



Brent Lott &lt;brentlott@gmail.com&gt;

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**FW: STATEMENT: National Arts Centre mourns the passing of Canadian choreographer and dancer Rachel Browne/Le Centre national des Arts pleure le décès de la danseuse et chorégraphe canadienne Rachel Browne**

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**Holmes, Jeanne** <Jeanne.Holmes@nac-cna.ca>

11 June 2012 12:13

To: "sballard@mymts.net" <sballard@mymts.net>, Lucie Boissinot <lucie.boissinot@edcmtl.com>, "pat@schooloftd.org" <pat@schooloftd.org>, EDQ - Lyne Binette <lbinette@ecolede dansedequbec.qc.ca>, faye and odette <info@schoolofcontemporarydancers.ca>, Hélène <helene.leclair@ladmmi.com>, "lauren@schooloftd.org" <lauren@schooloftd.org>, lydia <lydiawagerer@hotmail.com>, Soraya <soraya.ouldali@ladmmi.com>, sylvie desrosiers <theschoolofdance@magma.ca>  
Cc: Brent Lott <brentlott@gmail.com>

Hi all – just out from the NAC communications team - fyi

Best

jeanne

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**From:** Thompson, Rosemary**Sent:** Monday, June 11, 2012 1:10 PM**To:** All users / Tous les utilisateurs**Subject:** STATEMENT: National Arts Centre mourns the passing of Canadian choreographer and dancer Rachel Browne/Le Centre national des Arts pleure le décès de la danseuse et chorégraphe canadienne Rachel Browne

## **National Arts Centre mourns the passing of Canadian choreographer and dancer Rachel Browne**

**Ottawa (Canada)**—The National Arts Centre (NAC) is mourning the death of Rachel Browne, the founder of the longest standing contemporary dance company in the country, Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers (WCD).

Known as the beloved matriarch of the Winnipeg dance community, Ms. Browne was visiting Ottawa over the past few days as part of the Canada Dance Festival. The NAC extends its condolences to all of the dancers participating in the festival and to Ms. Browne's family and friends, she will be deeply missed.

Browne was here to oversee a performance of students from The School of Contemporary Dancers (Winnipeg) on Tuesday and to attend the performance of Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers in Brent Lott's *97 Positions of the Heart* on Wednesday.

Mr. Lott is the current Artistic Director of Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers (or WCD). "Rachel Browne's legacy is us," Lott said in a statement. "All of these dancers and choreographers who have been blessed by knowing her, dancing for her, being mentored by her. We're all around the world now."

Lott's show will go on as planned on Wednesday. "She wouldn't have wanted it any other way," he said.

To pay tribute to Rachel Browne's contribution to the cultural life of Canada the NAC has lowered its flag in recognition of her

# DANCE COLLECTION DANSE

Number 72

DANCE THAT LASTS

Fall 2012

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**Rachel Browne**

**Leland Windreich**

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# Rachel Remembered

BY CAROL ANDERSON

In the days and hours following Rachel's sudden death, images of her, fragments and words, kept coming to mind. Indomitable. Brave. Radical. Funny. Haunted. Wilful. Sensible. Poetic. Uncompromising. Amazing listener. Moral matriarch.

Ray was her given name. "Rachel" was an invention when she got an Equity card in New York City and there was already a Ray Browne. She travelled through radical phases in her life. There was a play of forces inside as Rachel continuously balanced light and dark. A woman of unflinching determination, once she had decided on achieving something she never ever relinquished her goal.

Rachel left us peacefully, after travelling to Ottawa to see students of the School of Contemporary Dancers perform in a massive Canada Dance Festival production of Jean-Pierre Perreault's *Joe et Rudolphe* that brought together students from Canada's professional contemporary dance training schools.

It seems certain that Rachel attended *Joe* in spirit. As a mentor, teacher and choreographer who worked with many generations of dancers, she was focussed, entirely attentive, a proud but critical observer, attuned to every nuance and detail of a dancer's work. Odette Heyn Penner, one of the co-founders and co-directors of The School of Contemporary Dancers, noted that Rachel found, with each new process, a simpler, more supportive way to work with dancers, moving into a deepening identity as an artist and humanitarian through her work.

