

An Albertan in Paris

Mark Lawes looks for Old World theatrical wisdom



Seven days before Mark Lawes left Calgary for Paris, I met up with him at the James Joyce pub. I asked the easy-going founder and artistic director of Calgary's Theatre Junction, what he was going to miss most about Alberta during his 10-month sabbatical. He lowered a frothy pint glass from his lips and answered, "Gerri...my dog." Despite the looming separation—not only from his pooch, but from family, friends and his theatre company—Lawes wore the excited glow of a kid in a candy store.

Lawes arranged the European junket to learn from some of the world's leading theatre talents and to experience theatre anew—*en français*. "I grew up in Alberta and I have travelled some," he said, his measured voice scarcely audible over the lunch-hour din at the pub. "But I want to open my eyes to the world's theatre culture and get some perspective on my work here, how I fit in and how my company fits in."

Born in the east-central Alberta town of Killam and raised in Carstairs, Lawes moved to Calgary for Grade 12 after earning a badminton scholarship from the Calgary Winter Club. Though he fell into the drama program at Mount Royal College "by accident," Lawes went on to study Fine Arts at the University of Calgary. He left the program after three years to "become a famous actor in Toronto," but ended up back in

Calgary as the founding force behind one of the city's most successful theatre companies. Never one to shy away from a challenge, Lawes's productions are miles from mainstream. Instead, he stages obscure and challenging projects, like last winter's *Britannicus*, which *Calgary Sun* theatre critic Lisa Wilton described as "huge and epic and rarely, rarely done."

Lawes does many things that are rarely done. He launched a theatre

company in 1991—a period of economic listlessness and high unemployment. And he's determined to make Theatre Junction a viable ensemble company, with a full-time staff of 12 actors ("I want actors to be able to make their living acting in Calgary," he says), two directors, two designers, a playwright and a production team. Should he achieve his goal, Theatre Junction will be one of only a handful of professional ensemble theatre companies in Western Canada. It's an endeavour he has put more than a decade of his life into, and it's one of the many things he's had to distance himself from in order to pursue professional development overseas.

The trip is Lawes's first extended absence from Theatre Junction since its inception a decade ago, and though he admitted to being a little nervous about leaving it all behind, he was confident the trip would be worthwhile. "It's a young theatre community in Calgary—and in Canada," he said. "There are no masters to learn from. That's why it's so important to go and learn from these great people abroad."

ONCE LAWES AND HIS GIRLFRIEND, Dominique, had settled into their flat on rue Diderot last February, he began working on Opéra de Paris's *Les Boréades*, a grand production with about 100 performers. Lawes functioned as an all-purpose assistant, standing in for soloists at rehearsals, working with the director and other assistants to solve staging problems, and sometimes fetching coffee and water. "Being an observer and assistant is an exercise in patience and concentration," Lawes wrote in an e-mail from Paris, "especially for someone who's used to running the show."

After seven weeks of rehearsals, the curtain finally rose on *Les Boréades* at the Palais Garnier (one of 13 theatres occupied by the Opéra de Paris); and it was an event more than 200 years in the making. Jean-Philippe Rameau wrote the score in the 1760s for the Opéra de Paris, but died while the production was in

rehearsal. Until this past spring the opera had never been performed on a Paris stage.

Unfortunately, the show didn't quite unfold as planned. The Palais Garnier lost power twice during the production, casting the theatre into darkness and sending the cast and crew into a real-life drama of their own. "But the overriding international constant in the world of theatre prevailed," wrote Lawes: "The show must go on!"

He added: "Certain elements of creation are always the same, whether you are working at Theatre Junction in Calgary or the Opéra de Paris: lack of time to create... nerves before opening night, fear of failure, and relief when it all comes together."

After his work with the Opéra de Paris, Lawes set out to explore opportunities in Ireland, London and Germany. He recently made tentative arrangements to work with Japanese actor and author Yoshi Oida back in Paris.

But it's not all work and no play for Lawes, who toiled seven days a week without a vacation during the first four years of Theatre Junction's operations. Between rehearsals and an enthusiastic attempt to learn French, he has found the time to enjoy Parisian culture. "Despite the absence of the natural world," he wrote in a letter posted on the Theatre Junction website, "the coffee, cheese, wine, bread, art, theatre, architecture, music, fashion, and general cultural life keep a skip in my step and my eyes wide open."

Lawes plans to return to Calgary in time to see the first snow fall. He expects his experience in Europe will make him even less compromising in his approach to producing theatre, and says he's getting "itchy feet to start working on a new project." In the meantime, he's enjoying what he calls the pacific pace of Parisian life, despite all he's missing back home.

"As for Gerri," he wrote, "I miss her tons. It would be nice to have a little unconditional love on those days when I've had it up to my *cou* in French culture." —Amber Bowerman