

Metamorphosis turns 17

By ANGELA PIDDUCK Sunday, April 22 2012

Artistic Director of the Metamorphosis Dance Company, Nancy Herrera, is promising a treat to local connoisseurs of the artform later this week.

Herrera, after collaborating with two international ballet artists, Frederic Jahn and Patricia Ruanne, Ballet Masters and custodians of Rudolf Nureyev's work, will produce Giselle, the first ever full length contemporary Caribbean ballet, for the company's 17th season at Queen's Hall, St Ann's from April 26-29.

Said Herrera of the new undertaking by Metamorphosis, "If you do not understand the rules, the conventions, if you don't know the story, you get lost, so you have to be briefed ... This time we are moving into a completely new dimension of a full length ballet done in one style. It's not going to be the company's traditional showcase of different styles taught at the Caribbean School of Dancing."

Herrera founded the Metamorphosis Dance Company in 1995 as a "stepping stone" for the talented senior dancers of the Caribbean School of Dancing, after they had completed the level of dance taught there, as a bridge for people who would eventually go abroad to study and then come back home to mount their work.

"Metamorphosis Company has succeeded against all odds," said Herrera.

In fact, it is only through rigorous fundraising, the commitment of teachers and parents, and kind corporate support, that Metamorphosis dancers are able to tour internationally, perform for dignitaries, enter prestigious schools for the performing arts, dance in major theatre productions in Europe and produce the annual dance season. "We have nurtured young dancers who excel both at home and abroad, such as Zara Bartels, who performs with the Lion King cast in England; Fana Fraser, who has danced with the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in the USA; Bridgette Wilson, who started in dance theatre as a Metamorphosis dancer, went on to study choreography in Canada at York University and has now returned as the company's rehearsal director and one of its choreographers. Also, Juan Pablo Alba Dennis is now studying at the Beijing Dance Academy on a Dai Ailian Foundation Scholarship."

Dai Ailian, who died at age 89 on February 9, 2006, was formerly Eileen Isaac, a Trinidadian and former student of Bishop Anstey High School. Born into an overseas Chinese family in 1916, Isaac went to England as a teenager, studied dance in China, and became known as the doyenne of dance in China.

Dai Ailian founded the Beijing Dance Academy and directed China's National Ballet.

Giselle is a full length ballet with a cast of 40 local dancers – out of which there are five male guest dancers from the University of Trinidad and Tobago's dance programme. "Except for the two producers, everyone else is Trinidadian, as Metamorphosis transports one of the great romantic French ballets to Trinidad at the turn of the 20th century," said a very excited Herrera.

"We have always had to adapt ballet on the Trinidadian body, the way we move, the way we express ourselves, is different to people in Europe or America. Likewise, what you put on stage, such as the choreography, has to communicate and mean something to a Trinidadian audience, so this particular ballet is better able to translate into a Caribbean context.

The story is interesting, the themes in the ballet translate well. One of the major themes in Act I is betrayal and in Act II it's justice and mercy."

The story is one of love and betrayal and is set in the early 1900's on a cocoa estate in Trinidad. Giselle, a young seamstress, is led to believe that the man she loves, Albert, is a simple farmer, but this is far from the truth. He is in fact the heir to the Courland Cocoa Estate and is engaged to another woman. When Giselle finally learns the truth she plunges into a fit of madness from her broken heart and kills herself. After her premature death, Giselle protects her lover from the vengeance of a group of evil female spirits.

Leading dancers are Yia Gomez, Shari Rhyner and Kriston Trim. Jahn is the choreographer and designs and sets are by Simone Phillips, who recreates the whole era of the cocoa panyol with classical movement on a West Indian body and a classical score on a West Indian instrument.

Over the years, Herrera has been pushing the boundaries of ballet and putting it in a Caribbean context.

"I don't do like kings, queens, princesses as we don't have that in the Caribbean. In fact, that is very much Caribbean School of Dancing, we have always done ballets in a local context."

The intriguing story of "Giselle", with a lot of dramatic action, beautiful costuming and scenery, starts on Thursday at 6.30 pm and continues nightly through Sunday.

Tickets are available at the Queen's Hall Box Office from tomorrow and at the Caribbean School of Dancing's office, 2A Dere Street, Port-of-Spain.