

# Mitchell's dance against death

## DANCE REVIEW

### *Dancing Joni & Other Works*

Southern Alberta Jubilee  
Auditorium, Calgary

BY MICHAEL CRABB

It was almost inevitable that *The Fiddle and the Drum*, Alberta Ballet's keenly awaited new work to Joni Mitchell songs, would receive an opening-night standing ovation, especially since the Alberta-born singer/songwriter was in attendance, but it was not a spontaneous one; and for good reason. This is not a jolly ballet designed to press the pleasure buttons. It's a thoughtful, sometimes poetically melancholy work that resonates with Mitchell's concerns about war, political chicanery and the despoiling of Planet Earth. No wonder Alberta Ballet, which relies on the business world to help keep it solvent, worried how potential sponsors might receive Mitchell's uncompromising cry of human anguish.

Ballet has been mining popular music for many years. Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens packed theatres across North America in the early 1970s with a staging of The Who's rock-opera *Tommy*. Alberta Ballet itself scored a popu-

lar hit more than a decade ago dancing to the songs of another famous Albertan, k.d. lang. It's a rare event, however, when the musician gets as closely involved in the creative process as has Mitchell.

In a pre-show chat last Thursday night at the Southern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium, choreographer and company artistic director Jean Grand-Maitre explained to audience members that in approaching Mitchell he'd proposed if not exactly a "Joni's Greatest Hits" ballet at least a quasi-biographical journey through her songs. Mitchell, already at work after a long hiatus on new songs for a forthcoming album, suggested otherwise. Rather than a choreographed apotheosis, Mitchell wanted a ballet that proclaimed her lifelong social, ecological and political concerns, even if it meant including songs that had scarcely been popular hits. Beyond that, Mitchell, in her visual artist mode, agreed to design the ballet.

With such intense collaborative participation on Mitchell's part it's small wonder that *The Fiddle and the Drum* has generated more international media attention for Alberta Ballet than anything in it's done before.

Mitchell's political banner is unfurled even before the curtain

rises. As her unaccompanied voice sings the title song, first one then a swelling group of dancers appear. They are scantily clad in skin-tight costumes, bodies daubed with stripes of pink and green. These are the same colours, Mitchell explains, that pulsated on her dysfunctional flat-screen television at home in Los Angeles and which prompted her remarkable series of images projected on screens to each side of the stage.

When the curtain does rise for *Sex Kills*, the second song, we see a stage stripped of adornment except for a huge round screen, fashioned like a stretched drum skin, suspended above the dancers. While varied images float eerily on the side screens, another video-generated series floats above the action.

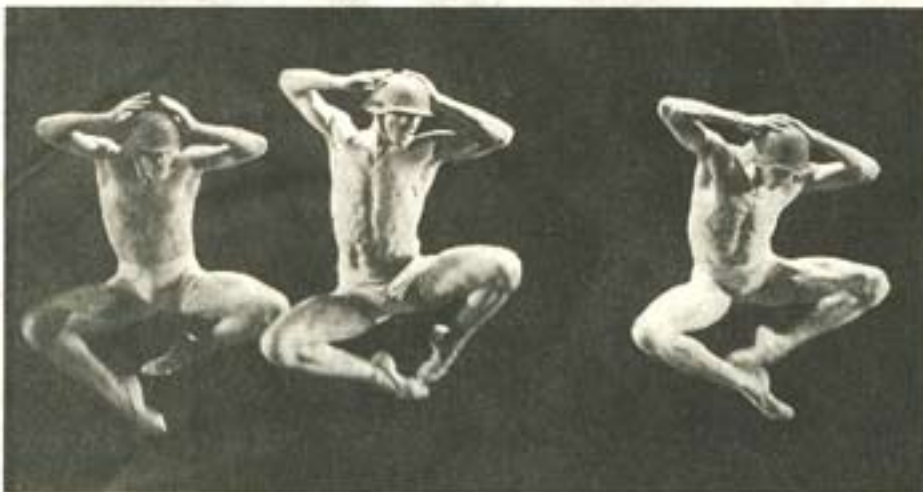
Grand-Maitre deploys his full company of 27 dancers in solos, duets and a variety of ensembles. There are painful partings, militaristic marches across the stage and crumpling figures. Strident bodies suddenly appear weighted by an invisible force and are transformed into loping zombies. This is not pretty ballet.

With such a powerful work dominating the program, it's easy to forget that the same program includes Alberta Ballet's debut performance of iconic choreographer George Balanchine's haunting Tchaikovsky masterpiece, *Serenade*. That the company can pull off two such different works in one evening — one historic, the other freshly minted — says a great deal about how far Alberta Ballet has come artistically in its 40-year existence.

The program is set for an as yet unscheduled TV broadcast. A documentary about the making of the Mitchell/Grand-Maitre ballet is also in the works.

■ Alberta Ballet's *Dancing Joni & Other Works* runs Feb. 16-17 at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton.

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Alberta Ballet's new work reinterprets the music of Joni Mitchell.