenged. Years later, the images and thoughts evoked in that performance still resonate, and are unlike anything I've seen elsewhere.

Dance in Alberta is a distinct and highly personal expression, deeply connected to these nuances of our multifaceted culture. Numerous and complex influences are at play—the dance traditions of immigrant and indigenous peoples, the geographical and cultural isolation from established dance centres, and a still-vigorous pioneer spirit. Yes, the endless sky and expanse of landscape inspire a soaring sense of freedom and possibility. Yet the climate demands pragmatic thinking and no small degree of social co-operation.

FACING PAGE: Danielle McCulloch and Daniela Sodero in Springboard Dance's *Screaming Fish*.



The Shumka Dancers pull out all the stops in *Cinderella*, a new production that showcases both their technical prowess and their Ukrainian cultural heritage.

regional folk ensemble; it's one of the most artistically interesting productions seen on stage this season. The entire full-length production—orchestral score, choreography and design—is original. It is marked by the company's growing confidence in its fusion of the heritage of the Ukraine with a contemporary theatre and dance sensibility.

Gordon Gordey, the company's current artistic director, is the driving force behind *Cinderella*. An alumnus of and long term multitasker in the Shumka empire, Gordey works with a well-established pool of creative talent—choreographers, composers, dancers, designers, directors and coaches—on the “Shumka style.” He says Shumka has always defined itself as a creative, evolving arts entity.

“Like other cultures, we have exciting folk dances of colour, animation and virtuosity,” says Gordey. “But Shumka has always been driven by individuals who have aspired to the art of dance. Every generation of new artists has kept that mission and that passion for dance.”

Dance connections in Alberta can sometimes be surprising. One doesn't necessarily expect to find a link between an avant-garde artist like Brian Webb and an amateur folk troupe like the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers.

But the links are there, in Shumka's commission of his work and in Webb's admiration for the company, which, he says, performs “the most exciting dance in Alberta.”

When the company commissioned Brian Webb, he created a remarkable, dark dance, thoroughly modern in its interpretation of the troupe's virtuosity, Ukrainian cultural narratives and raw physicality. Although not wholly successful—and probably ahead of its time for some Shumka audiences—it was a fascinating experiment.

That's the kind of risk Shumka's artistic team will take in seeking to define their abilities and their style. “What I wish for in this community is a commitment to pushing boundaries. I think that's an Alberta stamp. Any time I hear of an Alberta artist who's not sitting in a mind box, who says ‘This is what I want to express, and I'm going to do it’—that excites me,” says Gordey.

If Shumka are Alberta's folk dance heroes, Brian Webb is probably the leading edge of contemporary dance. A

resolutely modern artist, and an influential presenter, he has well-articulated ideas about the theory and practice of dance. His work is autobiographical, formal, ritualized, and often poses questions about identity and meaning. Webb's adventurous, thought-provoking performances have stimulated considerable discussion and occasional controversy over the years.

But Webb is no outsider. He is head of the dance program at Grant MacEwan College and an active mentor to emerging artists, most recently Kathy Ochoa and Tania Alvarado. His company presents a full season of “new dance” from across the country. In a small market, Webb has surprised a few people by developing one of largest audiences for contemporary dance anywhere in Canada.

Webb often speaks of his artistic freedom in Alberta. Away from “the maddening crowds,” he has had the opportunity to pioneer his own aesthetic, to create away from the influence of trends in bigger dance centres, and to speak directly to his audiences. “Living in Alberta gave me a chance to develop my own voice, develop my own taste,” he says. “I like dancing here—there is somewhat of a maverick quality, and a romance with that. I think [that quality] is respected in Alberta.”

Yet Webb has continually sought a critical distance from his home province. He had a successful career as a dancer and choreographer in New York before he returned to Edmonton to start his own company in 1979. He left again in 1984, to do a master's degree in the U.S. He says integrating his experience outside the province has shaped his vision of what it means to be from here.



Brian Webb, who has developed a distinct voice in modern dance, calls Alberta “home.”

