A New Dance Partner

IT TAKES INCREDIBLE GRACE AND ATHLETICISM TO BE A PROFESSIONAL DANCER. AND NOW EQUITY WILL HELP ENSURE THE DANCERS OF LES GRANDS BALLET CANADIENS DE MONTRÉAL RECEIVE THE COMPENSATION THEY DESERVE, AND THE WORKING CONDITIONS THEY NEED. LIKE THE MEMBERS OF ALBERTA BALLET, THE ROYAL WINNIPEG BALLET AND THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA, THESE DANCERS WILL BE ABLE TO FOCUS ON THEIR ARTISTRY – AND CONTINUE TO BRING THE ELEGANCE OF THE PAST TOGETHER WITH FANTASTIC VISIONS OF THE FUTURE. WE LOOK FORWARD TO THEIR STORIES OF PRINCES AND PRINCESSES AND SWANS AND NUTCRACKERS, AND TO SEE HOW THEY ARE CAPTURING NEW AUDIENCES WHILE ENTHRALING DEVOTED FANS.
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Equity members can submit letters to the editor via email at Eq@caea.com. The deadline for submissions is Monday, November 11, 2013. EQ reserves the right to edit for length, style and content.

Equity Quarterly (ISSN 1913-2190) is a forum to discuss issues of interest to members concerning their craft, developments in the industry, Equity’s role in the workplace, and the important position live performance holds in the cultural and social fabric of Canada. It is also used as an advocacy tool to educate others about the industry, promote live performance in Canada, and celebrate the achievements of Equity members.

Canadian Actors’ Equity Association (Equity) is the voice of professional artists working in live performance in English Canada. We represent more than 6,000 performers, directors, choreographers, fight directors and stage managers working in theatre, opera and dance, and support their creative efforts by seeking to improve their working conditions and opportunities by negotiating and administering collective agreements, providing benefit plans, information and support and acting as an advocate.

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Front cover and inside front cover: Equity welcomes the dancers of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal! Aline Schurger and Bryna Pascoe in Kaguyahime, The Moon Princess

Above: Robin Mathes in Sleeping Beauty
When digging through my old blog posts, trying to find some half-remembered-something I had previously written, I came across the following preview snippets of (then) upcoming Council items:

- Topics such as protection from harassment, changes in our joining process, protection for apprentices and customer service standards are also on the work plan for the term.
- While Equity has made steady incremental improvements to the insurance plan over the years, it has been a long time since we really examined it in detail, with an eye to reshaping it for the future.
- Member-initiated production is the next major topic up for review, and will begin shortly.

That list got me thinking. I’ve been on Council since 2003, and in that time, Equity has undergone a lot of changes, such as:

- a complete overhaul of our governance processes and member representation structure
- a major membership survey to chart our course for the future
- a comprehensive review and prioritization of membership benefits and services
- a totally revised joining process for artists working in theatre
- a detailed examination of diversity issues, resulting in enhanced representation and responsiveness at all levels
- updating of our complaint and discipline procedures
- our first electronic elections
- new customer service standards
- the addition of a blog, a Twitter feed and Council newsletter to keep members informed
- video reports from our NAGMs
- the launch of online forums for major membership decisions
- a total rebuilding of our insurance plan
- three new/revised agreements for independent and small-scale theatre
- opening up member access to all roles under our largest scale agreement
- new standards for scale agreement and engagement policy negotiation/review

And this list doesn’t include any of the myriad issues and technical decisions dealt with by Council over that time, nor other major milestone events, such as welcoming the dancers of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens into the membership.

Is there more to do? Sure – there always will be. Our industry is constantly evolving, and Equity must do the same. But that takes resources that we no longer have. We’ve reached the point where desire for innovation bangs up the inescapable reality of the following three questions: Who’s going to do it? When? And with what money? What $135 per year used to pay for in 1999, when the rate was last adjusted, now costs about $175, and it’s going up every year.

Read EQ Backstage to find information on our upcoming referendum to adjust the dues structure so that we can not only make plans for the future, but also make good on those plans. Equity only has the strength that you bring to it, and your organization needs your help if it is going to continue to help you.

Allan Teichman
President
Notes from Arden R. Ryshpan

Joining a union is rarely an action that a new member takes for granted. For some people, union membership is consistent with their values and ethics and they support the general goals of collective action. For others, the whole idea is anathema. They are not favourably disposed toward unions in general or maybe they just aren’t favourably disposed toward the one they are contemplating having to join. Then there are those for whom joining was merely a requirement of the job and they didn’t spend a whole lot of time thinking about it as the rehearsal period was starting and they had more pressing matters to occupy their time.

Over the years, a certain amount of time has been spent discussing (arguing?) whether or not we at Equity are a “professional association” or a “union.” In fact, we are both. For the purposes of labour relations and representing the dancers who are employees of the Alberta Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, we are a union, plain and simple. Both of these companies of dancers approached Equity about representing them when they had reached a point where it was no longer viable for them to manage on their own. The dancers of the Alberta Ballet joined in 2000 and this spring we welcomed the dancers of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens to Equity. It isn’t often that an entire company comes in all at once (hence the 13-year gap) and it is an event that requires a lot of time, energy and courage from everyone involved.

While on the surface our central EQ article is about the process of certifying a bargaining unit at the labour board, what it really does is look at the process from the point of view of the people who went through the experience – why the dancers wanted to join, how they felt about the process, how those involved at Equity felt going through the various steps, and who else was part of the effort to get what we needed for the certification application to be approved. It’s a tense, nerve-wracking experience but one that is also exhilarating and rewarding.

I grew up in Montreal and so the first ballet company I ever saw was Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, and I suspect the production was probably their version of The Nutcracker. I recall seeing their groundbreaking production of Tommy at an age that fused two of my great loves – ballet and really, really loud rock music. Both of these were choreographed by the great Fernand Nault. So it was particularly special for me to welcome the dancers of this wonderful company into the fold, and I look forward to seeing more of their work in the years to come.

