

DANCE COLLECTION DANSE

dance that lasts



Fernand Nault

Rediscovering Fernand Nault

by Lawrence Adams



At curtain time an enormous four-spoked wheel is dimly seen through a scrim. A procession of monks in russet coloured robes and hoods enter, filling the scene. Slowly, they take positions on either side of the stage. From the orchestra pit, the conductor gives three down-beats – one: the monks (a chorus of 120 singers) pull back their hoods; two: they open their black song books; three: the orchestra plays the opening of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* as the fortune wheel begins to turn.

This is Fernand Nault's interpretation of Orff's "scenic cantata" based on 13th-century songs written by wandering minstrels, troubadours, monks and errant students.

Nault's *Carmina Burana*, debuted at the 1967 World's Fair in Montreal, will forever stand as a milestone for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

In four scenes, *Carmina* was a dance work theatrically

spectacular and intimate, emotionally exhausting and exhilarating, beautiful and disturbing – telling of life's good and bad fortune. Performed to accolades in England, France, Portugal and Switzerland, throughout the United States and Canada, this is, probably, the unassuming Fernand Nault's signature choreographic work.

Nault had been Associate Artistic Director of LGBC since 1964 when Ludmilla Chiriaeff had invited him into the company. This was a transitional period – the company was evolving from a feisty band of dancers into a major ballet force. Nault restaged *Les Sylphides* for the company and set *The Nutcracker*.

Works such as *Carmina* began their emergence in east end Montreal during the roaring 1920's when Fernand was fascinated by a tap-dancing flower seller. He asked the man to teach him – his first lesson was conducted on the

sidewalk. Fernand's sister, Margot, was studying ballet at the Maurice Lacasse-Morenoff dance school and Fernand joined the classes. This led to performing opportunities with Les Variétés Lyriques, a popular variety show that Morenoff choreographed. Under the pseudonym of Bill Watson, and later the more exotic Igor Latasscoff, with his sister Latasscoffa, Fernand sharpened his skills in downtown theatres. As a teenager he studied in other Montreal schools, and after time in the army he continued classes with Elizabeth Leese.

Fernand accounts his "dance genes" to his grandmother Belzémire who married Joseph BoissonNault the carpenter and town fiddler of Saint-Tite-des-Caps. At village festivals she would dance so energetically to her husband's fiddling that people believed she was possessed by the devil. Fernand's first intentions had been to enter the priesthood – but that controlling dance devil carried forward the tradition through Fernand.

His professional life began with a classic "break". American Ballet Theatre was performing at the Saint-Denis Theatre in Montreal in 1944 when a dancer was injured. Anton Dolin, who was guesting with the company, auditioned Fernand. He was on the stage the following night in *Petrouchka*. A six-week contract followed and he was earning his living as a dancer in the New York company.

Born in Montreal in 1921 with the birth name Fernand Noël BoissonNault, when he joined ABT the company directors suggested he adopt the stage name Fernand Nault.

This was a time of the ballet "boom" in the United States. In 1939 Europe exploded into war and dancers fled or chose to leave Europe and England for New York. In the late 1940's Léonide Massine's Ballet Russe and Colonel de Basil's Ballet Russe had re-formed in New York and along with the fledgling Ballet Theatre, found themselves staring each other down. Touring was the answer and the three companies began to crisscross the United States and Canada on trains, playing one-night stands in small cities and week-long engagements in larger centres such as Toronto and Montreal. Fernand was in the thick of it.

This "hot-house" of performing proved invaluable for the intense Fernand. As well as dancing, he discovered that he could easily learn every part in every ballet and was often called on to teach roles and, in emergencies, fill in for others. Still in his late twenties, this was the period of his "empirical" education – the study of theatre, dance, stagecraft and pedagogy.

His abilities didn't go unnoticed in Ballet Theatre. In the twenty-plus years he spent in the company throughout the 1940's and 50's, he would serve as a dancer, then régisseur and then ballet master. Plagued by financial difficulties and company layoffs in the early 1960's, director Lucia Chase asked him to stay on as ballet master, but Fernand wanted to choreograph.

