

Ballet Notes

THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA

KAREN KAIN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

LA SYLPHIDE

and
INTERMEZZO



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MARIE TAGLIONI IN AN 1832 PRODUCTION
OF LA SYLPHIDE, WATERCOLOUR BY ALFRED-
EDWARD CHALON (BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY).
OPPOSITE: GUILLAUME CÔTÉ, 2004 PHOTO
BY BRUCE ZINGER
COVER: NIKOLAJ HÜBBE, COURTESY OF THE
ROYAL DANISH BALLET



THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA

THE WALTER CARSEN CENTRE FOR THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA
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INTERMEZZO

Choreography by ELIOT FELD
Staged with the assistance of CHRISTINE SARRY
and TIMOTHY CRONIN

Music by JOHANNES BRAHMS

Intermezzi Opus 117, No. 2 and Opus 118, No. 2; Waltzes Opus 39

Costume Design by STANLEY SIMMONS

Lighting Design by ALLEN LEE HUGHES

Piano Soloist ANDREW BURASHKO



LA SYLPHIDE

A Romantic Ballet in two acts

Choreography by NIKOLAJ HÜBBE
after AUGUST BOURNONVILLE

Music by HERMAN LØVENSKJOLD

Set and Costume Design by PETER CAZALET

Lighting Design by PIERRE LAVOIE

In honour of the bicentenary of choreographer August Bournonville's birth, The National Ballet of Canada is pleased to present this new production of *La Sylphide* re-staged by Nikolaj Hübbe. New York City Ballet Principal Dancer and Bournonville expert, Mr. Hübbe appears as guest artist in the role of James on Thursday, November 24, 2005. The production features new sets and costumes from Boston Ballet.

All text in this *Ballet Note* regarding *La Sylphide* and Bournonville was written by author and journalist Michael Crabb. Mr. Crabb is dance critic for *The National Post* and is heard regularly on CBC Toronto's *Here and Now*.

The National Ballet of Canada is honoured to have the esteemed Danish dance critic Erik Aschengreen as a guest speaker for Ballet Talks for the run of *La Sylphide*. Mr. Aschengreen is one of the world's leading experts on ballet history and the choreography of August Bournonville.



MR. ASCHENGREEN'S APPEARANCE COURTESY
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INTERMEZZO

One of Eliot Feld's earliest works, the evocative, romantic *Intermezzo* premiered in Spoleto, Italy, on June 29, 1969 performed by Feld's own American Ballet Company. Feld himself danced the lead role, partnering ballerina Christine Sarry. Two years later, Feld mounted the work on The National Ballet of Canada, casting a very young Karen Kain and Frank Augustyn, dancing together for the first time, as one of three couples in this lyrical ensemble work. The National Ballet premiered the ballet in Windsor on February 18, 1972, with Veronica Tennant, Karen Kain, Mary Jago, Sergiu Stefanski, Jacques Gorrisen, and Tomas Schramek (replacing the injured Augustyn).

This inventive, highly musical work set to the piano music of Johannes Brahms enraptured audiences. Doris Hering, dance writer for *Dance Magazine* wrote, "Why, among style studies, does *Intermezzo* work with such truth? Precisely because Feld is a romanticist. The Brahms intermezzi used as an accompaniment have obviously stirred him deeply, so deeply that the mood of the music permeates the dancers' bodies even before a single note has been formed beneath the pianist's fingers..."

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Eliot Feld is regarded as one of America's most original and inventive ballet choreographers. Feld's canon of work has come to embody a distinctive vision of contemporary American ballet. His ballets are in the repertoire of the American Ballet Theatre, American Ballet Company, Royal Danish Ballet, The Joffrey Ballet, John Curry Skating Company, The Royal Swedish Ballet, The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, London Festival Ballet, Boston Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Atlanta



HEATHER OGDEN AND NEHEMIAH KISH, 2002 PHOTO BY ANDREW OXENHAM



STACEY SHIORI MINAGAWA AND JILLIAN VANSTONE, 2003

Ballet, Richmond Ballet, New York City Opera, New York City Ballet, Feld Ballets/NY (now known as Ballet Tech) and The National Ballet of Canada.