In Solidarity,

Arden R. Ryshpan
Executive Director
Letters to the Editor

Our colleagues to the south

It was an unexpected delight to read the Flashback piece on 100 Years of AEA in the spring edition of EQ. For most of our existence, we have had a shared history and a shared union; and despite our “amicable separation” (under the terms of which, you got national universal health care and we got nine NHL expansion teams) in 1976, we have remained very close. Although I have never subjectcd Canadian audiences to the dubious pleasure of my stage acting, I have proudly and happily worked alongside many CAEA members here in the States; and in formulating plans to make the government of AEA more effective, I have profited from discussions with President Teichman and Executive Director Ryspahan. I look forward to the next 100 years of fraternal cooperation and solidarity.

With gratitude,

Nick Wyman, President of Actors’ Equity Association

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LETTERS on subjects of concern to Equity members will be considered for publication. Letters must be signed, but names will be withheld on request for those letters that may affect members’ employment. Letters that include articulate criticisms of Equity members or letters that are antagonistic or accusatory, either implied or expressed, may be withheld or edited at the discretion of the editor. Opinions expressed in Letters to the Editor are not necessarily those of the Association.

PHOTO AND PRODUCTION CREDITS


Page 10: Photo courtesy of Dennis Lepsi.


Page 18: Photo of Scott Freeth with courtesy of Rainbow Stage. Photo of Jacob Chaos courtesy of Bernadine Stromgren.


The Honourable Shelly Glover was appointed Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages in this summer's federal cabinet shuffle. As the Member of Parliament for Saint-Boniface (Winnipeg), she was first elected to the House of Commons in 2008 and re-elected in 2011. Prior to entering federal politics, she served as a member of the Winnipeg Police Service for almost 19 years.

Equity Life Member Doreen Brownstone was honoured with a special lifetime achievement award at the 7th annual Mayor’s Luncheon for the Arts in Winnipeg. Brownstone was nominated by Steven Schipper, artistic director of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre.

Larry McCance Award winner Desmond Scott received a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his volunteer work with the Canadian National Institute of the Blind (CNIB) where he has been recording books for the blind every Friday afternoon for 40 years.

Paul Gross has been appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada for his contributions to Canadian film and television as an actor, writer and director.

Krista Jackson of Winnipeg, Manitoba, has been awarded the second annual Gina Wilkinson Prize. The $2,000 prize pays tribute to actor/playwright/director Gina Wilkinson by honouring a female theatre artist who is transitioning from one theatre discipline (acting, stage managing, playwriting, administration, etc.) to that of directing.

Congratulations to all the theatre companies that are celebrating milestone anniversaries this year. This includes the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver, Halifax’s Neptune Theatre, Playwrights’ Workshop Montréal and The Second City – which are all turning 50, and Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary – which is now 40 years old.

Equity thanks Stage West Theatre Restaurants for their financial support of the Stage West – Equity Emerging Theatre Artist Award, which concluded in 2012 after 12 years.

Jennie Apps has joined Equity’s National Office staff as administrative assistant.

Marjorie Chan has been appointed artistic director of Cahoots Theatre Company in Toronto.
The intersection and connection of recorded and live performance

Live cinema broadcasts are increasingly being seen as one of the most important ways to reach larger audiences for theatre, opera and dance. The extended reach of the technology is limitless, making any town with satellite and digital projectors a prime candidate for world-class stage performance. And the audience gets, if you believe the publicity, “the best seats in the house.” What’s not to like about being up-close with an actor, especially when those close-ups, courtesy of an eight or 10-camera shoot, can’t be seen from the back row of a theatre?

Naysayers trumpet that this newish genre is, at best, a pale reflection of the real thing; with a director engineering the way global audiences see and hear the performance. There is a sense that some star-struck audience members will happily shell out an affordable $25 to see Christopher Plummer starring in an “exclusive” cinemacast of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival’s production of George Bernard Shaw’s Caesar and Cleopatra, or Helen Mirren in the National Theatre’s Phèdre, direct from London. Whether the broadcasts pique people’s curiosity to see live productions, or broaden an individual’s views of what repertoire they are prepared to go and see, is debatable.

The Metropolitan Opera’s pioneering simultaneous telecast on December 30, 2006, of Julie Taymor’s production of Mozart’s The Magic Flute, revolutionized the way many people today consume the arts. Given the success of The Met’s HD simulcasts, many other large arts groups wanted in. Audience analysis reveals these screenings have proved wildly popular far and wide. Though National Theatre Director Nicholas Hytner admitted to being suspicious of theatre live on television, he also indicated that his plan to use satellite technology to deliver real-time footage of performances to cinemas, called NT Live, was an experiment. “We were genuinely undecided about whether the experience would be a good one for those in the cinema. I was fearful that these would look like a lot of hammy actors shouting, so the technology and the technical difficulties came second to the theatrical difficulties,” he said (The Telegraph, May, 2010).

No doubt bolstered by the National Theatre’s success, the U.K.’s Royal Shakespeare Company is expanding to the educational market. This fall, a direct-to-the-classroom interactive will stream Richard II to 1,000 schools, reaching an estimated 60,000 students. Extras include a live introduction to the play, a live Q&A, as well as extensive online resources for use by teachers and students.

Here in Canada

The National Ballet of Canada was the first homegrown company (teamed with Cineplex Entertainment) to live-stream a high-definition matinee telecast of The Nutcracker to movie theatres nationwide, on
December 22, 2007. The intent: to lure new and younger dance fans, those far from an urban centre, and those who normally can’t afford tickets. Artistic director Karen Kain was thrilled that Canadians coast-to-coast would experience the Yuletide favourite. But skeptics, like Alberta Ballet artistic director Jean Grand-Maître, weren’t happy about the National Ballet’s foray. “I’ve talked to a lot of ballet companies and we all feel the same: *Nutcracker* is our bread and butter, it pays for the whole season, and the Saturday before Christmas is usually a sell-out,” he said. (Due to the global economic meltdown in 2008, the National Ballet’s live version of *The Nutcracker* for cinemas turned out to be a not-to-be-repeated experiment.)