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens had grown from being a television dance company into a theatre dance company by

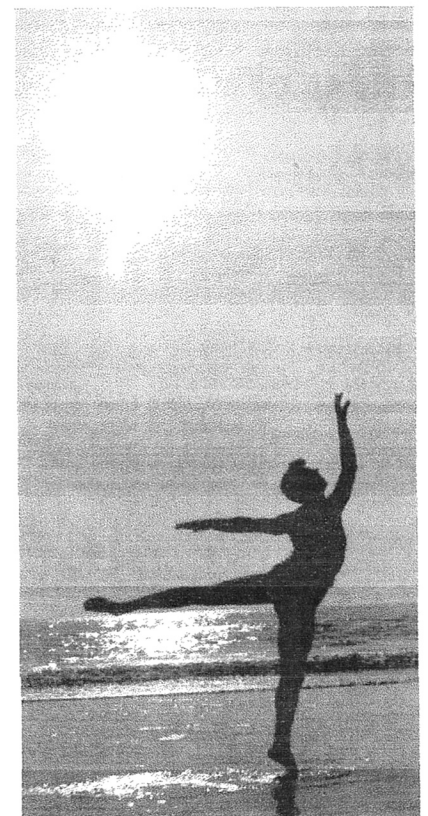
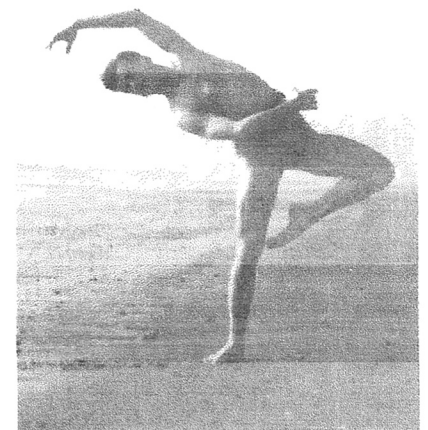
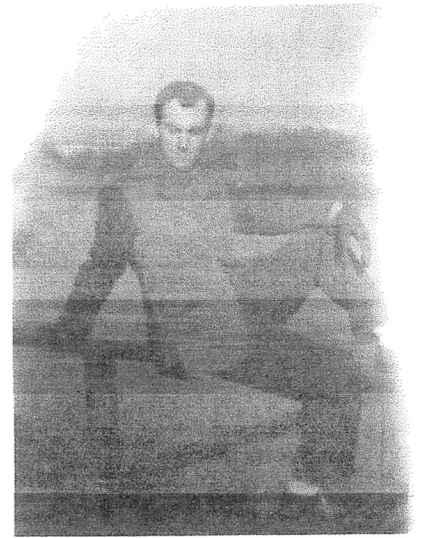
the 1960's with Ludmilla Chiriaeff as the driving force. She had to do everything from raising money, publicity, choreographing and taking rehearsals to teaching class.

Knowing that Fernand had drifted away from ABT, first to the Louisville Civic Ballet and later the Denver Civic Ballet, Chiriaeff invited him to Montreal. He was appointed resident choreographer of LGBC in 1965 and remained in that position until 1974. In twenty-three years, Fernand choreographed thirty-one works for the company.

Fernand's production of *The Nutcracker* for the LGBC's Christmas season was, and remains, a significant success. In September of 2000, thirty-six years later, Linda Stearns called Fernand to say hello; he had just returned from a rehearsal of *Nutcracker's* first Act!

Stearns, a dancer who had joined LGBC in its television days, would later become ballet mistress and in 1978 one of the company's great triumvirate of artistic directors along with Colin McIntyre and Daniel Jackson.

Stearns describes Fernand's influence as "enormous", representing a new intensely creative period for the company. His quiet manner and meticulous mind, paralleled with a ceaseless energy as a teacher, mentor, choreographer and raconteur, changed the working methods, look and presentation of the company. Stearns says, "He was a leader and theatre director and it was all in the



In 1970 he also changed the financial landscape of the company – just in the nick-of-time. Through an arrangement with the rock band The Who, Nault’s production of *Tommy* was staged. This energetic work generated a new, young audience, filled the company coffers and travelled the world.

A solitary man by choice, Fernand was once seen after a company workshop production walking slump-shouldered, alone on the street, “probably worrying that he was a failure.” Subtle, but always present, is his religious faith – threading through his works, playing a quiet role.

Dependably pragmatic, Fernand went about the business of filling-to-order the programme needs of the company. If an opener or a middle ballet was required, they were summarily delivered up. He fully understood the necessities of maintaining a large performing company.

Fernand Noël BoissonNault was honoured in November of 2000 with the Governor General’s Performing Arts Award in Dance.

Honour Fernand we must. Preserve his works we must. Through these works Fernand will live on. Rediscovering Fernand Nault is now the task at hand.

*This article drew on many sources who are owed my thanks: Linda Stearns for her excellent memory; Pierre Lapointe for his book *Trois danseurs intrépides: Montréal (1940 et 1950)*, published in Montreal in 1999 by Les Éditions Francine Breton; Iro Tembeck for her book, *Dancing in Montreal: Seeds of a Choreographic History*, published by Studies in Dance History, 1994; Michelle Proulx, Artistic Coordinator of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal; Marie Claire Forté, Daniel Jackson and Linde Howe-Beck. A special thanks to Alex Pereima for his photographs including the cover image of Fernand in Antony Tudor’s *Romeo and Juliet*.*