Early dances by Rachel were often created in response to her profound love of folk songs, classical music and poetry. There was a deep vein of socio-political activism in her. These elements had been part of her upbringing; she studied music as a child, and her father was a Russian political exile. Drawing from her formative influences, her early dances also seemed symbols of her struggle to move beyond the forms of the modernist ideals she admired, and the ideals of classical form that she absorbed deeply from her ballet training and performing career in New York and with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Despite the enormous

and relentless demands of her role as artistic director of Contemporary Dancers – choreographing, teaching, dancing, directing, hiring dancers and choreographers – she was determined to stay creatively vital. Her great desire was to develop as a choreographer. She held to pursuing this artistic goal, she once told me, "because it's so hard."

Though Rachel did not much like the word "pioneer" as a descriptor, she is a founder of Canadian modern dance. Hired by her teacher and mentor Benjamin Harkavy, in 1957 she came to Canada from New York to dance with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet during Harkavy's brief tenure



Contemporary Dancers tour bus, 1971  
In the windows (L to R): Elaine Loo, Michele Presley, Holly Anne Savage; Standing: 2 crew members, David Tucker, Barbara Johnson, Janet Oxley, Jim Green; On roof: David Weller and Charlie Moulton; On hood: Larry Brinker and Rachel Browne



Dancers in the studio with Rachel Browne, 1967

as artistic director. After four years she left to raise her young family. But dance called her – she began to teach at the downtown Winnipeg studio of Nenad and Jill Lhotka and she soon began to choreograph. Her first piece, *Odette's Songs and Dances*, emerged – she described this in her biography, *Dancing Toward the Light*: "When this first dance came out of my body, it certainly was not balletic ... the movement looked, felt, contemporary. It was just from inside, from my gut someplace ..."

Rachel started Canada's oldest existing modern dance company, Contemporary Dancers (now Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers), in 1964. At first a small touring ensemble, the company quickly grew. In its first years, there was no support from the Canada Council for the Arts, though Rachel received individual encouragement as a performer and frequently studied in New York. She invited noted choreographers to work with the company, including Sophie Maslow, Dan Wagoner and James Waring. The company built a strong following in Winnipeg, for years running a very successful subscription series and tour-

ing extensively in Canada and the U.S. In the early years, Rachel did everything, from typing programs to making dances, from hiring and training dancers to dancing herself.

After nearly twenty years, in the context of the huge metamorphosis in Canadian dance, the rise of one-choreographer companies, the ascendance of Quebec dance, and conflicting artistic imperatives that affected the Contemporary Dancers board and dancers, the company went through a convulsive crisis. Rachel finally tendered her resignation. Over time, she re-established and sustained a cordial relationship with the company, becoming an important fundraiser and advocate of its activity. And her choreography was consistently presented.

Stepping down as Contemporary Dancers' artistic director against her will marked a traumatic and seismic change in Rachel's world. However, free of the responsibilities of organizing and running Contemporary Dancers, she began to devote her energies to her choreography, finding solace, and new direction, in creation. She cultivated her connection with the school, a decades-long

commitment that never faltered throughout the company's troubles, and remained a key player – teaching, mentoring, choreographing. She was valued as a guide and wise mentor by Odette Heyn-Penner and Faye Thomson, co-directors and co-founders of the school that Rachel effectively handed to them while both were still in their twenties.

Concentrating on her choreographic aims from the early 1980s forward, she created a long series of challenging, episodic works including *Mouvement*, *Six Messages*, *Edgelit*, *Toward Light* and many others. While often her voice was spare, searching, dark, she also created light-hearted pieces. Her last professional work was *Radiant*, created for the company's Kristin Haight. Rachel's final piece, *Momentum*, a trio for the school's graduating students, was performed in May 2012.