Feld studied dance at the School of American Ballet, the New Dance Group and the High School of the Performing Arts. At the age of 12, he performed the role of Child Prince in George Balanchine's original production of *The Nutcracker* for New York City Ballet. At age 16, he joined the Broadway cast of *West Side Story* and appeared as Baby-John in the movie version. He also performed in the Broadway musicals *I Can Get It For You Wholesale* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. In addition, Feld performed on the Gary Moore and Ed Sullivan television shows.

Feld Ballets/NY was established in 1974 and the versatile dancers of the company are known for their talent in assisting Feld in the invention of a new dance language. Feld Ballets/NY regularly performs in New York at The Joyce Theater and also tours extensively throughout America and other countries.

Working with Feld for the first time in 1971, Karen Kain realised, "that if I turned myself over to a gifted choreographer completely, I would discover qualities in myself that I could never have found alone." Kain became a frequent guest artist with his company. The National Ballet of Canada and Feld Ballets/NY have maintained a close working relationship, often collaborating when the National Ballet performs Feld's works.



PHOTO BY BRUCE ZINGER



KAREN KAIN AND TOMAS SCHRAHEK, 1972 PHOTO BY ANTHONY CRICKMAY

LA SYLPHIDE

CHAN HON GOH WITH ARTISTS OF THE BALLET, 1993 PHOTO BY DAVID STREET



KAREN KAIN AND FRANK AUGUSTYN WITH ARTISTS OF THE BALLET, 1974



SYNOPSIS

ACT I: We are in early 19th century Scotland, in the home of James, a young gentleman farmer. James, who is to marry Effy this very day, slumbers in a wing chair beside the fireplace. The Sylph, in love with James, sits at his feet then awakens him with a kiss. James, unsure if he is merely dreaming, tries to catch the playful spirit creature but she vanishes up the chimney. When Effy arrives, James is again sitting in his chair, preoccupied with what has just happened. Effy tries to gain his attention and James leaps up, expecting it to be the Sylph. He tries to reassure Effy and professes his undying love but Gurn, James' rival for Effy's hand, is suspicious and believes he may yet have a chance to win her.

As the household busies itself for the wedding it is clear that the brooding James' thoughts are elsewhere. He is angered to discover that a dishevelled old woman, Madge, has sneaked in to warm herself by the fire. Effy intervenes to stop James from forcibly ejecting her. Despite his protests, Madge – suitably lubricated – is persuaded to read the assembled girls' fortunes. When Gurn asks her to read his palm Madge tells him he is destined to marry Effy. The enraged James drives Madge from the house.

When James is alone again the Sylph appears at the window and enters to tell him of her devotion. James is initially hesitant but soon enraptured by this vision of beauty. Gurn returns to witness James' extraordinary behaviour but, when he summons the other guests in order to expose James' apparent infidelity, the Sylph has mysteriously vanished. Gurn's accusation is dismissed. However, as the guests dance James is again visited by the Sylph. Worried that he may yet marry Effy, she snatches the wedding ring he holds and runs from the house, with James in hot pursuit. The unnoticing guests now turn to salute the bridegroom, only to discover that he is gone. Gurn runs to see what has happened and returns with news that James has run wildly off into the woods. The heartbroken Effy breaks down in despair.

PHOTO BY MARTHA SWOPE



ALEKSANDAR ANTONIJEVIC AND XIAO NAN YU, 2005 PHOTO BY BRUCE ZINGER



ACT II: In a dark, dank forest, Madge gathers her fellow witches around a steaming cauldron. They have concocted an evil brew in which she dips the veil they have woven. The witches vanish, the mist clears and the day brightens to reveal a woodland clearing to which the Sylph has led James. She asks if he loves her, and James, still uncertain, says he does and the Sylph's many sisters dance for him. He runs after when they fly away.

The wedding party is still searching for James. Gurn enters to find James' abandoned cap but before he can rejoin the others Madge appears, discards the cap and convinces him to propose to Effy. When the distraught Effy arrives, Gurn convinces her that James has disappeared for good and she reluctantly accepts his proffered hand.

James, his heart still torn, returns to the empty glade. When Madge appears she tells James that the magic veil she holds will enable him to capture the Sylph. James pleads successfully to be given the veil and Madge leaves. The Sylph reappears and James, as instructed by Madge, winds the long veil around her. He embraces her passionately but immediately senses that something is horribly wrong. The Sylph is dying in his arms and is carried away lifeless by her sisters.

