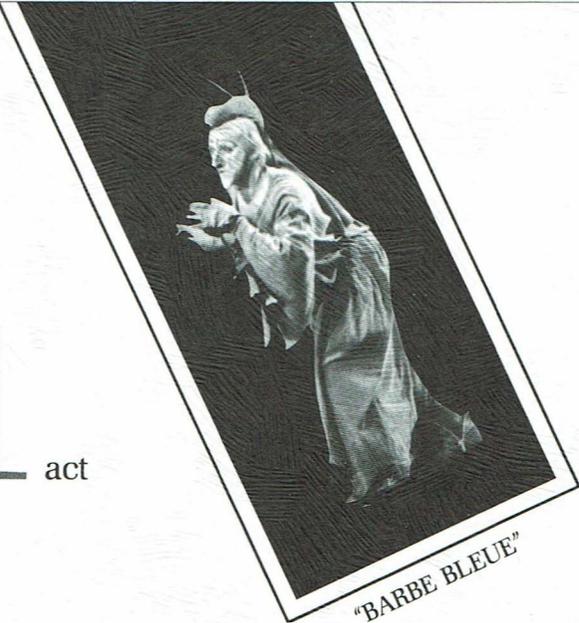


1 act



Speaking with verbal and emotional refinement, gentle calm, and a modesty that nevertheless does not conceal great inner depth, Fernand Nault tells the story of his life. In his narrative, the events follow from one another, naturally and smoothly. They seem almost to arise by chance. But make no mistake: a career this exceptional cannot be the result of pure coincidence. A tremendous passion, to which he has always been totally receptive, has made possible what initially seemed to be impossible, to belong in the realm of dreams.

The Quebec of the 1930s, and the rest of Canada, for that matter, was a wasteland as far as ballet was concerned. There was no professional company anywhere, few touring companies, a mere handful of ballet schools, and a deep-rooted prejudice against dancers. Moreover, dance in general was the subject of a religious prohibition. How, in such surroundings, could a teenager from a poor family in Montreal's Hochelaga-Maisonneuve district develop such a taste for dancing that he wanted to make it his career?

"I was strongly influenced by my grandmother. She loved social dancing and did a lot of it, even at the expense of her reputation. I also had a fondness for the theatre: putting on a make-believe mass was theatre to me!" A French film, *L'étoile de Valencia*, in which Birgit Helm danced a tango, was the trigger. It was love at first sight.

While he could afford five cents to go to the movies, young Fernand did not have the means to pay for dancing lessons. Then he met Raoul Leblanc, a flower seller at the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve market, and a tap dancer. He offered to give the teenager lessons for a few dollars. The first class took place on the sidewalk on Haig Street, as Raoul's father refused to lend them his living room. "I immediately realized that I had a natural sense of rhythm."

Raoul steered Fernand towards the Maurice Morenoff dance school. "It was actually Maurice Lacasse and his French wife,

2

act



"PÉTROUCHKA"

Carmen Morenoff. That's where I discovered ballet which, until then, hadn't even existed for me." Once again, love at first sight.

His family, as was to be expected, took it badly. Nault's mother was more worried than anything else; she did not see how he could make a career of it. He earned his weekly dancing lesson by selling flowers with Raoul Leblanc. "I dreamt of nothing but dance. Those years were really tough, because we were so poor."

In 1942, Fernand Nault was drafted, but was declared unfit for service on account of an illness. His mother, by now widowed and the sole support of his sister, gave him three months to find a job in ballet. Nault went to New York to knock on the doors of the only two professional companies in North America: the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the American Ballet Theatre. He returned to Montreal with a vague promise of a date with the ABT, which was to be appearing soon in Montreal. When the troupe came to town, Nault took some lessons from Anton Dolin, a principal dancer with the ABT. One night, during a performance, one of the dancers was injured. Rosella Hightower, who taught with Dolin, urged Nault to try out at the audition for a replacement. He came away with a six-week engagement in the corps de ballet for the performances in Montreal, Boston and at the Metropolitan in New York. He made his debut as a professional dancer in the mazurka in the last act of *Sleeping Beauty*. Once he got to New York, he was invited to complete the season with the ABT. He stayed for 21 years, from 1944 to 1965.

One memory in particular stands out from the beginning of this prestigious career. In 1945, the American Ballet Theatre had commissioned the sets and costumes for Stravinsky's *Firebird* from Marc Chagall. At the dress rehearsal, the painter realized that the costume to be worn by Fernand Nault had not been designed. He then proceeded to paint the costume right on the dancer's body. Not many dancers can boast of having been a living Chagall!