Admittedly, dance does not easily translate to television or film. When the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB) and filmmaker Guy Maddin made *Dracula: Pages From a Virgin’s Diary* – a 2002 award-winning adaptation of Mark Godden’s choreography for CBC Television – Maddin astutely remarked to *Variety News Bag*, “Choreographers have a captive audience in theatre seats while on television you are dealing with itchy trigger fingers on the remote control.” The RWB’s fascination with the medium continues with a new full-length HD surround-sound movie adaptation of *Moulin Rouge® – The Ballet*.

Last September, the federal government’s Standing Committee on Heritage released a report on Canada’s 150th anniversary celebrations. When he appeared before the Committee, former Heritage Minister James Moore wondered about the investment in cultural legacy projects – an important topic for many witnesses – and their long-term impact, given the fast pace of technological change. “Yes, we want to invest in cultural events and legacy projects like films and documentaries that are important to Canadians, but whether or not they’ll have saliency 50 years after this is hard to say,” he said.

Ultimately, this latter concern speaks to the question of nation building and the arts in this digital age. Peter Herrndorf, President and CEO of the National Arts Centre, recently addressed this issue on TVO’s *The Agenda*, recalling Winston Churchill’s comments from 1938: “The arts are essential to any complete national life. The State owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them.” In concert with those remarks, Herrndorf indicated Canadians want a society where the arts flourish. “Artists define the country and tell the story well,” he said.

*Philip Szporer is a Montreal-based writer, lecturer and filmmaker, specializing in the arts. He has been an active member in the Canadian dance scene for over 30 years. He is the recipient of the 2010 Jacqueline Lemieux Prize, awarded annually to an established dance artist who has made a significant contribution to dance in Canada.*
TETYANA MARTYANOVA AND YADIL SUAREZ
Llerena in Les Grands Ballets’ production of
Kaguyahime, The Moon Princess by Jiří Kylián
February 20 – The beginning
An email from former dancer and Equity Business Rep (2005-09) Dennis Lepsi may have kick-started Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal’s push to join Equity – but the journey actually began many years before.

“We had tossed the idea around 10 years ago, when I was a member of Les Grands Ballets,” says Lepsi, “but the timing was never right.”

The idea continued to be discussed on and off over the years, “but this last time, I got a message from Bob [Robert Deskins, the Dancers’ Rep] saying it seemed like it was time. The situation was not worse, but the issues we were dealing with 10 years ago had never been completely resolved,” says Lepsi. “So I suggested Bob contact Arden.”

On February 20, Lepsi sent an email to Equity Executive Director Arden R. Ryshpan saying she might be receiving an email from a dancer interested in learning more about joining Equity.

The very next day Ryshpan received an email from Deskins.

Some background
Deskins was one of five volunteer dancers who sat on a committee to uphold the company’s “convention” – a set of rules similar to an Equity agreement.

The convention was negotiated every five years by the management and the dancers’ committee, with the next round scheduled for 2014. “Knowing that this was coming up was on my mind,” says Deskins.

The negotiations would take up a lot of time, and the discussions could get heated. But that’s not all. Given a dancer’s background and training, it was hard to stand up to management and fight for what you thought you deserved, he says.

“We start dance when we are really young, and we are taught from a young age how hard it is to get a job – and to be thankful when we have one. Our careers are also so short. With an injury it can all end tomorrow. You don’t want to deal with being labeled a loud mouth or being punished for being negative or a bad seed. It’s hard to stand up and put your neck out.”

Although the committee had won some victories in the past, Deskins felt Equity could accomplish more.

“We weren’t dancers coming together to behave badly,” he laughs. “We just wanted someone to look out for us.”

February 21 to March 5 – Preliminary discussions
“I was delighted to hear from Bob,” says Ryshpan. “The very first ballet company I ever saw perform was Les Grands Ballets.”

While every now and then Equity receives an inquiry from members of a theatre or dance company about joining, not all are ready to charge ahead. Ryshpan says she has to get a sense of where the group is at, and determine if they are seriously considering joining Equity.

“But it was clear from that first email that dancers at Les Grands Ballets had given this a certain amount of thought, and it was not just out of the blue.”

Although Ryshpan knew the dancers were serious, she had to learn more about the issues facing them, and take a look at their current contract and rules. “I have to have confidence we can make a difference. I don’t want to make promises if the truth is we can’t fix the problems.”

There were also legal issues to consider, as each province has its own specific labour laws. So on March 5, Ryshpan brought in Equity’s Quebec labour lawyer, Colette Matteau, who works with many English artists’ organizations, such as ACTRA, the Directors Guild of Canada and the Writers Guild of Canada.

“As the labour legislation and the process for an association to obtain certification to act as bargaining agent vary from province to province, it’s important to check and follow the provincial rules,” says Matteau. “For example, Alberta’s specific legislation had to be followed when the dancers of Alberta Ballet joined Equity back in 2000.”

March 6 – The decision to move ahead
Up to this point, Ryshpan had been communicating with Deskins by email. On the evening of March 6 – at a location away from their workplace – Ryshpan had a telephone conference call with Deskins and two other dancers. This was a chance for them to ask questions to help them decide if they should go ahead with the certification process.

“We discussed their current problems, what Equity could do for them and what the process would likely be,” says Ryshpan.

“I told them they needed to go away, have a think, and let me know how they wanted to proceed.”

The next day Ryshpan received an email saying the dancers wanted to move ahead with certification.
Since most people join Equity as individuals when they sign a contract with a company or for a production, welcoming in a whole dance company is a special situation. “It’s a rare occurrence, and a great honour for our organization,” says Equity President Allan Teichman.

Ryshpan briefed Teichman about Les Grands Ballets’ interest in Equity when she first began exchanging emails with Deskins. “I approached the situation with wary enthusiasm,” says Teichman. “When these overtures are made, you never know how many people are interested. Maybe they are just exploring the situation, or think that when word gets out they are talking to a union it could help them be better positioned in negotiations.”

