

Travel dancing

Les Sortilèges cast folk-dance spells

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by LINDE HOWE-BECK

Ugh," she said, screwing up her face as if she'd swallowed a fly. "*Folk dance!*"

Right. I thought my dance buddy might like to see Canada's only professional folk dance company, Les Sortilèges, who, after all, have a commendable international track record. Offended, she said she wouldn't be caught dead at such an event. She

Dance

Les Sortilèges are at Théâtre de Verdure Thursday, July 6 to Saturday, July 8. 8:30 p.m.
Free

came along anyway and was converted, enthusing over the "anthropology in motion."

Myself, I'd always thought of Les Sortilèges as armchair travel. Effusive, colourful and joyfully upbeat, the Montreal group's repertoire hails from more than 20 countries complete with 2,000 authentic, mostly handmade costumes. Because Les Sortilèges are so good and because they spend too little time in Montreal each season (they average 100 performances elsewhere), local performances nearly always play to packed houses. The biggest crush comes at the free summer performances at the Théâtre de Verdure at Parc Lafontaine, where this year they inaugurate the city's outdoor dance concerts with two programs July 6-8.

The company is approaching its 30th birthday, a venerable age for any dance troupe. That longevity is a positive triumph for a group that has always had to battle the snobbery of a dance establishment which tends to regard professional folk dancers as wannabe-something-elses. This is a nervy attitude considering many of these groups constantly dip into folklore for choreographic inspiration.

Some of Les Sortilèges dancers do have modern dance and ballet backgrounds. But more and more, the company is going



Folk heroes Anthropology in motion?

abroad to recruit trained folk dancers. As director Jimmy di Genova explains, Les Sortilèges' repertoire is increasingly specialized and requires dancers trained expressly in folk. Canucks are tough to find since there's no professional folk-dance school in Canada.

A former high school teacher, di Genova founded the group in 1966 when folk dance mania was in full swing. Expo '67 loomed on the horizon and everybody was curious about how others lived and moved. Di Genova gave his little group a name that means mystic or sorcerer, honouring those key figures of earlier societies and reflecting his commitment to preserving folk culture and traditions. He had a modest \$250 to spend on 40 costumes needed for the initial French Canadian dances. The next year he borrowed \$1,000 for Ukrainian costumes—the hand-embroidered blouses and red leather boots—a first step toward the company's multicultural mandate. To keep up with his group's expansion, di Genova gave up his teaching job in 1977 to run the company full time.

A typical Sortilèges program is a toe-tapping travelogue. On tour, the company seeks out representative dances. Thus the repertoire is rich in Eastern European dances: Serb, Croat, Bosnian, Armenian, Ukrainian, Rumanian, Polish, as well as Turkish, Yemeni, Israeli, English and Chinese. Its Québécois repertoire celebrates rural, urban and Métis traditions.

Brian Macdonald, whose name is better known in ballet circles, has choreographed for Les Sortilèges, as have Nicole Vachon, Jean Léger and Theodor Vasilescu. Vasilescu's "Carnaval Moldave" (Moldavian Carnival)—scheduled to play at Parc Lafontaine—is a sure-fire hit. Lead by a magical goat with swinging hemp hair and a clacking mouth, it features a lineup of masked and mystical creatures.

Di Genova is typically low key about all of this from his headquarters in a converted Montreal school. He speaks in a sparse monotone as if to preserve his energy for his high-flying company. He agrees that he and his 16 dancers look forward to their Parc Lafontaine experiences because it gets them closer to the public they try to represent—simple working-class people who remember the traditions but can't afford to pay big theatre prices. "Parc Lafontaine is spontaneous. The public is so nice," he says. "Thousands come and they just love us."

There will be two different programs at Parc Lafontaine. July 6 and 7 will feature international dances, including the "Moldavian Carnival" while the closing night will concentrate on Quebec dance. There will be other folk-dance performances at Théâtre de Verdure in July. Montreal amateur groups representing Hungary, Greece, Mexico and Japan will perform July 19 and Boléro Ballet Espagnol will take the stage July 20. ✕