

Creating a living archive



FONDS CHORÉGRAPHIQUE FERNAND NAULT

By PAMELA NEWELL

THE MAJOR WORKS of Fernand Nault, one of Canada's most important choreographers, are now in a position to live on indefinitely. And in this case, we're not talking about pirouettes converted to digitized micro-bytes or petit allegros translated into geometric Labanotation symbols. We're talking about a living archive from which such greats as *Carmina Burana* can be faithfully re-created on dance companies for generations, giving them a life beyond the choreographer's.

Best known as co-artistic director (with founder Ludmilla Chiriaeff) and resident choreographer for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens* (LGBC), Montréal native Nault produced a formidable body of work during the sixties and seventies. Several of his spectacular productions, including *Carmina Burana* at Expo 67, a ballet rendition of rock band The Who's *Tommy*, and the magnificent *Symphony of Psalms* performed in the nave of Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montréal, helped launch the company to international status. His works are very much alive in the company's repertory and he continues his affiliation as Choreographer Emeritus.

At first uncomfortable with the idea of preserving his works, Nault now makes no apologies about his change of heart when he speaks to all dance lovers: "Wake up and realize that such a movement would benefit Canadian culture." After over ten years of personal reflection and legal consultation, Fonds chorégraphique Fernand Nault (FCFN), a trust

with his choreography as intellectual property, was established in 2003.

With Nault at the helm assisted by his designated trustee André Laprise, the FCFN trust operates essentially as a small business, licensing Nault's works to interested ballet companies around the world. Now eighty-four and stricken with Parkinson's disease, Nault doesn't travel but is still very active in coordinating administrative decisions and even making small changes to his choreography during reproductions. When Nault passes on, however, his entire repertory will be transferred to Laprise. Nault's assistant for over twenty years and a most ardent supporter, Laprise will be solely responsible for continuing to fulfill requests for the ballets and for maintaining the integrity of the work. Nault's tangible artifacts, such as photos, slides, letters and any other ephemera not needed to reproduce works, will be donated to the Québec National Archives.

Laprise was not only influential in initially suggesting that Nault consider preserving his work many years ago; his valued knowledge of the works became a deciding factor for Nault to go ahead with the trust. Nault was reluctant to leave his works to the discretion of a board or a group of individuals, as is the case with the trusts for George Balanchine's and Antony Tudor's works. He felt that when a board is involved, there is potential for discord. As well, board members can change, creating gaps in the transfer of knowledge. Having

honed a deep sensitivity for Nault's aesthetic over many years, Laprise offered "the kind of quality that I was looking for," explains Nault. Judging from Laprise's hectic seven-day-a-week schedule as a teacher, dance school and summer camp director, ballet master and member of several boards, Nault not only recognized his discerning artistic eye, but his organizational and administrative capacities as well.

Laprise describes himself as someone who likes to "keep track of things". As his family's self-appointed archivist, he's always collecting and saving the family photos, dishes and artifacts. A late starter in dance, Laprise attended L'École Supérieure des Grands Ballets Canadiens but was plagued with injuries. In the mid-seventies, while still a student, he found himself thrust into the position of makeshift assistant to Nault during the staging of his monumental *Nutcracker*. Laprise recalls sitting between Linda Stearns, former ballet mistress and co-artistic director of LGBC, and Nault: "They were shooting me notes" from both directions, he says, adding that he "didn't know what he was doing", but did know that this was something he enjoyed and he wanted to do more.

After graduating from the pre-professional program of L'École Supérieure and collecting some professional experience on stage, he recognized that, "I'm really a backstage person." He realized that his calling was as a ballet master: "Everything about rehearsal always fascinated me. Those skills aren't something you can study in school or in books. You learn them from person to person."

On the practical and legal levels, the preservation process happened in several stages. At first in 1990, Nault simply bequeathed the works to Laprise in his will. This initial gesture began a formal and informal process of making sure that Laprise knew all aspects of each choreographic work that could potentially be remounted. Having never danced in Nault's works, Laprise has taken every opportunity over the last fifteen years to work at Nault's side.