James hides as a wedding party passes through. It is Gurn leading Effy to the altar. Madge, triumphant in revenge, gloats over James and forces him to watch as the Sylph's bier floats towards the sky. James, all hope gone, sinks shattered to the ground.

August Bournonville is one of the greatest figures in the history of ballet. His fusion of the Italian-influenced traditions of the Royal Danish Ballet of his early 19th-century childhood with the style of the French pre-Romantic school learned later in Paris gave rise in Denmark to a unique dancing tradition marked by grace, musicality, precision, buoyancy and joyfulness. The ballets he created reflect Bournonville's profound confidence in humanity and espouse values that, while rooted in his own times, continue to have universal resonance.

As a virtuoso dancer and as a choreographer and teacher Bournonville also upheld a tradition of excellent male dancing in an age when elsewhere ballerinas reigned supreme. It is no accident that the Royal Danish Ballet, the major repository of Bournonville's surviving works and upholder of his teaching, continues to produce many of the world's finest male dancers. Through the work of Bournonville and his successors the Royal Danish Ballet has achieved a level of excellence that is truly remarkable for so small a country. Former members of the Copenhagen company have and continue to move out into the wider world of ballet as respected dancers, teachers and artistic directors, bringing with them a rich Danish heritage passed down from Bournonville.

Bournonville's father Antoine, himself an outstanding dancer and ballet master, was French. His mother was Swedish. While this helps account for his thoroughly cosmopolitan outlook, Bournonville, born in Copenhagen in 1805, was proudly Danish and fiercely patriotic. Much as he delighted in depicting the life and characteristics of other European nations in his many ballets – his 1842 *Napoli* is the greatest example – Bournonville felt a special kinship with his Scandinavian home. He represented its life and legends in several works, especially *A Folk Tale* from 1854, which has almost gained the stature of Denmark's "national" ballet. His charmingly sentimental 1860 *Far from Denmark* reflects Bournonville's Danish patriotism in a time of international strife while also touching, in more down-to-earth and realistic terms, on the familiar theme of man romantically captivated by the allure of an exotic female.

Bournonville's artistic gifts were many and various. His aptitude for dance was identified and cultivated from an early age. He could sing and play the piano. He was an accomplished painter and became a brilliant writer – sufficient to win the admiration of his friend and fellow Dane, Hans Christian Andersen. Bournonville's operatic productions were also widely admired but it was as a choreographer that he earned his enduring place as one of the greatest figures of Denmark's cultural "Golden Age." He was not unaware of his own major celebrity and his personal vanity frequently drew satirical responses from columnists and cartoonists.

August Bournonville's ballet training began in earnest when his father Antoine was appointed Ballet Master – effectively Artistic Director – of the Royal Danish Theatre in 1816. Antoine Bournonville, a student of the great French ballet reformer

Jean-George Noverre, had already begun to shape a distinctively Danish style of dancing. He sought to combine the Italian ballet mime tradition, so much a part of the work of his predecessor in Copenhagen, Vincenzo Galeotti, with the French emphasis on story-telling through dance. It was Antoine's son August who developed and perfected this synthesis in a way that allowed mime and dance to co-exist in a seamless narrative flow.

August Bournonville first visited Paris in 1820 and studied there from 1824 to 1826 under the great Auguste Vestris. The French capital made a lasting impression on the young man. Although he later spent time in most of Europe's major capitals, he thought of Paris almost as a spiritual home.

Bournonville danced with the ballet company of the Paris Opera and toured to London before resettling in Copenhagen in 1830. Though only in his mid-twenties, he was hired not only as a dancer but also as Ballet Master. With only brief interruptions it was a post he retained until 1877, long enough to see his company move from the cramped opera house of his youth into the larger theatre the Royal Danish Ballet still occupies.

Bournonville also married in 1830 – he hid the fact that he had earlier fathered a child in Paris – and he and his Swedish-born wife Helene went on to have six children and live a life of exemplary domestic respectability. Their home, close by one of the royal palaces, was visited by many leading cultural figures of the day.

