

Laurence Lemieux interviewed by Kate Story, February 9, 2016

Laurence Lemieux is the co-artistic director of Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie (CLC). She and her company are coming to Public Energy's 2015-16 season with the program "Elvis and the Man in Black", a double bill of contemporary dance made up of two works: *The Man in Black*, choreographed by James Kudelka, and *Looking for Elvis*, choreographed by Lemieux. The two works will be performed at Showplace Performance Centre on Saturday March 12 at 8pm.

Kate: You've already taken this program to lots of places, particularly small cities in Ontario... Is there a difference for you performing in smaller centres versus big cities?

Laurence: In a smaller city you might find that audiences haven't seen much contemporary dance, or maybe none at all... ***The Man in Black* has a real effect on people. It's really, really accessible for somebody who has never seen dance.** Not so scary. They can relate to the music, to the dancers wearing cowboy boots. There's something to grasp even though a story is not being told. But it's sophisticated choreographically, so a dance audience will also grasp its mastery. James is very good at that.

***Looking for Elvis* is more abstract, more complex in a way...**I've found that people really want to talk about it afterwards. You hear Elvis singing during the piece, and hear him speak. People grasp onto that.

K: You took a trip to Graceland in 2012...how did the material for *Looking for Elvis* come to you?

L: Well, I didn't wake up and say "I want to do a piece about Elvis." The trip inspired me. I travelled to Nashville with my daughter who was 13 at the time, because she is a Taylor Swift fan. I asked to stop at Graceland. It's what you would expect – tacky and all that. But the feeling of the house – he was sort of simple. The house was very comfortable. There is something very homey about Elvis. He grew up poor, and kept that, in a way. **The house evoked good, warm, fuzzy feelings. I decided to tackle that. This guy, the performer, who died. An entertainer who paid with his life.** You know, there's what we all think of Elvis, that bloated, sick and sad Elvis. But that Elvis was maybe a year and a half of his life. There's so much more to him: how he approached his business, his performing, how candid he was in his interviews when he was younger. And of course his voice. **There is something pure and naïve about him.**

I grew up in Quebec. I saw *all* of Elvis's movies! He's a big deal everywhere, but especially in Quebec. **I can't say I was an Elvis fan, it's just normal to be an Elvis fan in Quebec.**

K: I saw Kudelka's *The Man in Black* when the National Ballet of Canada performed it, and loved it. I'm curious about how the program came together as it did. Did you have the Elvis piece in mind, and then looked for a companion?

L: **Whenever James choreographs anything, he lets me know. He showed me a rehearsal of *The Man in Black* and I thought it was so cool.** I thought it'd be great for the company [Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie]. It is different with our dancers, they are different from ballet dancers – grounded, gritty and raw. So I thought – I'd been working on a semi-cowboy piece before that. I thought we could do these two... So I started to work on the Elvis thing, it just sort of happened, and I thought, Oh, that'd be really interesting, Elvis and Johnny Cash, right?

But the pieces are very different. ***Looking for Elvis* is about looking for the performer. There's a lot about what it means to be onstage, about what kind of price – good or bad – you pay.** On a big scale you have someone like Elvis, on a smaller scale you have me, or the dancers. People clap, but then you go home, and sometimes you go home alone, you feel... You give give give, and sometimes you will feel empty at the end of the performance because you have given so much.

James is more responding to the songs, to a group of people moving together, knowing each other and expressing those beautiful songs.

K: Music is at the centre of both pieces. You have John Gzowski on the sound design for *Looking for Elvis* – was it a collaborative process?

L: Yes, very collaborative. I did the piece in workshop before working with John, and I did the sound myself. Selected the interviews to use, and the songs. John built the score with me.

K: **Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie have a special relationship with Peterborough.** Billy Kimball notes in his website chat about the upcoming season that "sixteen years ago, when they [CLC] gave birth to their dance company, we were the first presenter in Canada to show their new program, "An Evening of Duets". Since 1987 the artists behind the company, Bill Coleman and Laurence Lemieux, have come to Peterborough a combined total of 16 times by our rough count."

L: Oh, yes. It's a unique relationship. **There is no other presenter who has this relationship with our dance company.** Almost every show has been there, in Peterborough. And now some of James's work. It's not automatic, but you build these relationships and you have somebody out there who wants to see the work, and that's... it's wonderful.

K: Yes, and we've seen a range of works, from the very intimate *Paradis Perdu* in the Gordon Best Theatre – I think about five of the lighting instruments worked and I remember your lighting designer Lucie created this magical lighting, it was really special...

L: Oh, yes, I remember that!

K: To something huge like *The Kudelka Taylor Project* at Showplace in 2006.

L: There was that big lineup outside – that was kind of crazy. And it was really important for the company, for James, for everybody involved.

Peterborough's like a second home. There's a warmth in Peterborough audiences. You feel like people know you. **Like when you go home for Christmas and you don't have to explain everything.** The audiences know us, they've known us, and so they can just see the work. There is no other place to which we've returned like this.

K: Dance critic Paula Citron writes that, "Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie have become the all-important conservatory of smaller works by James Kudelka." He reigns as one of Canada's premiere choreographers in both the ballet and contemporary dance worlds.

L: Yes, we mostly perform his contemporary works. He's been the CLC resident choreographer since 2008, so he creates something every year for us.

K: This program will see you performing in Showplace again.

L: That'll be great. I'll give a preshow chat in the lounge, and the audience can meet the artists in the lobby post-show.

K: I'm looking forward to it so much. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the works before I let you go?

Laurence: One thing is that people should just come to the show! The music is really good. If they don't like dance they can close their eyes! It is a celebration of these two wonderful artists. **It is very physical, very athletic. And there's humour too, as well as the darkness.**

It's a great evening to take someone to who has never seen dance.