

AGM Message

Barry Hughson, Executive Director

Good evening everyone and welcome to the 69th Annual General Meeting of The National Ballet of Canada, and the first to be conducted virtually. Normally, we would be gathered in the Prima Studio of The Walter Carsen Centre, sharing the results of our 2020 fiscal year, which began on July 1, 2019, and ended on June 30, 2020.

We would be celebrating the remarkable accomplishments and long tenure of many of our colleagues, some who have devoted their entire careers to the National Ballet. We will certainly celebrate as best we can tonight, but I think we all acknowledge that 2020 is a year for the record books and not in the way we had planned.

This was to be a year of celebrating Karen Kain's 50th anniversary. It is rare to have an artist turned leader spend five decades with the same company. It is rarer still that this artist becomes a Canadian cultural icon, celebrated around the world. While it breaks my heart that we didn't get to finish this season of celebration for Karen, I'm so grateful that she has agreed to extend her tenure a bit more. Demonstrating fifty years of loyalty once again, she will help lead us through this crisis and into our future, before taking her well-earned retirement. Karen, I know I speak for everyone when I say that we are deeply grateful.

Despite the continuing impact of COVID-19 on our company and our community, there are many things to celebrate. Prior to March 12, when we gave our last public performance, we were on track to meet or exceed our budgeted box office and fundraising goals, and operational expenses were right on target. We presented two world premieres and three company premieres, completed a triumphant visit to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., secured our first visit to London's historic Royal Opera House in more than 40 years and nearly finished the building of Karen's new *Swan Lake*, with extraordinary designs by Gabriela Týlešová. The first eight months of our 2020 fiscal year were stellar in every way. In the midst of our run of Alexei Ratmansky's *Romeo and Juliet* in March, the World Health Organization officially classified COVID-19 as a pandemic and 24 hours later we sent our artists home – the future uncertain.

What happened between March 12 and June 30 is not a story of despair. While there was, understandably, a fair bit of grieving for what was lost, there was also a remarkable coming together within our institution, in our city, across our country and indeed, around the world. From March to June, we moved from theoretical resilience to the real thing.

Over a period of ten days – our Technology team assisted staff in moving our entire operation to a virtual platform, without a single day of business continuity

interruption. We worked with our partners around the world to shuffle schedules and postpone projects to decrease risk while preserving collaborations that have been years in the making. Our Artistic team began strategizing ways to effectively deliver classes and other support to our artists during the shutdown and our production team delivered flooring to our dancers so that they could take virtual classes from their homes. Our Senior Leadership team worked to develop multiple financial and programming scenarios to respond to the constantly shifting realities of the pandemic. Board Chair Cornell C.V. Wright and our Board of Directors stood by us every step of the way. Our Fundraising team kept donors engaged and informed and began to build fundraising strategies and messaging to respond to our new reality. Our Marketing and Communications team immediately focused on taking an inventory of digital assets, along with developing new content to keep connected to our public and to keep our education and community work moving forward. Our Audience and Donor Services team worked with hundreds of subscribers and single ticket households to arrange conversion of tickets to donations, credits or refunds. Our Facilities and Human Resources teams began planning policies, procedures and facility upgrades that would be required to keep everyone safe once we could reopen our buildings. Our Production team found ways to keep projects moving forward, and our Wardrobe department delivered hundreds of hand-made Personal Protection Equipment to hospitals and healthcare centres. Company leadership engaged with peer institutions across Canada and around the world and began aggressively advocating for emergency relief funding for our sector. Many of our dancers and musicians volunteered to create digital content, teach virtual classes, engage donors, do press interviews – whatever was necessary to help see the company through.

In the midst of all of this, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, filmed for the world to see. This crime resulted in a global outcry to end systemic racism. At the National Ballet, we joined hundreds of arts institutions around the world in making statements of solidarity. These statements drew praise and condemnation, and one of our own dancers publicly spoke up about his painful experiences in ballet, and as a member of our company.

With support from our equity team at Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario, we brought our company together for difficult and important conversations about race. We welcomed American activist, consultant and former ballerina Theresa Ruth Howard, who brought her unique perspective through her lived experiences in the ballet world. There has been a collective “leaning in” to this work over the last two years at the National Ballet and an amplification of its importance in the last few months.

At the end of last month, Second Soloist Joe Chapman took a video of Corps de Ballet member Tene Ward receiving her first pair of pointe shoes that matched her skin tone, manufactured by Freed of London. There was an overwhelming social media response to Tene’s emotional reaction, with hundreds of thousands

of views. Comments ranged from praise to anger that it had taken this long for something so simple and so obvious.

In 1795, Charles Didelot created the predecessor of classical pointe shoes. 225 years later, Tene got a pair of pointe shoes that match her skin tone. 225 years. In the 69 years of The National Ballet of Canada, there has been only one black principal dancer. We have to do better, as an organization and as an art form – and we will. Under Karen’s leadership, today’s National Ballet is more visibly diverse than at any point in its history but there remains much work to do.

So, you can see that the whole world changed between March and June. Over the last few years, at the Board level, we’ve been talking about resilience and how to prepare for the unexpected. We are now living what resilience means and Cornell, Karen and I couldn’t be prouder of this company in this moment.

The National Ballet of Canada entered this unprecedented global crisis in a position of relative fiscal health – strong 2019/20 operating results, no debt, liquidity in our general fund and a strong, well-structured endowment. We have lived the values we set out as the pandemic began –

- To protect our artists and professional staff as fully and for as long as possible
- To protect both the short-term and long-term health of the National Ballet of Canada
- To communicate with transparency
- To be leaders in bringing together the arts and culture sector to solve problems
- To creatively and compassionately stay connected to our community
- And to document every aspect of this crisis and recovery for the future

Despite box office losses of \$4.5 million, through cost cutting, government wage subsidy and business cancellation insurance, we were able to pay our dancers and musicians fully through the end of the fiscal year on June 30, along with the majority of our administrative and production staff. Our subscribers and donors helped us get to the finish line by fulfilling pledges, donating tickets or taking credits on account for future purchases. Remarkably, only 11% of our subscribers asked for a full refund – an extraordinary show of support.

As a result, on a COVID-adjusted budget of \$32,923,000 for fiscal year 2020, we ended the year with a modest consolidated deficit of just \$303,000. Having delivered a significant surplus for fiscal year 2019 and with these 2020 results, we entered the 2021 fiscal year in a strong cash position on July 1.

March to June. 14 weeks. 110 days.

Now, we have turned our attention to the 2020/21 season and beyond. The most challenging part of this journey is not behind us but ahead of us and we’ll need

the entire National Ballet community of artists, staff, Board, donors, subscribers and stakeholders to lean in as we navigate the weeks and months ahead. It is my belief that the arts will see an exciting renaissance in the years following COVID-19. People will flock back to theatres because they will recognize what the world feels like without theatres and live performances, and without shared human experiences. We just have to get there and together, we will.