Bournonville's *La Sylphide* from 1836 was his first ballet to gain lasting acceptance and internationally remains his best-known work. Unlike many of his other ballets *La Sylphide* was not an original. The first ballet adaptation of Charles Nodier's 1822 story *Trilby, ou le lutin d'Argail* was produced in 1828 in Milan as *La sylfide* by the French-born dancer and choreographer Louis-Xavier-Stanislas Henry. It was Italian Filippo

Taglioni's 1832 Paris production, however, that took the ballet world by storm with performances in London and Berlin and later New York, St. Petersburg and Vienna. Taglioni's *La Sylphide*, with his celebrated daughter Marie in the title role, in many respects marks the start of the French Romantic era in ballet.

Bournonville was enchanted by *La Sylphide* when he saw the ballet in Paris in 1834 and soon decided to stage his own version in Copenhagen, but his was no mere knock-off.

While largely adhering to the original story of a Scottish farmer, lured from his intended bride by a mischievous woodland spirit creature, Bournonville, intent on dancing the misguided hero James, refashioned the ballet in his own style to give the male lead greater dramatic and choreographic prominence. Also, more for logistical than artistic reasons, he commissioned a new score from Norwegian-Danish composer Herman Severin Løvenskjold. Although there have been other ballet versions of the story and a reconstruction of Taglioni's Paris production, it is Bournonville's *La Sylphide* that has gained the widest currency and survived with its essential elements and style intact.



AUGUST BOURNONVILLE
COURTESY OF THE ROYAL DANISH BALLET

BOURNONVILLE AND THE NATIONAL BALLET: A LONG TRADITION

Veteran National Ballet watchers will never forget New Year's Eve, 1964. It marked the company premiere of August Bournonville's 1836 Romantic masterpiece, *La Sylphide*, staged by Erik Bruhn, one of the greatest exponents of the Danish choreographer's joyful, fleet-footed style.

Bruhn danced the hero James. His Sylph was Canadian-born ballerina Lynn Seymour, by then an established star of Britain's Royal Ballet. This in itself was enough to generate excitement but when word spread that the great Soviet defector, Rudolf Nureyev, had arrived in Toronto to see his friend Bruhn's first ballet production, balletomania reached fever pitch. When Bruhn later developed a troubling injury, National Ballet leading dancer Earl Kraul was hastily prepared for the role and danced magnificently. However, what understandably riveted public attention was news that Nureyev himself would make a double debut on January 5, 1965 – his first James and his first appearance with the company. Despite slipping on ice and spraining his ankles, the heavily bandaged Nureyev scored a personal triumph. It was altogether an exciting moment in the National Ballet's early history.

The decision to stage *La Sylphide* was a bold initiative on the part of Celia Franca, the National Ballet's founding Artistic Director and at Bruhn's insistence its first Madge, the evil witch who seals James' fate.

When the decision was made, the National Ballet was the first North American company to commit to staging *La Sylphide* although Lucia Chase's American Ballet Theatre – could Chase have got wind of Franca's plans? – unveiled a production of its own just weeks before the National Ballet's.

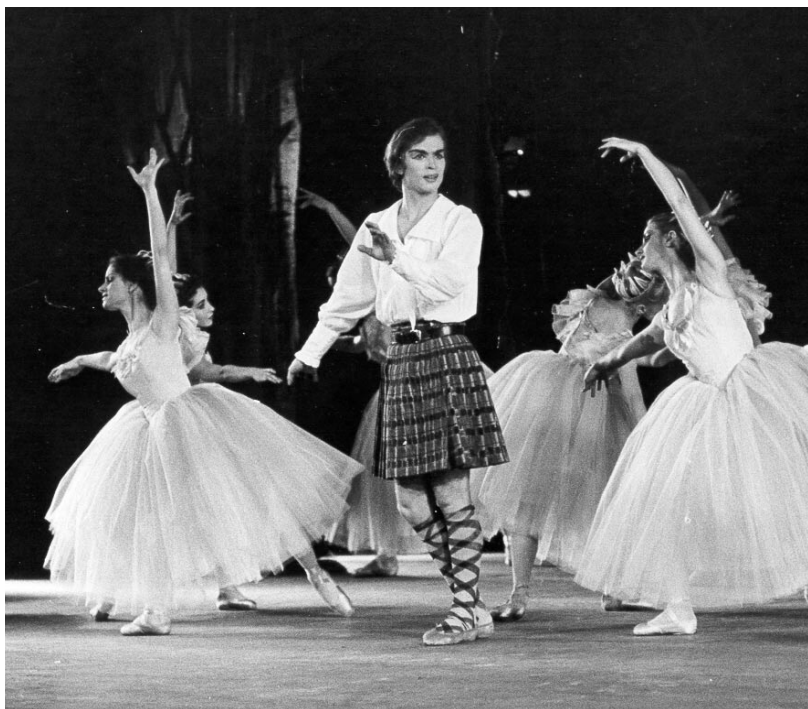
Although dancers, particularly male dancers trained in the Royal Danish Ballet's Bournonville tradition, were gaining international prominence – Bruhn was a prime example – outside his homeland Bournonville's choreography was unfamiliar to audiences of the mid-1960s. As leading Bournonville expert Erik Aschengreen explains, it was not until the international media descended on Copenhagen for the first Bournonville Festival in 1979 that the great choreographer truly achieved a "posthumous international breakthrough".

