

# Ballet High: An Interview with The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's Jennifer Welsman

By Mariève MacGREGOR

Take a peek into a world unlike any other. A world of travel, drama, costumes, lights, rehearsals, difficult shoes, and tutus. The world of dance. In an interview with Jennifer Welsman, a soft-spoken ballerina with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, I took a close look into that world, and fought my way back through ripped pantyhose, a pesky media contact person, and a little dog in a sweater.

**"We're one of the most-toured companies in the world and that's another one of the most amazing parts of this job."**

**-Jennifer Welsman**

Mariève: So you will be playing the Sleeping Beauty in tonight's show.

How did you prepare for that role?

Jennifer: Oh, my gosh, it's been a long process. It's amazing now, thinking about going out and doing these shows because last year I basically learned the steps. I had an amazing mentor, Galina Yordanova who choreographed this ballet. The only problem was that there are three different casts so we didn't get as much rehearsal time as we would want, as it always goes. Going into these shows I've got a daily routine. When I'm performing Aurora (the Sleeping Beauty) I usually wake up pretty early. If we're travelling I'll listen to the music, just my variations and all the parts that I'll be dancing. (I'll) get to the theatre incredibly early just to do my hair and get myself focussed. I'll try a few things with my partner beforehand, like obviously pirouettes and any kind of moderations. It's been amazing, I find it's almost like building a house. Last year I only had the foundation and this year I've been able to add the layers. The more you go out there... I mean, I love going on stage. It's definitely the best part of this career. When you're out there with the music and the costumes



**Two jobs: She must have student loans**

and all of your friends, you're just transformed. It's pretty amazing. But it's incredible how you think that there's no way you'll ever be able to know everything about a role. You just have to keep adding and keep adding (to the role). Every time you go out on stage there's something that's different, inspired.

M: Now, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet has come to Charlottetown every year for however many years now, but you didn't last year. What happened there?

J: Well, I think.... I'm not sure. Has it been every year? Because I thought it was every two years...

**"Ok, you were the China Doll on [the children's show] Toy Castle."**

**-Mariève**

M: Every two years? Well maybe there were three years in a row when you guys came, then (blush).

J: Actually, I was here the last time with Dracula (in 2000) and the time before that I wasn't. It just depends on our scheduling. Last year we went to

Asia at the end of the year. Then we were committed to perform Requiem 9/11, a Brian MacDonald piece for a tribute for the nine eleventh. (It took place) in Ottawa and that was in September, so it's scheduling, I suppose, but we're back this year! (Giggles)

M: Dracula was just amazing. It was beyond belief, I've never seen anything like it.

J: Oh! Thank you!

M: André Lewis was the Artistic Director for that as well (as this year's Sleeping Beauty). I was wondering if, with this Sleeping Beauty, has it changed? I know that there is the original Sleeping Beauty choreography, but is this one a new one?

J: No, this is the original. It's after Marius Petipa. Galina Yordanova, who is also our resident guest teacher, set Swan Lake. In our new Nutcracker she did the second act. She's definitely pure classical, traditional ballet.

M: Yes, I read that originally choreographed by Petipa (in 1890).

J: Yes, and staged by Galina. She came

from Russia and she actually trained in Bulgaria as well. She taught with the Bulgere and the tradition has been passed down.

M: How long would it take to set a ballet of this size, either in rehearsal or in production? What kind of process is that?

J: Our season is jam-packed with everything that we do. Whether we're learning a new ballet or getting ready to go on tour, it never seems like we have time. But Galina is just the most remarkable person. She is this tiny, like, five foot woman, and she has this power and she knows every single character, every detail, every arm gesture, finger gesture, where your eye position is supposed to be for every person in the ballet. Working with her makes it a lot, well, a lot faster most of the time, but with that she's very demanding. (She) comes with a Russian background where you have to follow the rules and everything must hold up to the tradition and with the standard of what it should be danced. (Setting a ballet) takes several months. Usually the way she works, she'll have the corps de ballet first and even if we're rehearsing another ballet at the time she'll take them and have a separate rehearsal. Then she kind of breaks it down in parts and she'll do a group of pas de deux and she'll teach us Aurora, all separately, and I guess within the last month she'll put it all together. I mean, you never feel like you have enough rehearsal time. The amazing thing about Galina is that you spend an hour doing a thirty second part of the ballet. It's so important so that when you go on stage you're that much more comfortable with the music when there's lights, when there's costumes, when something happens, all the live elements, you're not fazed at all, you're completely in your character and that's the one thing that she really emphasizes. I mean, along with the technique as well, but the relationship with the

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