

Creole Style

by Paula Citron

Toronto's Ballet Creole

is Afro-Caribbean inspired

— and totally Canadian.

Ballet Creole could only happen in a multicultural, multi-ethnic and polyglot metropolis such as Toronto. Artistic Director Patrick Parson was born in Trinidad. Associate Choreographer Gabby Kamino is of Ukrainian descent and has a Japanese husband. The 10-member company includes a mix of black and white dancers, both Canadian-born and new Canadians. The old countries of the latter are Mexico, Pakistan and five West Indian islands. The five musicians of the Creole Musical Ensemble are Trinidadian, Afro-German and Jewish. Of the board of directors, five are black, while the four Caucasians are of English, Italian, Irish and Jewish heritage.

Says Parson, "Ballet Creole is the living dynamic that is Toronto and the new Canadian hybrid that's happening in the arts."

As a child, Parson was a keen participant in Trinidad and Tobago's annual Best Village Festival, founded by former Prime Minister Eric Williams to preserve the islands' unique cultural heritage. Communities large and small compete against each other in traditional performing arts, and it was this yearly gathering that first instilled in Parson a strong sense of his Afro-Caribbean heritage while honing his skills as a dancer, singer and drummer. He began his formal training at the Caribbean School of Dance and the Dance Academy of Trinidad and Tobago, where ballet was the dominant vocabulary. He then performed with Trinidad's famed Astor Johnson Repertory Dance Theatre. When he was not on tour or teaching dance, he supplemented his income as a junior supervisor with a telecommunications company.

In 1988, Parson, then 29, made the decision to undertake formal modern dance training to polish his technique, which brought him to Toronto and the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. He never went back home, and in 1990 founded Ballet Creole. "I saw black dancers in ballet and contemporary companies," he explains, "but there were no black professional dance companies in a city where one-fifth of the population is black. The time was right to break new ground."

Ballet Creole created a splash at Harbourfront's WOMAD (World of Music and Dance) Festival in 1991, following up with a well-received first season in 1992. The latter led to Ballet Creole being part of the 1993 Premiere Dance Theatre Series at Harbourfront, the most prestigious venue in the city. Parson's mainstream obsession to distance himself from ghettoized dance and create a contemporary professional black dance company had paid off.

Parson hates the word "fusion," preferring "creolization" to describe the compa-

ny's unique amalgam of many dance languages. The anchor of Ballet Creole's training is the technique developed by the influential Katherine Dunham, the great black pioneer of American contemporary dance. Parson became a certified Dunham teacher at her famed school in East St. Louis, Illinois, and although he found Dunham only in recent years, her teachings solved his problem of how to take dancers of many different backgrounds and weld them together into an ensemble able to perform his choreography.

In a conversation with three Ballet Creole dancers, the company's salad-bowl roster becomes clear. Modern dancer Kathleen Pyper fell in love with the company's very first performance, took classes with Parson and joined Ballet Creole in its second year. "It's all about diversity," she says, "and that a white woman can be performing African-based dance and not be accused of cultural appropriation."

Trinidadian-born Neketia Perez studied at Calgary's Decidedly Jazz Danceworks, while Alejandra Valiente was schooled in ballet in her native Mexico. Neither had modern dance training before Ballet Cre-

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ole. For Perez, it took a year for the Ballet Creole style to click in, and that happened when she realized the training was complementary and not in opposition to Afro-jazz and hip-hop.

It was less easy for Valiente. "There are no counts, no symmetry, no logical directions," laments the dancer. "The steps don't have names. Instead, you communicate through shapes, fluidity and movement descriptions. It's about using space and energy. Ballet is about outside lines, but with Patrick you approach your feelings and the movement from the inside."

Kamino, a former member of the dance faculty at the University of Waterloo, comes from the dance heritage of Judy Jarvis, Til Thiele, Lawrence Gradus and New York's Milton Myers. What attracted her to Ballet Creole was the energy. "What makes the company strong is its repertory," she says. "Patrick brings in other choreographers, which encourages the dancers to grow artistically." Kamino has been associated with Ballet Creole for 12 years and has set many works on the company.

For the great Myers, an icon with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre as both a

performer and teacher, *Dancing Spirits* was also a break-out piece. Myers has been associated with Ballet Creole for three years as both a faculty member and choreographer.

For his part, Parson expresses his philosophy of choreography as being about life itself. His pieces on the downside have portrayed the objectification of women (*Erotica*, 1999) or the violence that shapes modern society, from youth gangs to 9/11 (*Urban Griot/Toute Baghai*, 2002). In contrast is *Saraka* (1998), a joyous celebration of African culture that weaves together eight ritual dances, each from a different country. His most ambitious work is *Soulful Messiah*, created in 2002 and presented every Christmas season since. Set to legendary American black singers performing a rhythm-and-blues version of Handel's famous oratorio, the moving production attracts sell-out crowds that cut across Toronto's demographic.

The company, headquartered in a former junior high school in the city's West End, forms a mini-empire of its own. The community side is based around Ballet Creole School of Performing Arts, which offers a wide variety of classes to the public, young and old, including a summer dance camp for children. The jewel in the crown is the full-time, two-year Ballet Creole Professional Training Programme, which educates audition-only students. There is also Kids Creole, a youth performance group and an adult drumming ensemble, Creole Drum-matrix.

The company operates on an annual budget of \$400,000 and has no debt. Grants come from both the Toronto and Ontario Arts Councils, but half its income derives from a heavy touring schedule, particularly in schools, and its annual seasons in Toronto, Hamilton and St. Catharines. Volunteers are its bulwark, such as music teacher Anna Di Costanzo, who is vice-president of the board and de facto office manager and archivist.

"From the beginning," she says, "Ballet Creole has been a pioneer. It was Canada's first professional black dance company, the first to start a full-time Afro-based professional dance training programme and the first to bring Dunham technique to Canada."

Jamaican-born board president Shirley Irving is another believer. A textile curator and design historian, Irving says: "The audience that used to come was mostly white, but we're attracting more blacks in recent years. The black community is beginning to understand that Ballet Creole represents them by doing something important, that we represent a black aesthetic that is participating in the creation of Canadian culture." ▼