But after Ryshpan spoke more with Deskins and the other dancers, Teichman says it became clear that this was the widespread view of the dancers, not just three or four. So after March 7, when the dancers decided to move ahead, Teichman brought the matter before Council, as Council must approve any material changes to Equity’s jurisdiction. In addition, Council approval was required for the formal certification process to represent the dancers under Quebec Labour Law.

After voting to welcome Les Grands Ballets, Council also voted on waiving most of the dancers’ initiation fees. “It is common, in these situations, to waive first dues or a portion of it,” says Teichman. “We want the entire company to come forward and join. Anything to encourage it to happen quickly and cleanly is good.”

Legal protections
Once an Application for certification is filed with the Quebec Labour Board, legal protections are in place to protect the dancers, i.e. no changes can be made to the current working conditions, and if someone having signed a membership card or participated in the organization campaign is dismissed, it is presumed to be a reprisal from management for this union activity. Recourses are opened if working conditions are changed or for challenging a dismissal. “This is one of the reasons it is important to get the certification Application filed as quickly as possible. Once it is filed the dancers are protected,” says Matteau.

But at this point certification was still a ways off, and Deskins had to talk to his colleagues about Equity, and invite them to an information meeting in April to vote on whether to join.

The fear of management learning about these discussions and punishing the organizers through casting decisions, or even dismissal, can be overwhelming. “I had to do some real thinking about how important this was to me, and to the future of the company,” says Deskins. “I was willing to accept some ramifications.”

It’s a very uncertain and frightening time, agrees Ryshpan. “It takes a lot of guts to make that first call and then to follow through. At Equity we are always aware that if anything goes wrong, those people are the ones most at risk. We are with them every step of the way to make sure they understand the approach we are taking and the reasons behind it. We want them to feel confident.”
When you think about it – there are less than 200 positions for ballet dancers in Canada. These artists are very vulnerable, and they often feel their career is in the hands of the artistic director. That’s one of the main reasons Equity is there – it takes the dancers out of the front lines. We’re the bad guys – not the dancers.”

“I was very scared,” admits Deskins. “I felt like a spy contacting people under cover. I sent out information and blacked out my name on the email. But the more I spoke to Arden the more comfortable I got. After all, this was not a protest. We were just coming together to get the best contract we could.

March – The communication process
Besides fear of reprisals, things did not go smoothly for Deskins as he got the word out about the information meeting. While sending out an email to the dancers to tell them about the meeting planned for April 9, he deliberately excluded four people.

“I was nervous that they might bring up the meeting around management, even if by accident,” he says. “The next day they found out and were understandably mad. One of them even pushed a co-worker up against the wall – whom they believed had written the anonymous email – and screamed at them.”

Deskins quickly realized he needed to take responsibility for the mistake of omitting the four dancers and sent out a new email apologizing for his actions. He also spoke to each person before the meeting. “How can you be a union if you leave people out?” he says.

April 9 – Information meeting held in Montreal
On April 9, Deskins arrived early to the meeting. He was worried. “I was told by a dancer that only three people were going to come.”

Under Quebec law, if more than 50% of the members of the company have signed up to join Equity on the date of the Application, there is no vote and the association is certified. This is the ideal situation, as the voting process takes time, and also gives management the opportunity to influence the dancers.

When Ryshpan arrived Deskins apologized for the poor turnout, thinking he had failed.

“I could see Bob felt terrible,” says Ryshpan. “I told him this just meant the process was going to take longer. We were not going to stop here.”

The next step would be to organize the dancers into three lists – those who were likely to join, those that were undecided, and those that looked like they wouldn’t sign – and then approach each person individually and try to move them onto that first list.

But before Ryshpan and Deskins could discuss Plan B any further, 22 dancers showed up – including the four that had been upset when Deskins left them off his email. “It was a real movie moment,” says Deskins.

A huge wave of relief filled the room, says Dennis Lepsi. Ryshpan had asked Lepsi to be part of a panel she assembled to talk to the dancers because of his experience with Equity and as a Dancers’ Rep at Les Grands Ballets.
Lepsi told the group how difficult it could be negotiating with management, and how much better it is to have a third-party represent you. “It’s hard to be in meetings with people who have power over you,” he said. “To the dancers’ credit, they held out and did as well as they could for as long as they could.”

Kelley McKinlay and Reilley Bell, who both dance with Alberta Ballet, happened to be in Montreal at the time and also spoke to the group.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect,” says McKinlay. “It turns out some of the dancers were worried about the quality of the repertoire. They thought they wouldn’t be getting certain choreographers if they were part of a union.”

McKinlay explained that most ballet companies around the world are members of an organization and choreographers expect guidelines to be in place regarding items like breaks and rehearsals. “They were also worried that they may get into trouble for joining Equity – that their job was on the line. I told them Equity is there to protect them from that. It makes sure you’re not abused, so you can put all your energy into dancing and being a dancer.”

Colette Matteau and Chantal Poirier, Equity’s Quebec labour lawyers, also spoke at the meeting. “The dancers had many questions,” says Matteau. “They asked everything from how the Equity negotiation process will involve the dancers, to the confidentiality of signing membership cards, and how it affects you if you are not a Canadian citizen.”

It was great having the lawyers at the meeting, says Deskins. “They were familiar with all the issues, and we wouldn’t have to work with lawyers from Toronto,” he says.

Dancer Jeremy Raia said he didn’t know very much about unions before he came to the meeting. “I wanted to know the good things about joining, and the bad things,” he says.

“I was on the dancers’ committee, and I thought we did a good job of getting important things in the ‘convention’. It was fun and educational, and I felt like I was accomplishing something. But I was curious to see if it could be done better, and easier, by Equity.”

Twenty-two dancers ended up signing an Equity membership card at the meeting, and the next day another nine dancers signed, bringing the number of dancers joining Equity up to 31 out of 34. That was more than a 50% majority, so no vote would need to be taken.

