

CID WORLD CONGRESS – AVIGNON, FRANCE – NOVEMBER 9 - 13, 2016

DISCOVER DANCE IN CANADA ! BY MONA D'AMOURS, PRESIDENT, CID VANCOUVER SECTION

Good evening everyone !

“Dance for me a minute, and I will tell you who you are” Mikhail Baryshnikov. If you thought I was going to dance for a minute, you’re dreaming. But I will tell you who we are from my years of dance in Canada.

First, let’s start at the beginning. What is Canada?

IT’S BIG. 15 times the size of France. But we have a problem. We have more trees, lakes and wild animals than people. You are more likely to see a bear, moose, deer, raccoon or beaver than a person. In fact, a bear walked into my kitchen once, and a mother bear and her two cubs ate all our apples in our backyard. In Canada, we only have 35 million people. That’s 4 people per sq. km compared to 65 million in France with 122 people per sq. km.

IT’S OLD. You might think Canada is young, only 150 years of history since confederation in 1867. You’re wrong. Canada is thousands of years old with 634 native bands representing the million First Nations who lived on this land long before Europeans arrived. In the recently published “Truth and Reconciliation” report by the Canadian government, Europeans who first settled in Canada are guilty of “cultural genocide” of our First Nations. It’s time we recognize their contribution to Canada.

IT HAS NO CULTURE. At least if you look at the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists, Canada is not even listed. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNESCO_Intangible_Cultural_Heritage_Lists Have we been forgotten? USA and Australia are also not listed. It’s an interesting observation, but cannot explain it since there are many arts with their roots in Canada, USA, and Australia, especially the culture of Aboriginal peoples.

So if we have no culture, live with wild animals in a vast open space, how can dance even exist? Let’s begin by looking at the characteristics of Canadians whose origins begin with First Nations, followed by French and British in the 15th century, and a continuing influx of immigrants. From July 2015 to June 2016, Canada welcomed 320,932 immigrants.

Canada embraces multiculturalism, and all the dances that reflect our diverse heritage. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who spoke at the United Nations General Assembly September 20, 2016 said this: “In Canada, we see diversity as a source of strength, not weakness. Our country is strong not in spite of our differences, but because of them.”

But who are these Canadians? What is the character of a Canadian?

Polite, Friendly, Informal. Everyone says we’re polite and friendly. I’ll let you be the judge of this. We like to eat what we want, when we want. We like our clothing to be comfortable rather than pretentious. We call each other by first names even if we are doctors, or professors. We have thrown out the stigma associated with the class system, and judge people not by what they wear or by their title.

Adventuresome, Direct, Bold. One of the favorite holidays for Canadians is camping in the wild. That's always an adventure. All new immigrants have to be bold and daring to leave their country and their family, survive the hardship of learning a new language, and braving temperatures as low as -50 degrees Celsius.

Open-minded, Ambitious, Creative. With citizens from more than 300 countries that have made Canada their home, we have to be open-minded to survive, and coexist peacefully. We are ambitious, and this has nurtured our creativity. Change is a way of life for Canadians. Just because we do things one way today doesn't mean we have to do it the same tomorrow.

Cirque du Soleil, Montreal, Canada embodies all these qualities. It has brought wonder and delight to more than 160 million spectators in more than 400 cities in over 60 countries on 6 continents. Its success can be attributed to its bold, daring, creative, and equal approach to all artists. Every artist is encouraged to be involved in the creation of each show.

Guy Laliberté, the founder of Cirque du Soleil, says. "I don't believe in pitfalls. I believe in taking risks and not doing the same thing twice . . . I believe in nurturing creativity . . . Life is full of adventure"

I've been working with Cirque du Soleil Casting for the past 5 years. I was invited to attend their dance audition in Montreal June 29-30, 2013. With 305 outstanding dancers auditioning from all over the world, it was a thrilling experience. I will take you back to those two days.

Day 1: Dancers learn a contemporary combination requiring strong ballet technique with improvisation at the beginning and end of the choreography. In groups of four, they perform. Without excellent technique combined with diversity and creativity, they were cut. 127 remain. After this first cut, the dancers perform a solo. Only the strong survive the second cut. 56 remain.

Day 2: The 56 dancers had to repeat the choreography they learned the previous day to assess their determination to learn it, and how well they could perform given a second chance. This was followed by learning hip hop choreography mixed with improv. One more cut. 33 remain.

Next was an improv solo in their preferred style of dance. Then casting asked them to perform an improv solo with a concept that would make them feel uncomfortable in a completely different style. One was told to dance with animal sounds, and no music. Another to be a sexy ballerina to hip hop music. Sleepy and stuck to a ballet barre with rock music. More cuts. 21 remain.

The last challenge was partner work with lifts across the floor in silence, first by being angels, then turning into demons. In the end, there were 19 who were selected based on their excellent technique in two extreme styles, ballet and hip hop, their creativity, and ability to communicate with each other and to their audience. That's dance in Canada.

The next audition for dance with Le Cirque du Soleil will be in Montréal July 1-2, 2017. Immediately after the audition, a talent scout from the casting department for dance will fly to Vancouver for Dance World Cup July 3-5 to offer workshops and be on the jury.