Nault had a hectic life with the American Ballet Theatre. In New

3 act



York and on tour, his passion for dance grew deeper. It was one discovery after another. "We were sometimes on the road for eight months at a time. The U.S. tours often moved at the frantic rate of a different town every night. We danced on the most awful floors, but I was lucky enough to escape serious injury. The European tours lasted five, six months, at a slower pace, so we were able to do a little sightseeing. We travelled quite readily in those days. I was around the world several times."

Fernand Nault progressed within the American Ballet Theatre without interruption. He quite naturally moved from the most physically demanding roles to the character parts, the mimed parts, and then the duties of ballet master. His last four years, from 1960 to 1964, he was co-director of the ABT School.

Choreography also became a natural part of his career. "At that time, there was no school of choreography, only a few leading choreographers that you had to observe and study. There was no young talent being developed. It was in Montreal, in the early days of television, that I created my first choreography, at the request of Elizabeth Leese. The ballet was Slaughter on Tenth Avenue by Richard Rodgers." In 1960, the Civic Ballet, a small company in Louisville, Kentucky, hired him as a choreographer. That was where he designed his first version of Carmina Burana, and many other works.

How did he come to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens? "By a happy turn of events. A friend of mine from the Stuttgart Ballet, who was in Montreal to dance in Romeo and Juliet, introduced me to Ludmilla Chiriaeff. Madame Chiriaeff asked me for a choreography, and I offered her The Nutcracker." This ballet was first performed at Place des Arts in 1964. Christmas 1989 marked the 25th anniversary of the production. Such longevity is not exactly restful, though. "It presents the challenge of adapting and innovating, while still keeping the magic, year after year." Fernand Nault was quickly won

4 act



“ LA FILLE MAL GARDÉE ”

over by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. “I was very impressed by the artistic sense and the quality of work brought to the company by Madame Chiriaeff. I thought it would be more interesting to choreograph in a young, developing company. In 1965, Fernand Nault became co-director and resident choreographer of the company founded by Ludmilla Chiriaeff in 1958.

His arrival at Les Grands Ballets inaugurated a period during which the company greatly expanded and diversified its repertoire. Nault’s choreographies range from the classical to the neo-classical, not to mention contemporary and theatrical dance. His many works include *La fille mal gardée*, *Danses concertantes*, *Symphonie de psaumes*, *Liberté tempérée*, *La Scouine*, and *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Two of his pieces, *Carmina Burana* and *Tommy*, achieved resounding international success and are still considered significant achievements by their author. “*Tommy* stands for a very special period and point in time. *Carmina Burana* is more transcendent, more universal, and ages better.”

When he returned home, Fernand Nault discovered a Quebec that was quite different from the one he had departed in 1944. “I left a village. I came back to a city that was becoming international, thanks to Expo 67.” While fulfilling his duties with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, he was active on several other fronts, as well. He worked at the *École Supérieure de Danse* as a choreographer and ballet master; he created choreographies for the American Ballet Theatre, the Joffrey Ballet, the Atlanta Ballet, the Ballet Federation of the Philippines, the Delta Festival Ballet, the Washington Ballet, and the Colorado Ballet. This last company named him its guest choreographer from 1978 to 1981 and its artistic director in 1981 and 1982.

After returning to Montreal in the summer of 1982, Nault created the choreography for *Narcissus*, the last work of Norman McLaren of the National Film Board. “That was a difficult experience, but also highly stimulating, and a very special collaboration.” Another

5 act



unique experience came in 1984, when Nault was asked by Abbé Jean Dubuc to choreograph the movements that punctuated the religious ritual of the mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II, at Jarry Park, on his visit to Canada. Some 60 dancers, recruited from all over, gave a fine demonstration of how well dance expresses life's spiritual dimension. Then, at Ludmilla Chiriaeff's invitation, he staged a number of performances, between 1985 and 1988, for elementary, secondary and Cegep students, to give young people in the Montréal area an introduction to ballet. In 1986, he choreographed the ballet segment in *Aïda* for L'Opéra de Montréal. Since 1987, he has acted as artistic adviser to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

The tribute paid to Fernand Nault today by Les Grands Ballets reiterates the homage already shown by his peers and fellow citizens. The Canadian government awarded him the Centennial Medal in 1967, and the Order of Canada in 1977. His ballet *Incohérence* won the prize for choreography at the 7th International Ballet Competition in Varna, Bulgaria, in 1976. In 1984, the Quebec government honoured him with the Denise-Pelletier prize for the performing arts, one of the six Prix du Québec awarded annually. And last January 18, he was made a Chevalier of the Ordre national du Québec.

How does this outstanding artist view the ballet world today? "We are going through a time of performance. This trend has affected ballet, which has become extremely sophisticated and technical. Expression, communication, and the joy of dancing are often somewhat stifled. However, I sense that the pendulum is swinging back and I am hopeful that we will soon rediscover the soul of dance, in all its richness."