Rachel continued to dance selectively. Lyrical as a young dancer, then slowed by age and physical impairment, she was always expressive and, in later years, hauntingly so. Dance artist/archivist Stephanie Ballard, a close and longtime artistic friend, is considering whether she can restage *Home Again*, created in 2010, an intergenerational work that featured Rachel in a powerful concluding solo.

Rachel will be remembered for her courage and integrity. She will be remembered for the way she wrestled with every side of every possible question to find the way to act that would be most morally acceptable. Her choreographies reflected this, with their social commentary and feminism, and their clarity. Honesty made her a cherished mentor.

Rachel became a Member of the Order of Canada in 1997 in recognition of her leadership in establishing and nurturing dance in Winnipeg and her significance in establishing and developing modern dance across Canada. She received many



Rachel Browne (centre) in Tedd Robinson's *Nothing Past the Swans*, 1986  
Photo: Robert Tinker

other honorifics, but her driving desire was always to be in the studio, creating and refining her work.

The School of Contemporary Dancers celebrates its fortieth year in 2012/13. In 2014, Winnipeg's Con-

temporary Dancers will turn fifty. For her remarkable, gutsy startup spirit, and her indomitable will, Rachel will be remembered with love and tributes through the entities that she started for the love of dance.

In later years, Rachel cherished time with her grandchildren and three daughters, Ruth, Miriam and Annette. She had said good-bye to two husbands, Don Browne and Ben Sokolow, and spent her last years living her feminist ideals. Her works, from the 1990s onward, were created for and danced by women. She worked with some of Canada's greatest women contemporary dancers – among them Stephanie Ballard, Odette Heyn-Penner, Faye Thomson, Pat Fraser, Karen Kuzak, Susan Macpherson, Davida Monk, Julia Sasso. In Rachel's searching, minutely nuanced explorations, inner space was created, theatrical, acoustic spaces resonant with deep listening. Journeying the textured, sometimes bleak terrain of women's work, Rachel's dances brought to light inchoate voices of profound solitude, and expressions of indelible joy with the voice of her soul, questing.

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## I REMEMBER RACHEL BROWNE

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**Karey Shinn remembers Rachel Browne, who died on June 8.**

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Rachel Browne opened up a world of possibilities to me when I was growing up in the suburbs of Winnipeg in the 1960s.

I learned Martha Graham technique from Rachel. She explained the floor exercises and then sat cross-legged, improvising beats on her bongo drums for us. She had us dance to her recorded music of Bartok, Odetta, and Switched-On Bach. Ten of us teenagers were there every Monday evening for her class. It was this class that produced her first Contemporary Dancers.

Classes were held in an old brick building at the corner of

Graham and Donald, where the new Winnipeg Public Library now stands. The ground floor was a classic greasy spoon. The second floor was shared between the Nenad Llotka Ballet Studio and the Scientific Beauty Salon. The third floor was J's Discotheque, an old Ballroom set up with a six-foot diameter silhouette of a couple doing the jive inlaid into the wooden floor in the foyer. On the fourth floor was Rachel's studio with its 11-foot ceiling, clunking radiators, and giant gilt framed mirror leaning off the front wall. I was 16 years old. This was bohemia.

I didn't become a professional dancer, but I showed her my drawings and she encouraged me to do art, which I have done.

# Obituaries

FAX: 416-585-5699 » DEATH NOTICES: 416-585-5111 » FEEDBACK TO OBIT@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM



Rachel Browne, right, was known for her endless energy and her dogged pursuit of perfection. BORIS MINKEVICH/THE CANADIAN PRESS

**RACHEL BROWNE** CHOREOGRAPHER, 77

## Famed taskmaster used to change the clocks to get more work from her dancers

Founder of Winnipeg's School of Contemporary Dancers received many honours for her life-long accomplishments

**PAULA CITRON**

Rachel Browne died with her boots on. The founder of Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers and its associate school passed away peacefully in her Ottawa hotel room on June 8. She was attending the Dance in Canada Festival.