Filing for certification
An Application for certification was filed with the Quebec Labour Board on April 10. At this time only the total number of dancers on the payroll was to be included – not the names of those who had signed cards. This was to protect the dancers. Management now had until April 25 to oppose the certification.

Things seemed to be going well until April 18, when management suddenly called a meeting of the dancers. Was management trying to derail the certification process? Were they going to try to influence the dancers so they would change their minds.
about joining Equity? Or worst-case scenario – were they going to threaten the dancers with losing their jobs?

If certification did come up at the meeting, Ryshpan advised the dancers to listen politely and leave without saying anything. In the end, it turned out the meeting had nothing to do with the Application for certification, and the April 25 deadline passed with no opposition from management.

In the meantime, a Labour Board Agent approved the dancers as an appropriate bargaining unit, and the last step occurred on April 30 when the Agent made an on-site inquiry. This was a spot check to ensure the Application for certification documents and membership cards were legitimate, says Ryshpan. “They checked the signatures on the certification, and talked to the dancers to make sure no one was pressured into signing.”

May 7 – Decision issued and received

“It all happened pretty fast,” says Deskins. “Management did not contest – but had they contested, it could have been more drawn out.”

Les Grands Ballets was just finishing up its season when the Labour Board issued the certification decision. The dancers were back at work on July 22 and will begin performing in the fall.

“I have faith and I am very excited,” says Deskins. “I know there will still be issues, but now it will be clearer to both sides what is okay and what is not okay.”

Ryshpan hopes management will find Equity’s involvement beneficial as well. “Everyone needs clarity in the workplace – knowing what you can and cannot do. Management has rights too, and you need to enforce those rights. If you want management to live up to their side, we have to as well.”

Raia is also optimistic. “A lot of things were fought for over the years, so my hope is that we keep going in that direction – and Equity makes it easier for us, and everyone can enjoy doing their jobs,” he says.

“I’m proud of my co-workers,” says Deskins. “They put the drama aside and came together as adults – not only for us, but for the future of the company.”

Valentine Legat as Sleeping Beauty. *Sleeping Beauty* will be the first production of Les Grands Ballets’ 2013-14 season with Robert Deskins as the Prince. It runs from October 10 to 26, 2013, at Theatre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts, Montreal.
The B-word carries a long history. Ballet's formal roots go back to the 17th-century French court, when King Louis danced in works showcasing his political might. In the public imagination, the art form is typically associated with Romantic era developments: women in white tulle and pointe shoes dancing stories of love and betrayal. Through the masterworks of George Balanchine, ballet's women were pushed into the 20th century with displays of breezy speed and assurance, albeit with the assistance of male partners who helped them through their fabulous neo-classical contortions. And finally, in the last several years, a new generation has tugged and prodded and yanked ballet into the new millennium.

In fact, given the amount of innovation going on, Yukichi Hattori, a popular dancer with Alberta Ballet, thinks the word “ballet” should be dropped altogether. “Just call it physical expression,” he says. In recent years, Hattori has learned breakdancing from one friend, tap from another, and roller-skated on stage. “I like finding different ways of using my muscles,” he says, “so I’m not strictly doing ballet.”

The National Ballet of Canada’s Guillaume Côté – celebrated for classical roles in Swan Lake and Romeo and Juliet – believes the popularity of TV’s So You Think You Can Dance is partly to credit for the mixed movements fuelling the world of dance. “Suddenly you have these different styles – from tap to hip hop to krumping – all coming together in this really great way.”

Even the august National Ballet has opened up to new influences in order to balance their classical repertoire. Côté mentions three dance innovators – Aszure Barton, Marie Chouinard and Crystal Pite (incidentally all Canadians) – whose work the company has performed. In Pite’s Emergence, commissioned by artistic director Karen Kain, classical steps like cabrioles and pirouettes are found next to a contemporary urban vocabulary that reminds Côté of the cool moves of Michael Jackson.

Krista Dowson, a member of the National Ballet’s corps since 2002, enjoys the way ballet’s vocabulary is growing and appreciates the modern sensibility of works like Emergence. While only the women are in pointe shoes (it’s rare for a man to train on pointe), there are no pale ethereal creatures or, for that matter, powerful kings: Pite has created a hive of activity for 40 dancers that references insect-like movement and group dynamics. Balanchine’s old saw that ballerinas are flowers in a garden tended by men is nowhere in sight; as Dowson explains: “Everyone is working toward the same goal.”

Left: Guillaume Côté in the National Ballet’s 2012-13 production of Nijinsky
Right: Amar Dhaliwal, who performed with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, recently retired as a dancer at the age of 30
New moves, new challenges
Innovative moves do bring challenges for classically trained dancers, and Hattori’s interest in breakdance and tap are a sign of the times: dancers these days often cross-train. Still, you can’t be prepared for everything in such wide-open territory. The intense spine undulations in Pite’s Emergence did not come easily for Dowson. “My colleagues helped me with that,” she says. “Plus we have coaches who were really helpful. Then I just had to practice, to find my own way of doing it so the movement made sense to me.”

Dowson champions classical technique as a good basis for every style. Sahra Maira, a demi-soloist with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal since 2010 but with over a decade of professional experience, agrees. “Classical ballet conditions your body to have plasticity and coordination, which lets you do other kinds of dance, too.”

Les Grands Ballets’ artistic director Gradimir Pankov favours a varied repertoire and, like Dowson, Maira calls on colleagues when something less familiar comes up. “For me, it can be hard when choreographers say, ‘Improvise! Show me something!’”

This collegial atmosphere is an important part of ballet culture for all the artists I spoke with. It’s what attracted Amar Dhaliwal, until recently a second soloist with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, to the profession. At first, he was more interested in jazz and tap, as well as contemporary and lyrical jazz. “I used to skip ballet classes,” he admits. “Then when I was 17 I took a summer intensive at the Banff Centre and saw the enjoyment the ballet dancers got from their hard work, and the way they interacted with each other.”