“When I went to California Institute of the Arts, that was the educational moment of my life. That experience helped me create original work. I started doing self-portrait, telling my own stories. And that intensified my feeling of being an Albertan.”

The independent streak that characterizes much of Alberta dance is also evident in Calgary's modern dance community, where a diversity of individual artists has each carved out a niche.

Calgary independent dancer Nicole Mion is a good example. She is a founding member of Calgary's Springboard Dance, an active independent choreographer and a filmmaker. (Her comic dance film, *Belly Boat Hustle*, currently tours the world via film festivals, and she is working on a feature film with Jerry Longboat and Buffy Sainte-Marie.)

Mion says Alberta's independent activity and fusion dance styles are innovations born of sheer necessity. “Here's my theory: we come from a really cold climate, and in a cold climate you've gotta generate your own heat. You initiate and create your own projects because you have to—if you want a show, you make one. No one is going to do it for you. You want a collaborator, you find one. There are a lot of self-starters here in Alberta, and a very entrepreneurial style.”

As Mion points out, most contemporary dancers in Alberta have no choice but to take on responsibility for all aspects of creating dance, from grant writing to production to technique classes that will keep them in shape for performance. Unlike places such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, Alberta doesn't have the population base—or the companies, studios and presenters—to sustain a critical mass of professional dancers.

“There's very little infrastructure in place for independent and contemporary dance,” she says. “That might strengthen you individually, but it weakens the commu-



Hannah Stilwell is one of the founders of Decidedly Jazz Danceworks



Chinook Winds develops the work of a new generation of Aboriginal dance artists at the Banff Centre.

once again on the leading edge. With its base at the Centre, the Chinook Winds Aboriginal Dance Project is swirling with the creative spirits of native artists from across Turtle Island—North America—and beyond. Now in its fifth year, the program brings together artists who are reclaiming and reinventing forms of traditional dance and artistic expression that go back generations. They also

share the sense of discovery, mystery and excitement that attends artistic exploration and experimentation.

This kind of dance is a new and distinct expression of native culture, says Aboriginal Dance Project director Marrie Mumford. “We’re creating new contemporary dance works based on our traditional dances,” she says. “Many of these are from ancient, classical communities; the Plains people have a culture that is thousands of years old.

“I think this project is unique because it’s a true cultural partnership with aboriginal artists from many different nations. We’re self-determined in our cultural processes; we control our creations.”

Mumford says Alberta, and in particular, Banff (“a very spiritual place for our people”), is a fitting place for a renaissance of aboriginal dance. “It’s interesting to look at what is happening in Alberta now, and what was happening in the late 1800s. While ballet was flourishing in Europe, Plains dancing was being discouraged, outlawed. Dancers went to prison for challenging those laws, for dancing openly. As we research history, we’re finding so many stories we’re just beginning to tell. Many stories are still very much alive with the old people. Alberta only went to the reserve practice in the late 1800s, so it was one of the last places for many nations to come and to be a free culture.”

Another ancient culture finding new expression in Alberta is East Indian dance. Usha Gupta is an accomplished vocalist, musician and dancer, steeped in the rich arts of her home in India. In Canada, she originally became active as a teacher, opening a studio for Indian dance and music in 1989. When a local dancer began taking her to contemporary dance concerts, Gupta was inspired by the expressive quality and emotional potential of modern dance.

nity. Still, I think that’s changing—in 20 years we’ll have more.” She points to the tenacity of artists who have already created a foothold for others, who have created “some level of establishment” for dance in the province.

People like Vicki Adams Willis at Decidedly Jazz Danceworks. “She’s a pivotal person,” says Mion. “She’s been around a long time and is very supportive of the dance community; she gives above and beyond.”