I would like to share a bold step at the CID World Congress in Tokyo, Japan, 2014. I noticed there were no hip hop workshops so I asked the young Canadian boy travelling with me if he could teach a hip hop class. Travis Lim, at age 13, was the youngest teacher at a CID World Congress. His mother, Frances Liu encouraged him, and trusted me. A year later, he launched his own TV show “Hip Hop with Travis Lim”, and won the title of World Hip Hop Champion. Now 15, he is entering his second season of his TV show.

When I was young, I studied classical ballet, and modern dance, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham technique. In fact, I was faced with the decision between joining the Toronto Dance Theatre Company or becoming a Professor of Psychology. I became a Professor. It paid four times more. Then I became a Training Consultant for the government of Canada. This is when I read the economic services bulletin. “Dancers and choreographers are among the top 10 growth occupations. In fact, it ranks 4th with a 5.3% annual growth rate.”

This bulletin plus the death of my father from cancer 5 days after he was diagnosed, changed my life. At the age of 45 in 1994, I took the plunge, and followed my childhood dream to pursue a career in dance. That was the birth of 5678 Showtime – the first Vancouver-based dance competition. Now we host 14 events annually across Canada including Dance World Cup.

My mandate is “to promote excellence and diversity”, and to attract the best dancers plus I wanted to give value to dance by awarding large sums of money to dancers so they could pursue further training. Through registration fees, and admission fees, without corporate or government support, I generated enough revenue to award 1.7 million dollars to young Canadian dancers since 1994. This figure will reach 2 million dollars in 2020.

Today there are over 300 companies that host hundreds of dance competitions in Canada with over 3,000 dance schools and almost one million students studying ballet, lyrical, contemporary, modern, jazz, tap, hip hop, musical theatre, acrobatic and folkloric dances. The dance competitions in Canada are multi-disciplinary, and the forms of dance have become eclectic with each style influencing the other. It is not unusual to see “ballet jazz” or “lyrical hip hop”. Competition fuels creativity and growth.

We have numerous ballet companies in Canada. I have worked with, and have liaisons with three of these companies. Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB) which will celebrate 77 years recently produced the world’s first full-length First Nations inspired ballet “Going Home Star - Truth and Reconciliation” RWB school not only offers ballet, but also jazz, lyrical, modern, tap, musical theatre, hip hop, and special classes for boys and adults with more and more participation.

The two other companies are the National Ballet of Canada in Toronto which hosted the first National symposium for dance and well-being November 4 and 5, 2016 in cooperation with the National Centre for Dance Therapy of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens in Montreal.

There are so many initiatives in Canada in dance which reflect our open-minded culture of diversity and cooperativeness. With all the dance schools, dance companies, dance competitions, and dance associations, there are an estimated 3 million people involved in dance from 2 to 92 in Canada.

This September, I travelled with 19 French tourists on the Trans-Siberian Railway through China, Mongolia, and Russia. With 180 tourists from 17 countries, we called ourselves the UN delegation, and were treated with ballet, opera, piano, and violin performances. One woman remarked. "Now that's culture." I told her "Yes that's culture from the aristocracy and upper classes, but there is also the people's culture." In fact, one lady said, "the most important culture is agriculture". Maybe she was right. Without farms, we do not have food to nourish our creativity, and our culture.

The people are the majority, and their culture is equally important which brings me to three styles of dance whose origins come from the people of Canada.

The first is hoop dancing performed with 20 or more hoops by First Nations in America, Canada and USA. Hoop dancing is distinctively unique, and it tells the story of life of our aboriginal people before Europeans called them savages, and tried to destroy their culture.

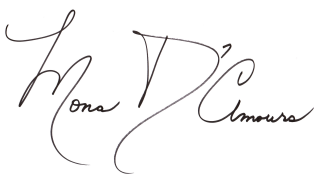
Then there is Acadian Step dancing shared by Canadians from France whose culture was almost lost when 10,000 were deported from Canada by the British from 1755 to 1764. The rhythm of the fiddle, beats of the feet, hands, and spoons in their traditional dresses tell another story of the people of Canada.

Then there is Hip Hop dancing that comes from the streets of America, Canada and USA that has grown into the most popular style of dance among young people today. In fact, it is now practiced worldwide. The largest street dance competition is in Paris, France. "Juste Debout" sells out each year with 16,000 spectators inside the AccorHotels Arena.

These three forms of dance come from the people, and they all have a social and cultural significance. They are not recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. Why not ? I leave you with this question.

This year, Canada is hosting the 10th Dance World Cup at Fairmont Château Whistler, an hour north of Vancouver, Canada, June 30 – July 5, 2017. <http://www.fairmont.com/whistler/media/photos/> We offer a full day bus and boat tour of the Vancouver area June 30 followed by workshops July 1-3 to learn choreography from our faculty from around the world that will be performed in the closing ceremonies in costume that each dancer will receive, and finally the Dance World Cup competition in all styles of dance for all ages July 3-5. Over 8,000 dancers have competed at Dance World Cup since 2008. Dance World Cup is recognized by CID (International Dance Council) <http://www.panorama.cid-portal.org/index.php/canada/110-canada/496-vancouver>, Cirque du Soleil Casting, <https://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/jobs/casting/default.aspx> and Fairmont Hotels. <http://www.fairmont.com/>

It's time you discovered Canada. I thank you. I am Canadian.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mona D'Amour". The signature is stylized and cursive.

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<http://www.danceworldcup.com/>