Dhaliwal started to see the depth and subtlety of ballet’s high artistic goals. “It’s not just rigid and blocky, it’s not dry,” he says, debunking the stereotypes. Good ballet, he adds, is about more subtle things than the “flash ideas” of So You Think You Can Dance, where mass appeal is the goal. Yet Dhaliwal, too, is inspired by SYTYCD’s stylistic mix.

It’s complicated. After all, ballet companies crave big audiences, but artistic directors also need to nurture their dancers’ artistry. “Sometimes a blockbuster hit with audiences is not considered a success by the dancers, and sometimes what’s a success with the dancers is a huge flop,” says Dhaliwal.

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet’s family-friendly Moulin Rouge® – The Ballet by Jorden Morris was a huge success with audiences, though not with critics. Dhaliwal danced the role of Zidler, owner of the Moulin Rouge, and from his point of view, says: “I had a great part, with a good amount of dancing.”

The ticking clock, the sudden ending
After Dhaliwal reprised Zidler last summer for the film of Moulin Rouge, he retired as a dancer at the age of 30. “I wanted to leave while I feel strong, before I’m forced out!” The parent of one (with wife Emily Grizzell, a former soloist with the Winnipeg company) wasn’t keen to discuss his plans, saying only, “I do have skills outside of ballet.”

Dowson, who’s a year older, isn’t ready to retire yet, but says: “I’ve been working for a number of years on my own side business making dancewear.” She’s been lucky and so far has had only one major injury – a broken foot – but transitioning into a second career is something today’s dancers are encouraged to think about early.

Maira and colleagues at Les Grands Ballets who are also “at that age that’s pushing you to finish” often discuss what they’re going to do next. The 32-year-old felt the end might be near after a back injury last year, but happily, “this season was good.”

“Worrying about injury can bring a lot of pressure,” Maira says. “You have to just accept it and give 100, 150% all the time. Because you don’t want to be at the end of your career regretting what you didn’t do.”

Côté agrees. “You have to forget that injury is an issue,” he says. “There are risks. It’s one reason people love watching us, in the same way they watch an Olympic athlete take risks. When you do get injured, even the strongest can fall into an abyss of depression. Some great dancers get injured and never come back in the same way, but some come back better. Dealing with injuries is what separates the good from the great.”
When Côté was injured three years ago, he was off for nine months. Since then, he’s gained a reputation as a composer and a choreographer, skills that should sustain him beyond his dancing days. Côté also talks about getting into coaching and the management side of dance.

Lorna Geddes is one of the few who has sustained a career on the ballet stage over a lifetime – well, for 54 years and counting. The 70-year-old dance artist joined the National Ballet of Canada in 1959. Today she’s an assistant ballet mistress and is also in charge of managing the dancers’ footwear (including about 2,000 pairs of pointe shoes annually). And she’s still on stage. “I’m not up on pointe anymore,” she laughs, “or in a tutu. I’m a character artist: in the classical story ballets there are a lot of queens in big costumes, big hats.”

Music matters
For James Kudelka’s richly nuanced The Four Seasons, titled after the Vivaldi score it’s set to, Geddes and three other character artists embody Winter. Much of the pleasure in dancing the role, says Geddes, came from the music. “You can like whatever the heck you want – jazz or rock and roll, it doesn’t matter – music fires the imagination.”

Maira agrees, and talks about how dance can bring together music and emotions in a transformative way. “I love dancing [Marius] Petipa classics for the musicality. I enjoy contemporary work so much more when the music and the steps are connected.”
James Applewhite is at the beginning of his ballet career and dreams of performing as Romeo

years – learned a lot about ballet on YouTube. “I would get home from school,” he says, “and watch ballet for hours. I recently discovered Gelsey Kirkland and Baryshnikov dancing Balanchine’s Theme and Variations [in a performance from 1978]. I love their musicality, and how disciplined their technique is. It just sucks you in. There are no crazy extensions or gymnastics going on. They play with the music like they’re having a good time.”

Applewhite, who is at the beginning of his career, proselytizes for the past and present of ballet. “I’m always bringing people to the theatre,” says the 23-year-old. Recently, it was a friend from the gym where he goes to box. “For the record, this guy is a killer,” Applewhite says, “and he loved it!”

The mixed bill – including Kudelka’s 2012 Johnny Cash tribute, The Man in Black, with men and women in cowboy boots, and Balanchine’s 1947 Theme and Variations set to Tchaikovsky, with the women on pointe – featured the range of styles for which ballet is increasingly known.

The exciting urban edge to the most innovative work draws younger audiences, but Côté maintains contemporary style can have a broader appeal when it’s rigorously made. “Even people who usually only like classical work,” he says, “would definitely appreciate the virtuosity and physicality of Emergence.”

Pite’s choreography is challenging to dance because the style is so particular to her, Côté explains. Yet Emergence is a structured, formal work that calls for highly developed skills and artistry from dancers with a strong foundation in ballet technique. “It’s still ballet – ballet of today.”

As Dhaliwal says, putting it in a nutshell: “Ballet is in a tumultuous place.”

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Kaja Pepper’s criticism and essays have appeared in The Globe and Mail, The Walrus, Queen’s Quarterly and many dance publications. Her inaugural issue as editor of Dance International magazine comes out in Fall 2013.

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What is your favourite role?