Indeed, Decidedly Jazz is one of Alberta’s dance success stories. With a loyal local audience in Calgary, frequent appearances in Edmonton, and an often hectic tour schedule, DJD has consistently forged deep connections in the community with a style that goes far beyond generic “show” jazz. The company creates dance that explores the many threads woven into jazz history, from African music and rhythm to circus traditions. Director Willis and her DJD colleagues are enthusiastic researchers, and they draw a diversity of artists and influences into the company’s studios in Calgary. And as Mion notes, their studio and artists have been a key connection point for many dancers in Calgary.

Mion also credits Calgary’s dance development to Anne Flynn, “a real go-getter,” who started the dance program at the University of Calgary. “A lot of dancers are coming out of that program and sticking around,” says Mion. Also, One Yellow Rabbit, another Calgary company, “has opened a lot of doors, creating their own vernacular with text and movement. They’ve taken their audiences along with them, so that kind of fusion is no longer really alternative, it’s more mainstream,” says Mion.

The dance programs at the Banff Centre have been a key destination for dancers since 1947, when early dance pioneers Betty Farrally and Gweneth Lloyd founded the summer Festival Dance program. Now, when the energetic fusion of heritage art forms and modern expression is the defining characteristic of dance in Alberta, Banff is

And in Canada, away from centuries of tradition, she found the artistic freedom to re-examine and interpret her own classical culture. In her “second life” as an artist, she’s now creating a complex fusion of different artistic



Karrie Darichuk in a moment from Gupta’s *Passages*.

traditions. Her first full-length dance, *Passages*, was a promising blend of influences from contemporary and kathak dance. Her newest work takes this further—she is combining the surprisingly related rhythms of kathak and flamenco.

During a recent studio visit, I watched a kathak dancer and a flamenco dancer clap

and stamp out their alternating and blended rhythms, set in shifting time signatures from four to 12, performed by four musicians and three dancers from various backgrounds. It was a dizzying experience.

Yet deep in this mélange of music, you can literally hear artists speaking—across time and geography—of similar things. Which is, I think, what Gupta wants to reveal. And in synthesizing different worlds, she is finding her own individual voice as a creator. Gupta wants *Nine Human Emotions* to be “a very deep, very mature expression” of the essential human character. “I want to make what is in my mind, in my heart,” she says. “This is very important to me now.”

If Alberta Ballet, the province’s largest company, can be distinguished as “Albertan,” it is in its highly entrepreneurial style. The company was founded by Ruth Carse, one of Canada’s classic dance pioneers—determined, talented and passionate about dance. Now a polished mid-sized company based in Calgary, Alberta Ballet is under the direction of Mikko Nissinen, who has expressed an energetic ambition to put Alberta on the international dance map. It’s not an impossible goal, especially considering the company’s excellent

reception in major dance markets such as New York and Toronto. Despite occasional upsets, Alberta Ballet has flourished over the last decade or so, acquiring a significant amount of new work. Bucking trends, the company has invested in full orchestral accompaniment for its home seasons. This fall, the company launches a festival of new dance, showcasing emerging choreographers.

By all accounts, Alberta Ballet is in good shape, and obviously raring to go. The question is: where? Finding markets to sustain the company as a touring ensemble isn’t easy. And while Alberta Ballet has set its sights on national and international performance opportunities, executive director Greg Epton still laments Alberta’s loss of touring infrastructure.

“Alberta’s professional touring circuit at one time rivalled Ontario in sophistication and collaborative presenting,” says Epton. “Those tour opportunities are gone or under the gun.”

Meanwhile, in Edmonton and Calgary, where the company also acts as a presenter for Canada’s three large ballet companies, attendance is down and audiences are “extremely volatile,” says Epton.

“Bring in a *Swan Lake*, or *Misha* (Baryshnikov), or do a *Cinderella*, and the draw is strong. Bring in a phenomenal program of mixed repertoire—really exciting dance—and people stay away in equal numbers. Still, I know the right production, at the right time, will sell. Managing the risk is the toughest thing.”



Alberta Ballet has sparked praise in Toronto and New York, but still struggles to find touring markets closer to home.

