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# Ballet's new chief savors the classics

By WILLIAM LITTLER  
Star music critic

"TALK, talk, talk," laughed Alexander Grant, banging his fists against the sofa in his office-to-be. "All I want to do is stay in that rehearsal room with the dancers and all I wind up doing is talking."

It was near the end of a long day of consultations and interviews for the National Ballet of Canada's newly appointed artistic director. Sir Frederick Ashton had given him special permission to take a week off from rehearsals for his new ballet in London to fly to Toronto to get acquainted with his future colleagues. His dancer's feet were clearly growing itchy.

"Why should dancers be called upon to talk so much anyway? They speak with their bodies. The whole art of the dancer is to be able to say something without speaking. To open one's mouth is a traumatic thing."

The veteran Royal Ballet dancer assumed a look of mock horror. Being one of the western world's great dance actors, it seemed almost genuine. Almost.

"Why did I accept this new post? I've been trying to understand it myself," he said. "First of all, it came as a bolt out of the blue. I've been 30 years with the Royal Ballet and, although I've been jumping about on its stage less, I've been kept busier than ever directing its Ballet for All company, and I've been happy in my work."

"The change was an enormous one for me to consider. It meant leaving my friends, my life, my company. It took me over a month to make the decision."

## 'One family'

"What helped me to make it was the knowledge that dancers are basically the same kind of people. I would be going from one family to another. And I knew the Canadian Ballet operates much along the line of the company I've been a part of. I also knew that if I didn't take the job I'd spend the rest of my life wondering about it."

"No, I haven't seen much of the company's work. I saw its London season and I flew out to Regina to take a look before giving an answer. But when I arrived in England after the war, the touring company of the Sadler's Wells Ballet was just being formed and the first role I danced in London was choreographed by Celia Franca (the National Ballet's founder). So there has always been a kind of connection."

"I've sort of followed the company's growth since the early '50s. When I was here with the Royal Ballet they even asked me to choreograph the Neapolitan Dance from Swan Lake. And that's what

I'm here for this week, trying to spend as much time as I can seeing the company at work. My job as artistic director is to be aware of everything that goes on on that stage."

"I shall cling onto the classical repertoire for two reasons: First, it's the yardstick of standards I think every great ballet company should have, and second, when you have a well-run school in Canada (the National Ballet School) that is teaching classical technique, you have the dancers."

"It's a long process and it won't happen overnight, but I want to look for creative sources in the company and in Canada, too."

But will Alexander Grant be around that long? Thinking about the question a moment, he allowed a smile to soften his reserve.

"I'm what is called a stick-in-the-mud, really. I've lived for 30 years in two places in London and I've worked in one company. I'm one of those people who, when they make up their minds to do something, stick to it."

## Short careers

"You know, dancers are like circus people in a way. They believe in handing on a tradition. 'Us old dancers' have to stop kicking up our legs eventually. We don't think about it at the beginning, otherwise we'd give up before we started. Our dancing careers are so terribly short. But when we discover another way to use what we've learned, it's an encouragement to all dancers."

When asked about dancing in Toronto, the 50-year-old New Zealander added: "I won't say I'll never appear with the National Ballet of Canada, but I'm not coming here to use the company as a vehicle for my own performances. Besides, you seem to have an animosity toward outside artists."

Yes, he had obviously heard about the press accusations that the National Ballet has been travelling on the coattails of one Rudolf Nureyev. He views the situation differently.

"In London we have all the best artists appear and nobody worries about it. A star footballer enhances the popularity of football."

"If people go to see Nureyev and discover the Canadian Ballet as well, you'll find them saying 'What a good company' and coming again. So I don't think the stars are using the company. The company is using them."

"You should take pride instead in what the National Ballet has achieved in 25 years. A dancer starts his training at 9 or 10 and takes 10 years even to reach circulation. Considering this, it's fantastic what Celia Franca and Betty Oliphant (principal of the National Ballet School) have done."

"What made me a dancer? I don't know. It sounds so banal, but I just woke up and found I was dancing. I started when I was 6 and how the hell do you make up your mind at that age?"

"When I asked my parents why, the only answer I got, which also sounds banal, was my mother's telling me that whenever there was any music I was jumping about, so I might as well learn to do it properly."