So Franca was taking a risk, albeit a shrewdly calculated one. She was motivated by her eagerness to build a distinctive repertoire for the National Ballet and by an awareness of the salutary challenge Bournonville's stylistically and technically difficult choreography would offer her dancers.

According to Franca, it was her friendship with Erik Bruhn that was the deciding factor. Franca had invited Bruhn, then still a young member of the Royal Danish Ballet, to dance as a guest in London with the short-lived



ERIK BRUHN AND LYNN SEYMOUR WITH ARTISTS OF THE BALLET, 1964



RUDOLF NUREYEV WITH ARTISTS OF THE BALLET, 1973 PHOTO BY JONES & MORRIS

Metropolitan Ballet. The two stayed in touch and, as she considered the possibility of presenting *La Sylphide* Franca travelled to Copenhagen to see it. After watching Bruhn deliver a superb performance as James, Franca visited his dressing room and, knowing Bruhn's interest in staging a production, invited him to do so in Canada. Franca and her then husband spent hours first acquiring and then pouring over the lengthy Løvenskjold score to edit it appropriately for Bruhn's intentions. "It was a lot of work," Franca still recalls.

It was the start of a unique connection between the National Ballet and Denmark's Bournonville tradition that, with the unveiling of a new production of *La Sylphide*, continues to this day. The connection has many dimensions and vividly illustrates the bonds that art has the power to build between nations.

Bruhn's association with the National Ballet continued and blossomed during the ensuing 22 years, culminating in his Artistic Directorship, 1983-86. His production of *La Sylphide* became a much-loved staple of the repertoire and a wonderful vehicle for its leading dancers. Bruhn himself continued to appear in it, latterly and memorably as the malevolent Madge.

Bruhn also began to teach at the National Ballet School and formed a valuable friendship with its founding principal, Betty Oliphant. Through his teaching as well as his dancing example, Bruhn helped inculcate a Canadian facility in the difficult Bournonville style which while appropriately accented – perhaps a little bolder and larger than the Danes – still had the mark of authenticity.

Canada's National Ballet School's connection to the Bournonville tradition and Royal Danish Ballet School survived Bruhn's sadly premature death in 1986. Student and teacher exchanges still continue and, following in Bruhn's footsteps, several distinguished members and former members of the Royal Danish Ballet – including Peter Martins, Peter Schaufuss and Johan Kobborg – have danced with the company.

The National Ballet's expertise in the exacting Bournonville style was an important factor in Alexander Grant's decision as Artistic Director, 1976-83, to stage North America's first full-length production of Bournonville's exuberantly enchanting three-act *Napoli*. As Franca had turned to Bruhn, so Grant turned to Peter Schaufuss.

