

Montreal's dance boom of the 1980s and 1990s still reverberates beyond the many anniversary celebrations by companies like La La La Human Steps, Compagnie Marie Chouinard, O Vertigo, Cas Public, Company Flak, Fondation Margie Gillis, BJM and a host of others. Born in those heady times, these diverse groups are now well-respected internationally and Montreal is an acknowledged world dance capital.

Springboard Danse Montréal, a unique three-week residency/talent market for ballet to street dancers destined to be future stars, is a reflection of the success of those senior companies because, without them, it would not exist.

In June, Springboard celebrated its 10th edition. Conceived and produced in a mere four months in 2002 by Alexandra Wells (artistic director), a former *École supérieure de danse du Québec* teacher, and Susan Alexander (general director), founder-director of ballet school Ballet Divertimento, to help pre-professional students literally get a leg up into their chosen careers, it relied — and still relies — heavily on the goodwill and generosity of Montreal companies.

Springboard is a mentoring project. After auditioning the first week for places to work with one of seven local companies participating that season, students learn repertoire the following two weeks. The work is intense, demanding. The fruit of their labour is shown on the final night in a simply staged performance.

What began as a project to introduce teenagers into how dance companies operate has matured into an even tougher experience where students are watched by potential employers who hold auditions, casually drop in on rehearsals or just attend the final show. It's exhausting and nerve-tingling to be continuously on display in such a meat market — but it pays off. This year, besides formal auditions held by Montreal companies, talent scouts from Chicago and New York checked out the action. Other years, there has been interest from Europe. Alexander remembers a year when Nacho Duato, who then headed an illustrious Madrid company, "hired a dancer right off the stage."

A decade ago, Wells, adviser, rehearsal director, teacher, facilitator and coach at New York's Juilliard School, insisted that Montreal was the only city in North America

where such a programme could take root, because of the large numbers of established, and very different, year-round companies. She continues to reiterate these words.

Companies and choreographers offer their time, space, repertoire and staff to teach interpretation or, in the case of those studying choreography, creative process. This year, Stephan Laks, a Springboard graduate now working at Sweden's Göteborg Ballet, and Danielle Agami from Israel's Batsheva, each mentored a group of aspiring choreographers. Their companies donated their time; Springboard receives no public or private support and there are no funds to pay even the smallest stipend to overseas companies.

Tuition costs \$1,250. Financial administrator Alexander stretches it "to bring the project to zero. We just cover costs," which include honorariums for every mentor, teacher and accompanist.

"When we started, the companies were so supportive they offered to do it for free. Alexandra and I decided we had to pay them in order to [guarantee] the project would continue."

However, Springboard always offers some scholarships. In 2011, 22 out of 80 students received full scholarship. Since 2002, Springboard has hosted 560 students.

In the 10 years since its inception, registration shot from 26 to 80. "There has been a noticeable change in the level of dancer," says Wells. Students are older

now — between 20 and 31 instead of teenagers — and many are already professional. They are chosen by live audition in New York, Toronto and Montreal by groups of eight to 10 people familiar with the Montreal dance scene. "We select dancers according to which company is the best match for them."

Although Springboard's purpose is to encourage Canadian dance, the majority of its enrolment has always been American. Alexander believes that's because U.S. dancers come from strong university programs. Canadian universities do not offer comparable training, she says.

"We have a responsibility to encourage Canadians. We want to have an effect on training. But we also have to meet the needs of companies" and provide them with well-trained dancers.

Springboard grads have no problem finding jobs after their three-week ordeals, says Wells. Two Montreal companies, Company Flak and BJM have been the biggest beneficiaries of the project. "José Navas [Flak] has pretty much hired his entire company for the past five years through Springboard and many Ballets Jazz [BJM] dancers [have been] from Springboard as well."

Wells and Alexander are pleased with the course's success. "The dancers are turned inside out and learn so much about themselves. It's like doing a year of auditions in a couple of weeks. They work with the top companies of every type and learn what suits them best — that's the key," says Alexander.

Meanwhile, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal returned from a three-stop tour of China with Ohad Naharin's *Minus One* to announce its dream had come true — it will finally have a home of its own in Montreal's upscale Quartier des Spectacles overlooking Place des Arts where it performs in central Montreal.

A new 5,000-square-metre five-storey building designed for the company will be opened in 2014 as part of a complex that will be Montreal's first made-to-measure dance centre. Tangente – Laboratoire de mouvements contemporains and LADMMI (L'École de danse contemporain) will be neighbours.

The new building will also be home to a new ballet school, the Academy of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, which will train professional dancers and also offer courses for the general public. Les Grands has resided in cramped quarters in a converted parking garage since 1980. ▼

DANSE MONTRÉAL



Gabrielle Salvatto and Jenelle Figgins in Springboard Danse Montréal
Photo: Michael Slobodian