

Folk dance troupe makes magic

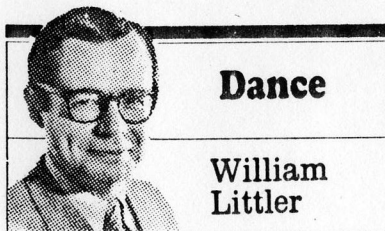
Harbourfront's 1990-91 CIBC Dance Season whooped, stomped and clattered its way onto the stage of Premiere Dance Theatre last night in the personable form of what was billed as Canada's only professional folk dance troupe, L'Ensemble National de Folklore Les Sortileges.

And if ever a national troupe bore an apt name, this one does, since the word sortilege, from the Latin sortilegium, has the same meaning in English, French, Italian and Spanish.

The meaning has to do with sorcery or magic (usually by drawing lots), which itself represents a fair enough summary of what these 18 Montreal-based dancers deal in.

But the fact of the name's quadrilingual sameness also provides the clue to what makes Les Sortileges different from virtually any of the other major national folk companies on the touring circuit.

These other companies, whether the Ballet Folklorico of Mexico, the Georgian State Company, Mazowze or whatever, are all specialists in their own folk music and folk dance.



Dance

**William
Littler**

Les Sortileges, on the other hand, defines itself as a repertory company and on last night's bill of fare (the company performs through Saturday) the nationalities represented included Yugoslavia, Turkey, Russia, England, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, the United States and, if you will forgive its premature elevation to nationhood, Quebec.

It can be argued, certainly, that only by embracing all these national folk styles could Les Sortileges fairly represent the mosaic that is Canada. Unless one takes the view that the only truly Canadian folk sources are aboriginal, our folk culture is everybody's folk culture.

And you wonder why Les Sortileges not only is but has to be professional? With a repertoire of

more than 200 dances from more than 15 countries, its dancers, in successful defiance of folk tradition, are actors in movement, constantly changing roles.

Splendid actors they are, too, and handsomely costumed. Jimmy di Genova, who founded the company in 1966 and remains its artistic director, has clearly seen to it that they are coached in detail not only in the various steps but in the social contexts informing them.

It was fascinating to see in the way he assembled last night's program how common devices, such as the circle and the arm-locked line, keep reappearing in the folk dances of different nations.

It was equally fascinating to see how qualities of movement change in the way these devices are used. The bodies that seemed so proudly erect in a series of Yugoslav dances suddenly became soft and sinuous in a Khorovod from Turkey.

The feet that stamped flat in an old men's dance, Los Viejos, from Mexico, became agents of a detailed morse code of heels and toes in the step dances of Ireland.

Do preferences in folk dance movement reflect national character? Was it any accident that the five men in close formation in the Rapper Sword Dance from England carried their upper bodies in such a stiff, uptight position and rattled off their machinegun footwork from the knees on down?

A program by Les Sortileges feeds this kind of anthropological speculation, even as it entertains by its variety. A pity there were no program notes to provide intelligent clues to the specific meanings of the dances.

A pity as well that the dancers had to perform to taped music (save in such cases as the wonderfully austere Yugoslav dances in which they sang their own a capella accompaniment). But the alternative would probably be financially prohibitive.

Besides, if it is hard to find dancers able so convincingly to switch folk styles, how much harder would it be to find similarly versatile folk musicians? In a nation that is a mosaic, it would appear that you really do have to be all things to all people.