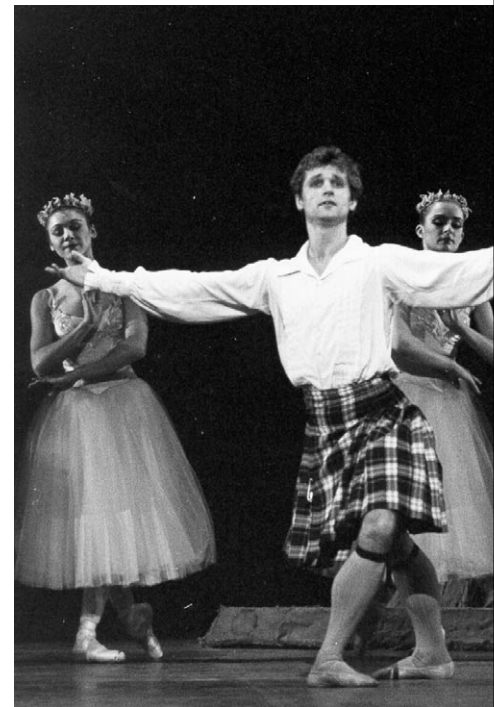
Schaufuss, son of the celebrated Danish dancers Frank Schaufuss and Mona Vangsaae, had been present as a teenager for the 1964 premiere of Bruhn's *La Sylphide* because that same season his father was appearing as a guest artist in Franca's *The Nutcracker*. Schaufuss danced with the National Ballet from 1967 to 1969, went on to achieve fame with New York City Ballet, and returned to Toronto under Grant in 1977. Grant confronted a good deal of skepticism in the run-up to *Napoli* but its Toronto premiere in 1981 was an international triumph and reinforced the company's link with Bournonville. Soon afterwards, it was a performance of *Napoli* that was chosen to mark the



CELIA FRANCA, 1965 PHOTO BY KEN BELL



LOIS SMITH AND EARL KRAUL, 1965 PHOTO BY KEN BELL



PETER SCHAUFUSS, 1981 PHOTO BY ANDREW OXENHAM

National Ballet's 30th anniversary. And what a performance, uniting Danes and Canadians in a rapturous celebration! Schaufuss partnered Veronica Tennant in the leading romantic roles, Grant joined Bruhn and another great Danish dancer, Neils Bjørn Larsen, to perform the three major male character parts and former National Ballet stars Yves Cousineau and Lois Smith performed supporting roles. Grant had even convinced Franca to take on what is normally a supernumerary role. Needless to say, in her character's elegant black widow's weeds, Franca momentarily stole the show. Then, in Act III, there were the children from the National Ballet School – the next generation – up on the bridge waving their flags and banging their tambourines while all the company's senior ballerinas danced below.

Although the complete *Napoli* has not been seen since 1991, Nikolaj Hübbe staged the brilliant divertissements from Act III in 2003. In between, under Artistic Director James Kudelka, the National Ballet presented a reconstruction of Bournonville's full length *Tales of the Arabian Nights: The Story of Abdallah* in 1997.

The Erik Bruhn Prize, an occasional invitational competition established through a bequest from the late great dancer, is another important link. Bruhn wanted a celebration of young talent drawn from companies with whom he had felt a strong allegiance during his distinguished career. Naturally the National Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet were two of them. As a result, Canadian audiences have a continuing opportunity to enjoy and admire emerging talents from both companies. Several of the leading lights of today's Royal Danish Ballet performed here as young dancers because of Bruhn's foresighted legacy.

So, the tradition continues and perhaps for reasons that reach deeper than fortuitous professional friendships and the desire of successive Artistic Directors to offer audiences something attractively distinctive.

The values inherent in the Bournonville style and in his greatest ballets are modest, humane and civilized. Although, as in *La Sylphide*, Bournonville embraced 19th-century ballet's fascination with tales of the supernatural – a fundamental component of art in the Romantic Era – his true allegiance was grounded in a wholesome reality where good triumphs over evil and ordinary people live in tolerant harmony with each other. They learn to accommodate and to resist extreme reactions and dangerous temptations. Note how the sad fate of James in *La Sylphide* is instructively contrasted with the ultimately happy union of Effy and her stalwart admirer, Gurn.

Then, in the dancing, there is a naturalness and buoyancy that despite its technical complexity has nothing to do with showing off. The choreography is approachable, generous spirited and life affirming. Is it too much to suggest that this explains why Canada in particular has forged such a special bond with this Danish master of the art of ballet and with the company he led to greatness?



MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV, 1974 PHOTO BY MARTHA SPOWE



NIKOLAJ HÜBBE WITH ARTISTS OF THE BALLET REHEARSING *LA SYLPHIDE*, 2005 PHOTO BY BRUCE ZINGER

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