Brent Lott, WCD's current artistic director, speaks for the Canadian dance community at large when he says: "How tragically poetic, how bittersweet, that she died surrounded by dancers." It is also prophetic that Browne's penultimate piece *Radiance*, a solo for WCD dancer Kristin Haight, which made its debut in December, 2011, was about confronting death.

Browne was considered the matriarch of Canadian contemporary dance. She took great pride in the fact that WCD, which she established in 1964, is the oldest modern dance company in Canada. Through the School of Contemporary Dancers, she helped train, nurture and inspire countless choreographers and dancers. Her role as a pioneer in the development of modern dance in Canada is monumental.

She was born Ray Minkoff in 1934 in Philadelphia to Russian immigrant parents. Her father Israel, an insurance salesman, and

name to Rachel in order to join Actors' Equity and avoid conflict with an existing member. Her inner circle called her Ray.

When Harkarvy became artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, he invited Browne to join the company. It is a testament, either to Don Browne's service to his wife's career, or her force of will, that the couple moved to Winnipeg in 1957 where they were soon joined by Eva Minkoff.

Browne arrived on the same plane as Richard Rutherford, a fellow RWB dancer. Rutherford remembers Browne's relentless pursuit of her craft. "We had an hour and a half class followed by six hours of rehearsals," he says. "I could scarcely breathe at the end of the day, but Rachel would stay late, endlessly practising her pirouettes."

This single-mindedness would become a well-known Browne trait when she was working with dancers in rehearsal. Apparently, in the early years of the company, dancers were afraid to tell Browne if they were injured because her philosophy was to keep making them dance, no matter what. In fact, Browne used to set the studio clocks back 10 minutes to gain extra rehearsal time. When the company moved into its new quarters, the studio clocks were placed above

formidable reputation.

1983 was one of the darkest chapters in Browne's life. That year the WCD board fired Browne as artistic director. She was even barred from entering the building. The reason given was a desire to have a fresh, new approach. A modern dance repertory company with its refined ideals of harmony and musicality seemed stilted and unadventurous in light of the many changes sweeping contemporary dance in the 1980s.

It took many years for the rift to heal. Browne ultimately became a WCD board member and created many works for the company. In 2008, the main WCD studio/performance space was named the Rachel Browne Theatre.

Toronto choreographer Carol Anderson, who wrote Browne's biography *Dancing Toward the Light* (1999), believes that Browne's dismissal from WCD was a blessing in disguise. Says Anderson: "Ray became an independent choreographer, and freed from the strictures of creating company works to fit the needs of a program, she could pursue her individualistic artistic expression."

Browne's first piece, *Odetta's Songs and Dances* (1964), resembled a folkdance in its joy of movement. Over the years

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*We had an hour and a half class followed by six hours of rehearsal. I could scarcely breathe at the end of the day, but Rachel would stay late, endlessly practising her pirouettes.*

**Richard Rutherford**  
Dancer

women paving the way for those coming after. Browne also believed in the creation of new music, and had a particularly fruitful artistic relationship with the late composer Ann Southam.

Browne was a singular personality, and the people who knew her rejoice in talking about her foibles. Luckily, Browne was always able to laugh at herself. An endearing trait was the notes that Browne gave after performances, even on the closing night. She even gave notes when she saw the works of other choreographers whom she had mentored.

By all accounts, Browne was an atrocious driver who was prone to sideswipe other cars. This led

