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Marie-Hélène Falcon
Director of Festival TransAmerique

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Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー Interview with Marie-Hélène Falcon, Director of TransAmeriques, the leading performing arts festival in Canada's Quebec Province

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カナダ・ケベック州の舞台芸術を牽引するフェス
トランス・アメリークのM・H・ファルコンに聞く

The predominantly French-speaking (80%) Canadian province of Quebec is famous for artists such as Robert Lepage and Cirque du Soleil and also for arts festivals like the Montreal Jazz Festival that draws an audience of about a million each year. We hear about the history of Quebec performing arts festivals and the background behind the international success of Quebec artists in recent years in this interview with Marie-Hélène Falcon, director of the Festival Theatre des Ameriques since its launch in 1985 and through its reorganization in 2007 as TransAmeriques, a festival for both theater and dance.

(Interview: Shintaro Fujii, Associate Professor of Waseda University; June 6, 2008)

It was just yesterday (June 5, 2008) that Festival TransAmériques finished its 15-day schedule of its second festival since changing its name from the former Festival de théâtre des Amériques while keeping the same FTA abbreviation. Although you are certainly still in the afterglow of an exciting festival, could I ask you to give us your overall impression of this year's festival?

I am very happy with this year's Festival. Over the past two weeks the public took the risk of creation with us, moving from one discipline to another with enthusiasm and curiosity.

We just finished compiling all the statistics for the fifteen days and we find that this year's schedule attracted a larger audience than last year. Excluding the free outdoor performances, we had a total attendance of over 16,000. In terms of capacity, the overall audience ratio was an average of 75% of seating capacity, but about half of the performances on the schedule were sold out. And we estimate that another 8,000 attended the free performances. When you consider that the population of France is eight times that of Quebec and the representative French theater festival at Avignon draws just over 100,000 in audience per festival, I think you can say that our numbers are quite respectable. And already in this morning's French-language newspaper *La Presse*, they gave us a every favorable overall review on the festival in a large article. Honestly, I am very happy with this.

I have served as director since the launch of the Festival de théâtre des Amériques in 1985. In the past, ours was a biennial festival held every other year with a mini-festival called Théâtres du Monde in the interim years, but from last year we changed to an annual festival format. Preparing a full-sized festival every year is certainly difficult in terms of schedule (laughs), but for the festival it helps to keep it fresh in people's memories if it is held every year, so it is a fortunate thing.

Why did you change the Festival de théâtre des Amériques to a new festival that includes dance as well as theater?

Due to a number of circumstances, the International Nouvelle Dance Festival (FIND) that started around the same time as our festival had to be disbanded. At that time, federal, provincial and municipal authorities solicited proposals for a

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festival to carry on the dance tradition. I submitted a proposal for a festival that would include both theater and dance. It was a quite audacious project so I was very surprised and of course, extremely happy when it was accepted.

The program of the Festival de théâtre des Amériques was focused primarily on theatre works, but we also introduced dance works from time to time. And from watching many dance works, I had come to feel strongly in dance a unique appeal that wasn't to be found in theater. Quebec is a place that truly has a very active and interesting dance scene. In fact, half of the new works of dance produced in Canada come out of Quebec. However, at the time our festival had budget restrictions that prevented us from including many dance works in our programs.

Now that you mention it, I remember seeing a performance of “lets op Bach” choreographed by Alain Platel at the Festival de théâtre des Amériques and being really shocked by its uniqueness. It was a work that you hardly knew whether to call it dance or not.

I am especially interested in works that cross over the boundaries of the usual genre. This is true in the case of works that cross the boundaries of the artistic genres of theater and dance and also of works that break out of the usual theater venue into very un-theater-like spaces.

On our festival program this time, although most of the works were performed in theaters, there were also several works that ventured out of the theater venue in that way, including a work performed in the Place des Arts outdoor venue (“MELT” choreographed by Noémie Lafrance) and one performed in a warehouse on the old harbor district (“CABANE” choreographed by Paul-André Fortier) and a work that used street and shop window spaces (“LA MAREA” directed by Mariano Pensotti).