I enjoy all forms that allow dancers to express themselves, but my favourite is traditional and contemporary ballet. My dream would be to dance Romeo, to show the purity and complications of young love. — James Applewhite

I like it when choreographers combine maybe 10 different styles together to create their own style. My favourite role to date is [the lead in] John Neumeier’s Nijinsky. I got to perform bits from all the iconic ballets danced and created by the great Nijinsky, who went mad – by the end of Act 2, you’re swept away with the emotion. — Guillaume Côté

My favourite role is Prince Desire in Mats Ek’s Sleeping Beauty. Mats’ ballets really speak to me and it was a big honour to be chosen for such an important role. I also got to tell the complicated story with some colleagues who were the most amazing dancers, as well as friends, although that did make the kissing part a bit traumatizing… — Robert Deskins

If I can express myself – if I’m attached to a role – then that’s the style for me, whether it’s classical or contemporary. Though I do like pointe shoes. One favourite role is the devilishly funny Stepsister in James Kudelka’s Cinderella. The costumes are beautiful, the music is beautiful and she’s such a brat! — Krista Dowson

My favourite role is the Mad Hatter in Shawn Hounsell’s Wonderland. Shawn wanted us to go as far as we could with our characters – and the Mad Hatter is crazy, so why hold back? It was extremely physical, too. He’d say, “I want you to lean this far, but if you can go further, why wouldn’t you?” — Amar Dhaliwal

One role I love is the Fairy Godmother in James Kudelka’s Cinderella. My cane is my wand, and I use it to put a broken dish together, which isn’t easy because the magnets don’t always work. I feel such tenderness with the different Cinderellas, and it’s my pleasure to help make her evening at the ball the best ever. — Lorna Geddes

My favourite role is always the one I’m working on at the moment. I have to believe this, so I can get the most out of every role I perform. — Yukichi Hattori

One of my most important roles was Alan Strang in Equus with the Alberta Ballet. The ballet travelled to New York, Toronto and Montreal. It was a big moment for the company and for me. — Dennis Lepsi

Contemporary ballet is where I can most fulfill my own artistry. In my first year dancing back in Canada, I was the lead in Stephan Thoss’ Searching for Home – and just the title had so much meaning to me! The character’s struggles to accept all sides of herself felt very real. — Sahra Maira
Jacob Chaos (Paul Smith) 1963 - 2013

By Greg Armstrong-Morris

“In the end, all we’ll have left are stories and the storytellers.”

When we met at the Banff Centre in 1985, Jacob and I were mutually bemoaning the budding romances we’d left behind in Toronto. His boyfriend, Bernardus, would become his partner in an iconoclastic life-long journey. Mine would become a stalker.

A peripatetic son of Newfoundland, he traveled and studied in Europe, climbed mountains in Turkey, made homes in St John’s, Toronto, Vancouver and his beloved Gabriola, before choosing the beautiful and contrary city of Santiago, Chile.

Jacob was a Buddhist, and sought authenticity in his life as well as in his work, with a curious mind and generous heart. In Vancouver’s booming film industry of the 1990s, he was alternately bored and saddened by the banal and violent scraps L.A. tossed at our rain-soaked feet. With an impressive list of credits earned over a short period of time, he chucked it all to pursue a truer path – wherever that might take him.

This was part of the journey Jacob would frequently embrace – uprooting and challenging himself in his pursuit of a genuine and intentional life, eagerly and unrepentantly, with his eyes wide open. Eyes his Chilean students would describe as “ojos que captan el cielo” – “eyes that capture the sky.”

Two months after a lymphoma diagnosis, Jacob died as he had lived – with dignity, purpose, and grace – in his home in Santiago. It was my great privilege to be with him and witness what I can only describe as an ascension.

His courage and commitment to walk his own path was exhilarating. I loved the man and I will be forever grateful that my pilgrimage has been – and continues to be – so intricately linked with his.
Bernard “Bunny” Behrens 1926 - 2012

BY MATTHEW BEHRENS

After a very extended run, Bernard “Bunny” Behrens, a consummate Canadian theatre, television, film, and every-moment-of-the-day actor, completed his final act on this stage at 8:45 p.m. on Wednesday, September 19, 2012, in Perth, Ontario, just shy of his 86th birthday. His passing to the next stage was peaceful and it appears that the audition for his next role was successful.

Bunny was married to Canadian actor Deborah Cass (nee Bernice Katz), who passed away in 2004. As a boy in Depression-era London, Bunny dreamed from the age of seven of being a Hollywood actor, and escaped the privations of poverty when he sneaked into movie theatres to live out the fantasy world of Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Irene Dunne, and Myrna Loy, a world he eventually immersed himself in for more than half a century – one of the few individuals who can say they had a good life as a working actor.

His path took him everywhere from the Bristol Old Vic to Canadian Players Tours in the 1950s and 1960s, CBC TV and Radio, Toronto’s Crest Theatre, Halifax’s Neptune, the Stratford and Shaw Festivals, and a decade in Hollywood. Bunny, a Gemini Award winner, appeared in hundreds of films and TV shows.

A 2013 summer-long tribute to Bunny, Debbie, and their generation of actors, featuring photos, designs, posters and playbills, ran at the Perth Museum. A special fund in their memory, the Classic Theatre Festival’s Deborah Cass-Bernard Behrens Save-A-Seat program, opens up free theatre seats to low-income individuals.

Following an August 2013 performance at the Festival, Bunny and Debbie’s three sons carried their ashes from the theatre and scattered them in beautiful natural surroundings nearby.

Tax-deductible donations for Save-A-Seat can be made at www.classictheatre.ca (click on Donate Now button) or at 613-264-8088.

Greg Kramer 1961 – 2013

BY RICHARD CLIFF

Greg Kramer: magician, pianist, musical director, artist, director, playwright, novelist, friend, brother, lover, knitter, cat parent, tea drinker.

Greg memorably played vampires, a troll baby, Lucifer; even the devil disguised as a dog over the course of his stage and film acting career. He wrote about Isadora Duncan in purgatory and Sherlock Holmes chasing his nemesis through the streets of London in his plays. He turned his novelist’s attention to the people who inhabited his world: the club kids, the homosexuals, those who chose the edges, those who avoided the centre. He took a middle-aged suburban widow named Adelaide Simcoe, his Miss Marple, on a wild ride of self-discovery. He gave voice to Cherry Beach, his omnisexual hero(ine) of indeterminate gender and helped her navigate the practical demands of the world. He forced Wally Greene, his man behind the scenes, to face his demons, for better or worse.

Greg believed strongly in craft and he practiced it each and every day. As a magician, one of his very first passions, he realized that there could never really be enough practice and refinement of craft. His commitment to craft was brought to bear on every art form that attracted him and was a central tenet to his artistic output. Greg was always busy with something... a half hour of piano practice here, an hour with his cards or coins there, then some knitting, or some writing, maybe some painting or sketching, maybe reading and research... and tea. Always tea.