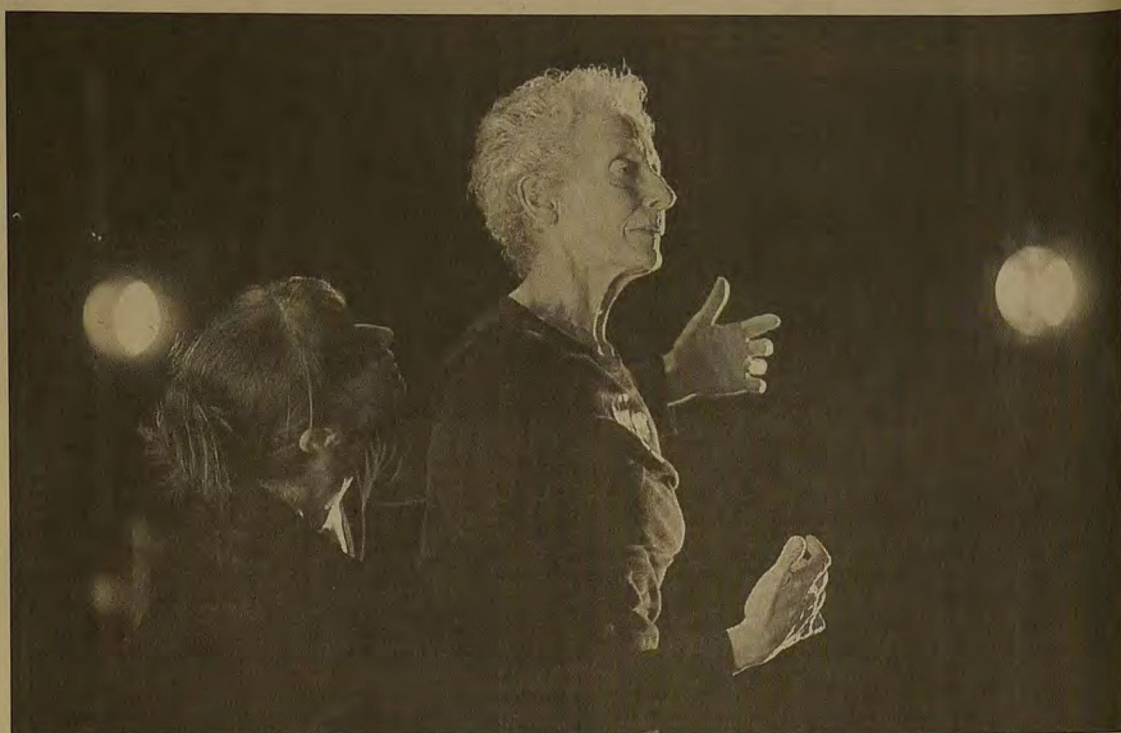
among the greatest inventions.

Browne's standard outfit was a tracksuit and sneakers. She did, however, dress up when she received her Order of Canada in 1997. Among her other honours were the Jean A. Chalmers Award for Creativity in Dance (1995), the Canada Council Jacqueline Lemieux Prize (2000), and the Manitoba Arts Council Great-West Life Lifetime Achievement Award (2001).

She put so much of herself into creation that she would often get sick before a performance.

Browne also suffered from chronic insomnia and needed pills to put her to sleep. In recent years, she had become increasingly frail, struggling with hip injuries and a very serious bout of pneumonia, but at 77, she was still going strong. Family and friends thought she was an indestructible force. Everyone assumed she would be there for WCD's 50th anniversary in two years.

Browne's death leaves many projects unfinished. One of the most poignant is a dance for camera film with Cooke. Browne had very arthritic, deformed hands that were, at the same time, very expressive. Cooke's idea was to film Browne's hands while recording her stream of consciousness voice-over. They had two rehearsal sessions last



BORIS MINKEVICH / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS ARCHIVES

# Dance world's 'grande dame' left a living legacy

*Founded oldest contemporary dance company*

By Alison Mayes

OBITUARY

**RACHEL BROWNE**

THE Winnipeg arts community is mourning the death of Rachel Browne, the revered founder of Canada's oldest contemporary dance company and the beloved matriarch of the dance scene in Winnipeg.

Browne, 77, died peacefully in her sleep at an Ottawa hotel on Saturday, said Stephanie Ballard, her fellow choreographer and friend of 40 years. The cause of death has not been determined.

Browne was in Ottawa to show support for students from the School of Contemporary Dancers, who performed at the Canada Dance Festival on Saturday.

The trailblazing performer, choreographer and teacher founded Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers (WCD) in 1964 and its affiliated school

in 1972. She became an influential artist on a national scale. She was endlessly supportive of each new crop of young dancers as a mentor, Ballard said, and had recently choreographed a trio for graduating students.