It is part of our festival mission to help our audience see and experience contemporary creative works (création contemporaine). We want to provide opportunities for the audience to encounter things they have not known before, to discover new parts of themselves and rediscover new aspects of their city. And we want to give them more opportunities to see works from cultures they have not known before and find more talented young artists.

In both your old and new festival names you use the word Amérique (French for America), and in both cases it is used in the plural (Americas). Isn't it unique to use it in the plural this way?

The word America is often used, if not always, in reference of the United States. But for us, it is much much wider. Of course, the U.S. is not the only country in the Americas. There are also French-speaking Americans like us in Quebec, there is the English-speaking Americas and the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Americas.

First and foremost, we are an international festival. We are based in Montreal, Québec, so we are naturally giving a large place to Quebec and Canadian artists. This year, we presented a few major artists from all across the country such as Marie Brassard, Benoît Lachambre, Nadia Ross, Marie Chouinard, Louise Lecavalier, Dana Gingras and Danièle Desnoyers. Two very talented directors from South America (Mariano Pensotti from Argentina and Enrique Diaz from Brazil) were also part of this festival. From Europe, which has always been a vital part of our program, we've invited Michèle Noiret and Galin Stoev from Belgium, Raimund Hoghe from Germany and also artists from Romania and Turkey.

It is quite significant to know that in the cases of Quebec artists like Benoît Lachambre and Marie Chouinard this year and Robert Lepage and Denis Marleau last year, it is hard to say whether they have been more active in Europe or Quebec recently.

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Also, I definitely want to invite some Japanese artists in a near future. Coming to Tokyo for the first time in a while to attend the Tokyo Performing Arts Market in March and the Tokyo International Arts Festival certainly strengthened that desire.

As if taking an example from Avignon, your festival had some very interesting “off” performances as festival fringe works that I felt were very successful and a major asset to the festival. However, unlike Avignon, this “off” schedule included some quite famous artists like Daniel Danis, O Vertigo, José Navas and Dave St-Pierre, and although the performances were on a smaller scale, there were many interesting ones to see.

There is quite a large number of professionals working in festivals and theaters outside of Montreal who come to participate in our festival. It is very unfortunate that we cannot include more artists in our official program. We consider that the “off” is very fortunate because it stimulates encounters that can lead to invitations from abroad. This is a situation in which everyone benefits.

Could you tell us about your personal history and career before you became director of Festival de théâtre des Amériques?

I started out studying philosophy and theatre at UQAM (University of Québec in Montreal). After that I became involved in student theatre festivals and I managed a women’s theatre festival. Eventually I became involved in the Quebec Youth Theatre Association (AQJT). At the time AQJT was a gathering place for young theatre companies who were socially involved and many of them were also strong supporters of the movement for Quebec independence. The theatre they were doing was very politically oriented. That was the type of era it was. It was a major social movement from the 1960s that was called the “Quiet Revolution,” and it was a time when the French-speaking community of Quebec developed a very strong consciousness of their cultural uniqueness. And, because we had a sense that we had to create our own art and society from now on, it was a joyous time of artistic experimentation, unbound by the past and unconcerned about what others thought of us.

This may be a bit off the subject, but in 1976, the Parti Québécois dedicated to the independence of Quebec province came to power and in 1980 a public referendum was held on the issue of whether or not to begin negotiations towards the independence and separation of Quebec from Canada. The result was that the majority turned out to be against separation, which greatly disappointed many of the artists of Quebec. But we can also say that that defeat helped to turn the energies of those artists back to creativity that led to a flowering of artistic creation.

I see. So, that is the kind of political background behind the international emergence of Quebec artists in the 1980s. From the early to mid-80s you had a number of festivals, including Montreal’s Festival de théâtre des Amériques and the Nouvelle Dance Festival and Quebec city’s Carrefour international de théâtre de Quebec (known as the La Quinzaine at the time) all being founded around the same period. The CINARS performing arts market was also formed during this same period, wasn’t it? And in Europe as well, the French –language theater festival of Limoges started also at this same time and, through the performances of works by Robert Lepage, a circuit rapidly began to develop connecting Quebec with the outside world.