As a grant recipient, Laprise travelled to Washington, DC, with Nault in 1990 to stage *Carmina Burana* on the Washington Ballet. He remembers "following him like a shadow" noting every detail in his body and on paper. Other opportunities in the United States followed, as well as in France, Korea and at LGBC. Some pieces that have not been remounted in recent years, such as Laprise's sublime favourite *Symphony of Psalms*, he learned in Nault's living room as Nault and he painstakingly combed through the thirteen dancers' parts from video.

Nault and Laprise complement each other well. Nault is reflective and instinctive, keeping everything in his head, while Laprise is meticulously organized and able to record artistic direction and production requirements in clear systems of documentation. Since 1997, Laprise has been travelling on his own to mount productions.

After discovering somewhat accidentally that the legal stipulations in Nault's will were not substantial or rigorous enough to ensure that preservation would be carried out according to his wishes, Nault, aided by Laprise, enlisted legal advice. Finding no precedent in Canada, they looked to the structures set up by choreographers such as José Limón, Balanchine and, in particular, Tudor. However, since these trusts were structured around a board, they found themselves starting from scratch to a great extent. After a couple of years of working out the legal details, Nault and Laprise are satisfied with the mechanisms in place and feel that other choreographers in Canada could benefit from their process.

For Laprise, he feels sincerely privileged to be entrusted with carrying his mentor's remarkable works into the future. In an art form in which execution is so inextricably bound up with interpretation, Laprise feels that Nault's works offer many possibilities for nuance and subtlety with each new dancer's embodiment. For Nault, "I feel rewarded to see my choreography done by other companies. It always brings a new interpretation." ~

Sommaire

Longtemps codirecteur artistique des Grands Ballets Canadiens et maintenant chorégraphe attiré, Fernand Nault a créé un corpus imposant de ballets. Aujourd'hui, il a quatre-vingt-quatre ans et il est atteint de la maladie de Parkinson. Au moyen de la création du Fonds chorégraphique Fernand Nault (FCFN), il a confié son héritage chorégraphique officiellement à André Laprise. La chorégraphie de Nault constitue la propriété intellectuelle du FCFN et Laprise en est le fiduciaire. Au milieu des années 1970, lorsqu'il étudiait à l'École supérieure des Grands Ballets Canadiens, Laprise est tombé sur le rôle d'assistant de fortune à Nault lors de la mise en scène du monumental *Casse-Noisette*. Bien qu'il ait été interprète professionnel pendant quelque temps, Laprise n'a jamais dansé dans les ballets de Nault. Depuis les quinze dernières années, il a profité de toutes les occasions possibles pour travailler auprès de Nault lors de reprises de ses œuvres et il a regardé des vidéos avec le chorégraphe pour apprendre de nombreux rôles. Au décès de Nault, Laprise sera entièrement responsable de répondre aux demandes de reprise de ses ballets et d'assurer l'intégrité de son œuvre. A priori mal à l'aise avec la préservation de son œuvre, Nault ne s'excuse pas d'avoir changé son fusil d'épaule lorsqu'il s'adresse à tous les amateurs de la danse : « Comprenez que la culture canadienne profiterait d'un tel mouvement. » ~

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Fernand Nault's version of *The Nutcracker* has been performed by LGBCM since 1964. It runs from December 11th through 30th at Place des Arts, Montréal.

*Les Grands Ballets Canadiens has since changed its name to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal. In 1980, L'École Supérieure des Grands Ballets Canadiens became L'École supérieure de danse du Québec and, in 2003, became L'École national de ballet contemporain.

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André Laprise / Photo by Mathieu Girard

Members of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal in *Casse-Noisette/The Nutcracker* by Fernand Nault / Photo by Roland Larocque

Fernand Nault / Photo by Michael Sobodan