"She was truly the grande dame," Ballard said. "She made it her business to know all the dancers in Winnipeg and be at all performances."

Browne's last onstage appearance was at age 75 in a multi-generational work by Ballard called *Homeagain*.

She leaves behind daughters Ruth Asper, Miriam Browne and Annette Browne and grandchildren Daniel, Rebecca and Max Asper. Browne's



WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS ARCHIVES

ABOVE: Choreographers Rachel Browne (seated) and Stephanie Ballard with dancers in 2002.

TOP LEFT: Browne performs during an event marking the naming of the Rachel Browne Theatre in 2008.

RIGHT: Browne performs with Ron Holbrook in *True Believer* in 1969.

second husband, Ben Sokoloff, died in 2004.

On Sunday, Asper recalled her mother's chutzpah and described her as still vibrant and youthful in her dance work. "She was a force to be reckoned with in all of her passions," Asper said. But the family is mainly remembering Browne as a wonderful mother and "baba," she said.

Browne was born Ray Minkoff in Philadelphia in 1934 to Russian Jewish immigrants. A ballet dancer from the age of six, she moved to New York the day after she graduated from high school. There was already a Ray Minkoff in the performers' union, so she adopted the name Rachel.

When her mentor, Benjamin Harkarvy, was hired to lead the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in 1957, he brought Browne here as a dancer. She danced with the RWB until 1961, but quit to raise a family with her first husband, Don Browne. She later said although she was deeply musical, she never had the body type to be a ballet star.

She was unhappy as a housewife and couldn't live without dance. In 1964, the feminist, pacifist artist began to choreograph in a non-classical, earthy style and formed Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers, Canada's first professional modern troupe. She made many subsequent trips to New York to study modern technique.

She was the unstoppable artistic director of WCD for nearly 20 years.

In the early days, she toiled as the administrator, fundraiser and publicist as well as the main dancer and choreographer.

Browne demanded intense dedication. According to Carol Anderson's 1999 biography of her, *Dancing Toward the Light*, "She once chastised a dancer for not showing up to rehearsal when the young woman had been flat on her back for two weeks with mononucleosis."

"She had more tenacity than anyone I've ever met," said Ballard. "She had to have a will of iron to do what she did."

At its peak in the mid-1970s, WCD undertook extensive tours, commissioned works from prominent and emerging choreographers and had 1,000 subscribers.

In 1982, ugly internal conflict erupted and the board of directors fired Browne. She was devastated but forged a new career as a freelance choreographer and teacher.

She created more than 80 works in total, many



J. COLEMAN FLETCHER PHOTO

dealing with women's experiences. Some of the most acclaimed were *The Woman I Am* (1975), *In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See* (1987), *Old Times Now* (1987), *Mouvement* (1992), *Toward Light* (1995) and *Edgelit* (1998).

She was known for wearing runners and sweatpants for almost every occasion. When she was invested into the Order of Canada in 1997, her daughters managed to convince her to wear elegant trousers.

Browne's other honours included the 1995 Jean A. Chalmers Award for Creativity in Dance, the 2000 Canada Council Jacques Lemieux Prize and a lifetime achievement award from the Manitoba Arts Council.

Her relationship with the company healed long ago. In 2008, WCD renamed its performance venue the Rachel Browne Theatre in tribute to her. A legacy fund in her name raised \$150,000.

"Her legacy is us — all of these dancers and choreographers who have been blessed by knowing her, dancing for her, being mentored by her... We're all around the world now," said Brent Lott, current artistic director of WCD.

Browne had intended to stay in Ottawa for the entire Canada Dance Festival, where the WCD company is to perform Lott's 97 *Positions of the Heart* this Wednesday. The prestigious show will go on, Lott said.

"She wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

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## DANCE PREVIEW

Rachel Browne was the founder of the Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers. Now, the troupe will honour the matriarch with *Verge*, a show inspired by her works.