Epton is willing to manage risk in the marketplace, but he still has strong opinions on the moribund state of government funding for the arts. He acknowledges the arts portfolio of Alberta Community Development has not



Independent dancer/choreographer Tania Alvarado is one of Alberta's breakout dance talents, gaining national attention and commissions.

tives. When I ask, "Is there something special about dance in Alberta?" almost every interviewee replies, "Yes. But ..." Regional pride can, of course, obscure as much as it reveals. Dancers qualify their answers, wanting to defend dance as an art form that transcends mere location. And yet everyone agrees that in this place, where there are still more than a few frontiers, dance has developed a distinctive voice. As Marrie Mumford says, "Dance comes out of the places we live, the land, and the people."

Alberta Dance Alliance Executive Director Bobbi Westman says the common thread—expressed through many disciplines and artistic nuances—is "a raw, don't quit attitude."

Whether it's the buoyant, impeccable technique of Alberta Ballet's dancers as they surprise Toronto's dance audiences and critics into ovations, the explosive energy of Shumka as they proclaim Alberta's standard of contemporary folk dance around the world, or the infusion of energy and resources for traditional dance that draws native artists to the province, Westman says personal passion and a dedication to expressive dance culture are both hallmarks of Alberta's dance scene.

"People here—for many reasons—have made dance their own. We've all felt an incredible freedom, and it has had a direct or indirect influence on how we move. Even if we take the same steps, dance here has this incredible trademark, you can tell it's from Alberta—you can see the stamp."

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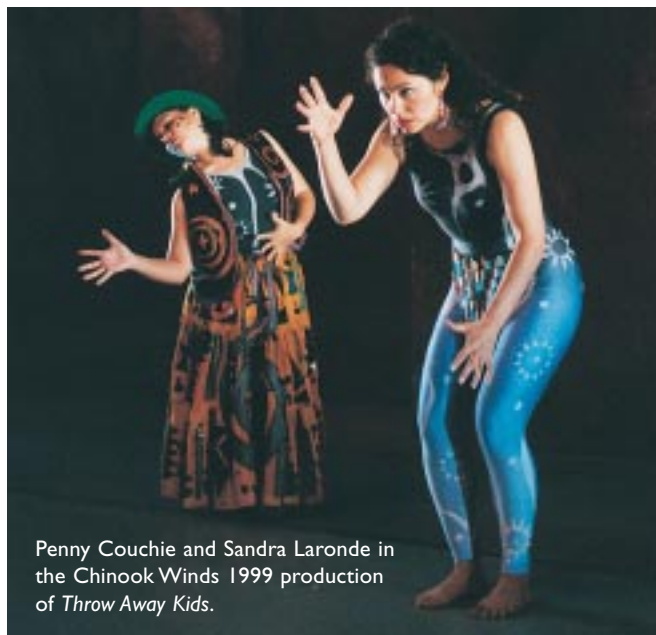
been cut, but says a decade of static funding levels in the face of growth and inflation have the same effect. "It's time the province's strong economy was reflected in the arts," he says. "This government is sitting on billions."

Indeed, while gifted independent artists like Tania Alvarado in Edmonton are making a splash on the national scene, and several Alberta dancers have recently received Canada Council project funding, there is little provincial support for dance careers in Alberta.

Paul Reese, Alberta Community Development's dance consultant, admits it's a struggle for many talented dance artists who might be flourishing in a more hospitable atmosphere. "It's becoming more difficult for touring artists to sustain themselves. And it's a very difficult environment for small groups or project-based independents. Some people fall through the cracks."

But he also sees encouraging signs as more graduates of training programs choose to stay in the province. He thinks a critical mass of dance talent might emerge. "I'm constantly surprised how many talented people are out there, particularly among young people," he says. "Dance is an art form that's always reviving itself."

Indeed, several generations of dance artists in Alberta have helped create a dance scene with few institutions but a proud tradition of individual and community initia-



Penny Couchie and Sandra Laronde in the Chinook Winds 1999 production of *Throw Away Kids*.