He learned to do it more than properly. Armed with a scholarship to the Sadler's Wells Ballet School, young Alexander Grant arrived in London via an eight-week trip on a cargo boat around Cape Horn and soon caught the eye of the noted choreographer Leonide Massine.

It was as the Barber in Massine's *Mam'zelle Angot* in 1949, in fact, that he got his lucky break. It typed him as a character dancer ("which I've never regretted because I'm still on the stage") but Massine's plot also gave him the girl and the girl happened to be another rising young dancer named Margot Fonteyn.

Grant has worked with many other important choreographers but with none more closely than one of the greatest, Frederick Ashton.

"I've been indebted most of my life to Ashton," he volunteers, "because the lifeblood of any dancer is having ballets created for him."

"Natalia Makarova gave an interview once and apparently said: 'In my life I have excited many men, but unfortunately none of them have been choreographers.' That about sums it up from a dancer's point of view."

## Major challenge

"This is going to be one of my challenges here—to keep the life blood going, choreographically. The problem is that the world's leading choreographers can be counted on one hand."

"Look at what has happened to the Russians. They have all those marvellous dancers but they feel the public must understand everything, so they are at a stalemate, doing the same old thing."

"When I say this, don't look to me to tear down what Celia Franca has built up. I mean to maintain and develop her work. It will take four years before you see any change. Ballet is not a factory, you know."

"When I first came to Toronto in 1950 there was no National Ballet at all. I think Celia was around, trying to get it started, but she had just put her foot on the ladder—and the ladder reaches to the stars. That's a long way."

Alexander Grant sounds as if he intends to stay around for the rest of the climb.



ALEXANDER GRANT, the National Ballet of Canada's new artistic director, met principal dancer Karen Kain (left) for the first time this

week as Veronica Tennant, another principal dancer, looked on. Grant, who takes over in July, was in Toronto to get to know the company.

# Dylan's travelling reunion is rolling our way

By PETER GODDARD  
Star staff writer

WATERVILLE, Maine  
THE maid didn't like it. No sir. These people slept too late. They burned candles in their rooms. They didn't take anything seriously. And their kids, Lord, they were bouncing around the motel like rubber balls.

"Yaaaa," a sandy-haired boy shouted as he careered down the hall.

"I'll tell you one thing," the maid grumbled as she slowly bent over another bed. "If that kid does that one more time, I'll tell his dad."

## Venting energy

At that particular moment that would have been impossible. While several of his six children were venting their mid-morning energy, Bob Dylan was asleep.

And Rolling Thunder Revue, his wandering folkie caravan, which had pulled out of New York two months ago and is heading for Maple Leaf Gardens for shows Monday and Tuesday nights, had stopped rolling—temporarily.

"It's like a family thing," said Louis Kemp, an old Dylan friend from Minnesota who had come down from Alaska to help out

"It's just folks travelling around making music."

Right. Just folks. There was Joan Mitchell, looking even paler in the waxen prenoon sun, scribbling in her note pad in the Howard Johnson's restaurant. Joan Baez's mother, at the next table, sipped coffee. Dylan's wife, Sarah, introduced her children to friends.

And out in the hall rambled Jack Elliott. Although he grew up in Brooklyn, where he was born Elliott Adnopoz, in any place west or south of New York he looks like the last of the old-time gun slingers.

"Man, but isn't this the best tour ever?" he asked of no one in particular. He was about to go out shopping, had just changed his mind and was thinking about changing his mind again. "Years ago, I used to tour in my car, with maybe another friend. Recently, I've had to fly. I hate planes. Hate airports, too. So, this tour gets us all back on the road. It's something like Kerouac. And I could drive forever with these people. Why I go back almost 20 years with most of 'em."

The tour is a reunion of sorts and, perhaps, a bit of a revival for those who were central to the early '60s moveable folk feast centred in Greenwich Village,

New York, and in Cambridge, Mass.

But everyone on the tour agreed you have to go back only to last summer in New York to find the moment this thunder started rolling. Both Elliott and Bob Neuwirth, an old Dylan buddy, were in town performing. Dylan, just returned from California, was hanging out in the village, writing new songs, planning a new album and dropping in at the Other End. Something was in the air.

## Less clear

The exact reasons for the tour are less clear.

Dylan said he saw it was a chance "to play for the people." To Elliott, it was all more casual, with "everyone having such a good time playin' with everyone else that Bob said, 'wouldn't it be fun to take this on the road.'"