Holly Harris

WHEN Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers (WCD), in collaboration with the professional program of the School of Contemporary Dancers, presents its latest show *Verge* this weekend, it not only celebrates the legacy of Canada's late revered matriarch of contemporary dance, Rachel Browne, but also, notably, one of its own.

The three-show run that opens Friday, Jan. 18 at 8 p.m. and runs through Sunday, Jan. 20 at the aptly titled Rachel Browne Theatre features a mixed bill of signature works choreographed by Browne, performed by 20 local emerging dance artists, as well as a quartet of well-established guest performers: Odette Heyn, Paula Blair, Kathleen Hiley and Robyn Kacki Thomson, directed by Winnipeg-based senior dance artist Stephanie Ballard.

"I wanted to show Rachel's diversity, because I believe that's the most important part and the brilliance of her career," Ballard, Browne's long-time friend and fellow choreographer, says over the phone. "She was driven and curious and gave herself to the work constantly, which allowed her to go in many different directions throughout her career. She was a legend in her own time who still inspires all of us today."

The Philadelphia-born Browne first arrived in the city to dance with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in 1957. After leaving the company to raise a family in 1961, she later founded WCD in 1964,

and served as its artistic director for nearly 20 years. Browne also established the school and apprentice program as a division of WCD in 1972, with her diverse body of work including more than 80 contemporary solo and ensemble pieces. She was inducted into the Order of Canada in 1998, among other honours, and coached, created and choreographed right up until the very end.

She died in 2012 at the age of 77, while supporting dance artists at the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa.

The 70-minute production (no intermission) is being staged almost exactly 55 years after Browne produced her first show in February 1964. It features seven retrospective works that showcase the depth and breadth of Browne's artistry, and were choreographed between 1985 and 2001. When asked for program highlights, Ballard's answer is succinct.

"Everything," she replies of the bill that includes Browne classics: poignant duet *Toward Light*, (1995), the rhythmically driving quartet *KJ4* (1994); decadent, Kurt Weill-drenched solo *Freddy* (1991) and its oldest offering, bluesy solo *Old Times Now* (1987). Also included is an excerpt from Browne's 2001 group piece *Sunstorm*, (2001) and a five-minute solo extracted from former WCD artistic director Tedd Robinson's full-length show: *Camping Out*. (1985).

One of the most heart-stirring works is inspired by Browne's personal paradise, her beloved family cottage located just south of Gimli, titled *Willow Island* (1997), which features

eight dancers joyously sweeping across the stage with utter freedom and the fleeting innocence of youth.

"This ensemble piece beautifully danced captures the love Rachel felt for nature and her beloved Willow Island," says Ballard of the 13-minute work that also features an ebullient score by the Penguin Cafe.

The San Francisco-born Ballard, first came to Winnipeg at age 22 and launched her choreographic career at WCD, creating more than 10 works for the troupe from 1979-83 while serving as a company member and associate artistic director/resident choreographer.

She's keenly aware of the passing sands of time — most of the performers in this weekend's trio of shows never met Browne, nor were given the opportunity to work with her directly as a beloved annual guest choreographer during their own training years at the School of Contemporary Dancers, which became a highlight for aspiring dance artists.

Ballard, a tireless mentor, educator, coach and

self-described "guerrilla archivist," who teaches a legacy course for SCD's professional program, is even more resolute about keeping Browne's passion for dance and artistic torch burning bright well into the future. She recounts one of the youngest dancers in the show gently inquiring during rehearsal one day what Browne was "really like."

"I told her who Rachel was, both as a person and as a choreographer," Ballard reveals. "How whenever she walked into a room to make a dance, the whole world changed. Rachel transcended everything, and focused so completely on the dancers that they became transformed in the process."

"She created the kind of work that is rare. She had an utter commitment to dancers that is rare. And most of all, Rachel shared her deep love of dance with all of us, including encouraging women to choreograph — that is rare and will not soon be forgotten."

[Holly.harris@shaw.ca](mailto:Holly.harris@shaw.ca)