Dance: Quebec well represented at Ottawa showcase

Canada Dance festival in Ottawa provides an appealing snapshot of contemporary dance across the country

**BY VICTOR SWOBODA, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE**JUNE 6, 2014

Karina Iraola in Native Girl Syndrome, by Lara Kramer

**Photograph by:** Photo: Marc J. Chalifoux, Canada Dance Festival

Summer is in the air at last, and with the warmer weather comes a variety of regional dance festivals within a three-hour drive of Montreal. In July, the annual folk dance festival in Drummondville brings another colourful cast of international folk groups. In July and August, the New York City Ballet returns to its summer home in Saratoga, where this year the Saratoga Arts Center also hosts no less than the Bolshoi Ballet. In August, the St-Sauveur Arts Festival presents its usual eclectic lineup, which includes the Martha Graham Dance Company in its first Quebec appearance.

But first things first. Next week in Ottawa, it’s the six-day Canada Dance Festival (CDF), which has been bringing troupes from across Canada to the nation’s capital since 1987. CDF artistic director Jeanne Holmes describes it accurately as the only contemporary dance platform in the country that focuses solely on Canadian creations. In other words, it’s a quick snapshot of the state of recent Canadian dance…

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As a special event, the Canada dance Festival is showing the preview of a documentary film about Rachel Browne, the founder of Canada’s oldest modern dance company, Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers, who died abruptly in her Ottawa hotel room during the 2012 CDF. The suddenness and circumstances of her death stunned Canada’s dance community.

“Rachel came every year to the festival. Dancers from all over Canada at the 2012 festival were so affected by her death,” recalled Holmes, who is starting her third year as artistic director. “She was either their dance teacher or they had worked on a project with her.”

Danielle Sturk, the producer/director of A Good Madness: The Dance of Rachel Browne, danced in a group work by Browne in 1989. Older members of Montreal’s tango community will remember that Sturk came shortly afterward to Montreal, where she co-founded the Argentine dance school/club, Graffiti Tango, a seminal force in establishing the city’s thriving tango community. For the past decade, Sturk has been in Winnipeg making documentary films and raising four children.

Sturk was fascinated by Browne’s own attitude toward raising her children in the 1960s while vigorously pursuing a dance career.

“In a 1994 interview, Browne admitted that she wasn’t a good mother,” said Sturk in a telephone interview from Winnipeg. “I was aghast. I couldn’t believe that someone (Browne) actually said that. As a mother and woman in the ’60s, pioneering a dance company, career-oriented at all costs, having children that she might have been socially obligated to have — what was the payoff? It was an incredible window for me to examine my choices and how I made them and what that means.”

Trained in classical ballet and a freelance modern dancer and choreographer, Sturk stopped dancing in order to raise a family. Her films, which often deal with the arts and with feminist women, fulfill her, though she thinks wistfully of her dancing days.

The Browne documentary includes complete performances of three of Brown’s short works in new staging. Sturk filmed them in venues that Browne never imagined, like a forest and a nightclub.

“I placed them in areas where emotionally in her life story they make some kind of sense.”

The rest of the film has reminiscences of Browne’s collaborators and friends, along with bits from seven hours of audio cassettes of Brown’s 1994 interview. Regrettably, few films of Browne’s works remain, and these have poor video quality.

Along with providing an intimate portrait of a Canadian dance pioneer, Sturk’s film reminds Canada’s dance community of the cultural importance of preserving choreographers’ works for posterity. Like the Canada Dance Festival, keeping our dance heritage is a concern of national scope.

Canada Dance Festival, June 9-14 at the National Arts Centre, 53 Elgin St. in Ottawa. Tickets, 613-947-7000, Local 620. Details: canadadance.ca.

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