Neuwirth, who met Dylan at the very beginning, when Neuwirth was only playing guitar to support himself as an artist in Boston, sees it all in more portentous terms.

"It was a strange time in the village this summer," he explained. "New York seemed empty, strangely empty. And it was a strange time in the world."

He tapped his whiskey glass on the motel's bar. While most were just finishing breakfast, it was already mid-afternoon, and Neuwirth and Dylan had already been out shooting a scene for the film being done about the tour.

Dylan, talking excitedly just outside the bar, was happy with the results. In the scene, Neuwirth had been driving a pick-up and had stopped for an anonymous hitchhiker, who turns out to be Dylan. The two try to scare each other as only two strangers can on a deserted back road in Maine. It was, as Neuwirth likes to say, "very existential."

The film is important to Dylan and the others. For them it won't be just a recording of the tour: It will be about what the tour means.

"None of us ever picked up a guitar to make a lot of money," Neuwirth went on. "We were artists. But now—NOW! (he pounds his fist on the bar)—art doesn't matter. There's a whole generation which makes music only to make a million."

"And to make money you need middle men and other jerks who turn out T-shirts and stuff. There are no middle-men here. This is the artists' tour. We don't tell anybody where we're going. Then we only give a few days notice with handbills. Sure, a lot of people don't believe the handbills.

But they're the ones who don't buy tickets and don't get to see the show."

Originally, it was just to have been Dylan, Neuwirth and Elliott in a station wagon. But they became nervous about being so vulnerable. So it grew in scope. Now there are two buses, one, called Phyldeaux, for the players, the other, nick-named The Ghetto, for the friends, and there's a lime-green camper called Palm Beach, for Dylan.

## Small halls

Originally, too, the revue was going to appear only in small halls, like the one with 500 seats in Plymouth, Mass., where they first stopped.

"But there are over 70 people to keep and every so often we've had to play a larger place for the money," said Joan Baez, explaining why the tour has appeared in 12,000-seat auditoriums in Providence, R.I., Springfield, Mass., and Niagara Falls, N.Y., and will be appearing at the even larger Gardens here.

"This thing has just kept growing," said Lou Kemp. "It now costs about \$150,000 a week just to keep going."

And it could keep growing — if those on the tour would let it.

"Everybody, but everybody,

wants to be in on this," said Neuwirth, his voice husky from all the singing he does. "I mean, one night John Prine and Bruce Springsteen showed up just to sit in the audience. That's last year's Dylan and this year's, you know. But I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about the big biggies—the Neil Youngs."

Joni Mitchell is the only late addition to stay with the tour. "I was only going to do one concert (in Niagara Falls)," she said backstage at the Augusta Civic Centre, 20 miles south of Waterville on Interstate 95. "But it felt so good I asked if I could stay on. And the higher-ups, Joan and Bob, said it was okay, and I stayed."

"I'm enjoying myself. I'm carrying on as if I don't have a care in the world."

But she does: No sooner does the Rolling Thunder tour end than she begins her own. Ronee Blakley, one of the stars of the film Nashville, also starts a tour after this one ends, and Joan Baez has had to keep previous concert commitments by leaving the tour between performances then flying back to reinjoin it.

"But just to sing with Bob again is worth it," said Baez. She had flown in from Philadelphia for the Augusta concert and had just finished a nap. "Sure, I'll

make less money doing this. But, the publicity value alone will make up for that, I guess."

Blakley knows about publicity. Looking a bit bewildered by everything, although she has been with the tour from the start, she explained: "When you're a singer and you're on stage with Bob Dylan, it's really good for your career. It's more than that. It's an honor."

## In awe

An honor. Even Jack Elliott, whose records Dylan used to collect and copy years ago, is awed by Dylan.

"This is the first time I've seen Bob in seven years," he said. "We used to be buddies. But I remember trying to visit him in Woodstock about eight years ago and he wouldn't see anybody. I thought maybe he was mad at me or something. Even now we barely talk. He's got so much on his mind."

"This is why he decided to come back to us, to go out on this kind of tour," said Joan Baez, looking dark and elegant in the candlelight of the backstage dressing room.

"He was given a gift, which he kept to himself for a while. Now he's bringing it back to everybody."