The Quebec community has traditionally been a provincial community that looks inward rather than outward toward the world at large. The 1967 Montreal World

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Exposition and the 1976 Montreal Olympics were very important as opportunities for the society of Quebec to feel greater connections to the outside world. The Silent Revolution changed the consciousness of the people of Quebec and they began to open up to the outside world more and more.

Today, artists from Quebec are working all over the world. And I believe that our festival has played a very big role in opening Quebec to the outside world and building a foundation for international cultural exchange. I believe that it gave the audience and the artists of Quebec the opportunity to see many works of the types they had never seen before and played an important role in supporting artists who wanted to look to the outside world, bringing them together with foreign producers and artists and helping to build an international network.

Could you tell us something about how your festival is run? Can we begin by asking about your festival budget?

For this year's festival we had an overall budget of 2.8 million Canadian dollars (approx. 280 million yen). Last year it was 2.7 million. For a festival of our scale, I believe this is a rather small budget.

Roughly speaking, about two-thirds of our revenue comes from public-sector funding. Our largest contributor is the Quebec provincial government (36% from the Quebec Council of the Arts and Culture), next is the Canadian federal government (20% from the Department of Canadian Heritage and from the Canada Council for the Arts) and lastly from the city of Montreal and from the Montreal Council of the Arts (9%). [Note: In Canada and Quebec, public-sector support for the arts is administrated by councils that are independent of direct government control.] The festival's budget breakdown is 63% for programming and production of works, 22% for advertising and audience development, and 15% for administration.

Philanthropic support from private-sector corporations is very difficult to obtain. Despite the fact that we are a North American society, corporate philanthropy is not yet common in Quebec. But, if you become as famous as the Montreal Jazz Festival, it is a different story. But, even in the United States, I don't think the level of corporate support in the fields of contemporary theatre and dance is very large in monetary terms.

Our next largest source of revenue after public funding is from ticket sales (ticket sales and other related income accounts for 35% of total revenue). I think it might be even better if we could lower our ticket prices a bit, but that is not easy in the North American context compared to European festivals with their generous levels of public-sector funding. Still, we try to expand our points of contact between the audience and the festival as much as possible through devices such as discounts for people who see more performances and the free outdoor performances that we always include in the festival program.

Speaking of your audience, what are the percentages of French-speaking and English-speaking audience?

The French-speaking audience is larger. Because in both Montreal and in the province of Quebec, French is the main language, so that is unavoidable. Of course, our professional audience, the festival directors and program directors who come to our festival from around the world, many of them can't speak any French at all.

However, at the same time, even though the focus of our festival is contemporary creation (*création contemporaine*), we are trying to get people who have no previous interest in the arts for example with our outdoor performances. Since we

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トランス・アメリークのM・H・ファルコンに聞く

are trying to show the very latest, the cutting edge of contemporary arts, it is unavoidable that our audience will mainly be people who already have a knowledge and interest in contemporary arts.

Do you have to pay to rent of the theatres and other venues that you use for the festival? Do you confer with the theatres when deciding what works will be performed where?

Yes. We don't have any venues of our own, so we have to rent out the theaters during the performance runs. This is a large and burdensome expense. The Festival is always selecting the works that will be performed. Exceptionally, some works are copresented with theatres, in which case the festival's choice requires a mutual agreement.

How many permanent office staff do you employ year round? I always find your staff so capable and so helpful and hospitable that my visits to Montreal are always very fruitful.

In all we have 11 people working year round. During the festival with the additional stage help and security people we need, we have about 200 people employed on a temporary basis. Also, each year we accept intern trainees to work on our staff, and we had seven this year. We make it a policy not simply to use these trainees for menial office work like making copies, but we assign them one important job that they take full charge of. Since we get many highly capable people coming to us, we are able to entrust them with important jobs with assurance, and in this sense we are very fortunate.

We are told that the Associate Artist for the 2009 Avignon Festival is Wajdi Mouawad, who studied originally at National Theatre School of Canada in Montreal, worked as a director in Quebec theater before going on to world fame. Of course the official program has not been announced yet but I am sure that it will be one that offers an opportunity for people to see some of the outstanding work being done by Quebec artists today and I am looking forward to it very much. Thank you for this informative interview today.

You're welcome.