Greg was a brother, a friend and a mentor. He was generous with his time, with his experience. He knew that we are all ultimately in this journey together and that life is unpredictable, surprising and beautifully mysterious. He believed in magic in all areas of life and lived accordingly. Those who were close to him benefited greatly from this outlook, he was generous that way and we all learned a lot. And now we have another lesson to learn: to learn to live without his gentle, passionate and magical presence in our lives. He helped prepare us for that too, however, by living as he did... fully. So, thank you Greg for what you left behind in all of us. Rest well now, brother. You sure earned it.
EQ: How did you get involved in dance?

Janelle Rainville: I started dancing when I was three years old. I danced throughout high school and university. My first degree was a B.A. in History and Drama Studies, and even though it was not a conservatory program, I learned a lot about stage managing from shadowing and reading and doing. But I was missing my dance. So I went back to York University to get my B.F.A. in dance, hoping to become a dancer. While I was there I worked as a stage manager for the dance department and found that due to my intimate knowledge of the art form and its vocabulary, creating my script and following the movement came very easy to me. By the time I finished my third year I had a decision to make – dance or stage management. Though I loved dancing I knew that I did not have what it would take to make it as a professional. And the passion I had for stage managing and calling a show fulfilled that artist part of me.

EQ: What are the main differences between stage managing ballet versus independent dance?

JR: Stage managing for the independent dance scene is a more “stripped down” approach to stage managing. There are many things that we do not do – make coffee, attend every rehearsal, give notes, prompt, do tons of paperwork. But there are things that we do that you don’t do in theatre, mainly act as a production manager. We become the liaison with the theatre and create the production schedule, organize the technical elements required for the production, figure out rentals. I’ve learned to work faster and more efficiently. There isn’t time to go over something again and again or have a long discussion. You learn to anticipate what is needed.

When I am working with independent dance, there is usually just myself and a lighting designer. We divvy up the work between us and because of my skill set, I usually deal with props, wardrobe, sound and scheduling/production managing duties. With the larger ballet companies, there are many more people to do all these jobs and scheduling falls to a different department. Stage management is also in rehearsal running props when necessary, as there are more set elements and props.

EQ: What do you enjoy most about your job?

JR: I love the high-adrenaline of it. There isn’t a lot of time to get it right. We load in on a Monday, open on a Wednesday and close on Saturday. I get one to two chances to call the piece before the audience arrives. There are no previews. Sometimes, opening night is my dress rehearsal. But I love the challenge. I also enjoy figuring out where the perfect call position is. As there is no text, it is about watching the dancer and being able to anticipate what they are going to do next. And if it is a piece with improvised sections – well that just adds another layer of interesting.

But I really love the dancers and the art form. It speaks to me. I love being surrounded by the music and the movement and the artistry. I guess since I grew up in this world, it just feels like home to me.
Equity has a money problem.

Inflation has reached the point where the current dues rates – last adjusted 14 years ago! – no longer cover necessary expenses. As a result, Equity ran a modest deficit in the 2011-2012 fiscal year, and a larger one this past year. Looking forward, the situation will only get worse as operating costs continue to rise. It is time to bring our dues levels up to date, to once again cover the expenses of the services that we expect our association to provide.

Most members will recall that Council last approached this topic in 2011, in advance of critical need, but the membership did not approve the proposal for a hike in basic dues. Costs are two years higher now and, despite making several cutbacks in the interim, the need has become critical.

In keeping with much of the commentary submitted at the last vote, Council is putting forward a new proposal that mixes a lower increase in basic dues, to $180 per year, with an increase in working dues to 2.25%. Because this change also needs the approval of the membership, Equity will be holding a referendum in February 2014 to decide the matter.

In the meantime, Council will be sending out more information on the state of our finances as well as steps taken to pare costs and increase revenue. Look for this background material and the rationale for the dues proposal in the next issue of EQ and posted on EQUITYONLINE (www.caea.com). We will also hold a series of online forums and in-person meetings to provide any additional information needed to ensure that you are able to make an informed decision on the topic.

The ability of Equity to operate effectively on your behalf is at stake, and it’s vital that you exercise your right to vote when the time comes.

The timeline for the upcoming referendum and member information sessions appear at left. You can contact us any time with inquiries at duesreferendum@caea.com, or by mail to our attention at the National Office.

— Respectfully submitted,
Council’s Dues Referendum Committee
Councillors Hume Baugh (Ontario), Yanna McIntosh (Ontario), Geoff McBride (Eastern Ontario / Outaouais), Howard Rosenstein (Quebec), Allan Teichman (Stage Management) and Aaron Willis (Ontario)

Paying for 2013 expenses with 1999 dues:

When dues were last increased back in 1999, the annual $135 was sufficient to cover Equity’s core costs. Since then, Equity has been providing increasing services, at greater cost, with the same money. According to the Bank of Canada, what our basic annual dues of $135 used to pay for now costs 32.4% more on average. In order for Equity to continue providing us with the services we demand, and to change and innovate as live performance does, an increase in dues is necessary.

Proposed increases:

This chart shows the proposed dues increases. An increase in basic dues to $180 and an increase in working dues to 2.25% will allow Equity to retain and improve its services, benefits and protection for the membership.
What to find at EQUITYONLINE
WWW.CAEA.COM

- 2013 theatre award ceremony links
- Councillor contact information
- Council Advisory Committee information
- Regional meeting dates
- RRSP funds on hold list
- Personalized privacy settings
- Member Only zone (update contact information online)

Service Standards

Equity’s service standards ensure delivery of a high level of customer service to members and others who have interaction with Equity.

The Association’s Service Standards policy is available on EQUITYONLINE at www.caea.com. Hard copies are available by contacting Equity’s National Office at 1-800-387-1856 (416-867-9165 in Toronto).

Save the date
Monday, February 24, 2014
National Annual General Meeting and Honours Awards Event – Toronto, ON

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