

Les Sortileges

The language of movement, loud and clear

By JOHN LAW
Niagara Falls Review

NIAGARA FALLS - There was a moment when Jimmy Di Genova knew his days, weeks and years with Les Sortileges were justified. He calls it a "souvenir".

He was in Turkey with his folkloric dance troupe, performing Turkish dances. Being a Montreal-based group, it's always a bit intimidating to go overseas and perform dances in the actual countries they originated from. Even so, the group got a standing ovation. And then something strange happened...

"After the show, people came up to me and talked to me in Turkish," chuckles Di Genova on the phone. "They didn't understand that I didn't know a word of the Turkish language. They didn't believe me!

"It showed that they really believed we were Turkish from abroad."

These things matter to Di Genova. His eye for costumes, for quality, for detail, has made Les Sortileges the only professional folklore dance group in Canada. He formed the group more than 30 years ago, and has no intention of handing it over just yet. "It's too soon," he says, searching for words.

It might take a crowbar to pry Di Genova away from Les Sortileges, the world-renowned group coming to Niagara Falls tonight (Niagara Falls Secondary School, 8 p.m.). If mass media and cyberspace are wiping distinction and interaction off the map, Les Sortileges is only too glad to take a step backwards. Back when dance identified a culture, and communicated where language couldn't.

These dances are easy to lose, difficult to find. And once found, it takes a group like Les Sortileges to keep it alive. Which is why any detail, no matter how small, must be preserved. Otherwise, it's gone forever.

"I get choreographers from all over, and once in awhile some of them have to come back to review what we have," says Di Genova. "We always have to check because, it's like when we talk - if you use always the same words, if you're not careful, maybe you don't pronounce them well. Or maybe you forget the real meaning of the word.

"It's the same thing with gesture. When repeating things, it can happen that, little by little, we change things without realizing it. That's why it's important to go back to the photos, to the choreographer or the video and be sure that the spirit, the gesture and the detail is there. Because dancing is a lot of details."

No one said preserving history is



Your passport to the world is Les Sortileges. The Montreal-based dance group comes to town tonight, with its repertoire of 200 ethnic dances gathered across the globe.

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easy. And doing it while offering an elaborate dance show with costumes from 23 distinct origins adds a touch of pressure. Not many groups would try it - not many would want to. The window for error, the temptation to skip the hard parts, is too big. But Di Genova thrives on the hard parts, which is why an evening with Les Sortileges is as much a mini-tour of the world as it is a night of slick dancing. With more than 200 authentic dances in its repertoire, the company is your two-hour, round-trip ticket.

Becoming a mobile encyclopedia took awhile. Di Genova started the group in 1966 when he was a high school teacher, looking for something to fill his nights. With parents from Italy, and family members spread across Canada, his diverse upbringing led to an interest in dance with a difference.

"I didn't have any presumption I would go very far with the company," he recalls. "It was only for culture and for involving the teenagers in something that would be good for them."

During a three-year hiatus from

teaching from 1974 to 1977, Di Genova devoted most of his time to the group, laying the foundation for its transformation to a professional company in 1981. Seventeen years later, it's still the only folklore dance group in the pro ranks.

But with the switch came a whole new system for Di Genova. Not only did his after-hours hobby turn into a career, the pressures doubled overnight. Suddenly, people expected more.

"In 1981, I was very naive," Di Genova sighs. "I said we have fifteen years experience as an amateur company with top-quality work ... but now, instead of having dancers working a few hours, you're going to have them every day. I didn't realize there would be such a difference. The mentality is completely different.

"When it's amateurs, people have an attitude about the company, with the group. But when you have professionals, then some people can become nasty and demand so much."

For the most part, Les Sortileges met the demand. Di Genova started stockpiling hundreds of dances, training an

ensemble of 20 performers. Along the way, he kept adding to the Marius-Barbeau Documentation Centre, a school, library and research centre Les Sortileges established in Montreal in 1977. The centre carries more than 1,500 books, 2,500 dance outlines, and a video library that's essential when studying new moves.

For tonight's show, the third of Niagara Concerts' 1996/97 season, the group starts with four regional dances from Quebec, such as the Captain's Dance (Gaspé region) and Broomstick Jig (Lac St-Jean region). Things then get global, with dances from Romania, England, Ireland, Transylvania, Bosnia and Italy. The performance ends with a showpiece combining seven different cultures into one choreography.

Politics are kept off the stage. Di Genova's love for ethnic diversity is best expressed in dance, not commentary. Even in Quebec's separatist climate, he resists the urge to speak out. To him, it's the dance that matters.

The dance doesn't ask for a referendum or election. "A great work of art is

like a dream," Carl Jung is quoted in the company's programme. "For all its apparent obviousness, it does not explain itself."

"I have my personal opinions, but as the director of a company, I don't get involved with politics," says Di Genova.

An attitude best exemplified by Danses de Glamoc, a Bosnian dance the company will perform tonight. Originating from a small village in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it dates back to the time of Turkish occupation when Ottoman enforcers outlawed dancing.

"When you dance it, you see that five hundred years after, it's the same situation again between Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims. This dance was danced without music because, five hundred years ago, they wanted to avoid the Ottoman soldiers. It's a dance we're going to present to Niagara Falls.

"Somehow, the history is more important than any political situation."

Les Sortileges is at Niagara Falls Secondary School (Epworth Circle) tonight at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$20 adults, \$10 students. Phone 356-4538 or 354-7559.