

Japan gives dancers a royal welcome

The Australian Ballet's performance of *Swan Lake* has been greeted by an audience enthusiastic for foreign artists, writes **Malcolm Rock** from Tokyo.

JAPANESE ballet dancers may struggle for domestic recognition, but artists from the Australian Ballet were watched by royalty when they premiered Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake* at the prestigious Bunka Kaikan theatre in Tokyo at the weekend.

Princess Takamado joined more than 2300 balletomanes who paid up to 16,000 yen (\$A150) to enjoy the first of three performances of Murphy's 2002 take on Tchaikovsky's most famous fairytale. Friday night's premiere was the first time the ballet had been staged without its star, Steven Heathcote, the dancer for whom Murphy choreographed the role of Prince Siegfried. Heathcote retired from principal roles two weeks ago.

Kazumi Hara of the Japan Performing Arts Foundation said overseas dancers were idolised by Tokyo audiences, who have long supported imported ballet, which traditionally eclipses home-grown work.

"Dancers from foreign companies are highly respected and treated like stars," Hara said, "but few Japanese dancers can make a living here and must go overseas to forge a career."

Wall scrawls and more than 100 handmade collage posters backstage commemorate touring productions from ballet companies including London's Royal, Paris Opera, American Ballet Theatre, Lithuanian National, the Bolshoi, Kirov, Imperial Russian and Leningrad State.

Next to La Scala's poster — a two-metre-high gold carved replica proscenium arch — hang the Australian Ballet's less ostentatious contributions from 1987 and 1996 — mauve block-

mounts featuring a silhouette carriage for *Manon*, marionettes for *Coppelia* and a somewhat incongruous cartoon yellow boxing kangaroo for Anne Woolliams' *Swan Lake*.

On Stage *Shimbun* dance critic Yukito Kado said he believed Japanese audiences would grow to love the Australian Ballet if it made more frequent visits.

"This production has an exciting natural interpretation," Kado said. "Audience knowledge here is very high because we regularly see the world's best, and the Australian Ballet stands comfortably beside them."

◀ **The Australians have made a very old ballet become very new and enjoyable.** ▶

MAYUMI ISHIKAWA, ballet aficionado

At a cost of about \$800,000, the 64-strong company of dancers flew into Narita airport last week with a pianist, two physiotherapists, three costumiers, three ballet mistresses, five administrators, 800 shipped set items and costumes, 609 pairs of ballet shoes and one anxious artistic director, David McAllister.

"In order to be perceived as a global player it is just as important to be successful in Tokyo as in London, Paris or New York," said McAllister, who has previously led the company on tours to London, Cardiff, New Zealand and Shanghai. "Performing internationally is a test of maturity because the company is removed from its usual means of support and must work even harder to prove itself."

Corps de ballet member

Simone Pulga, who toured Japan with the Stuttgart Ballet before joining the Australian Ballet last year, agreed that the workload increased while overseas. "Our company would never put two productions of this scale side-by-side in Australia," she said, referring to *The Sleeping Beauty*, also being staged in Japan.

Murphy, who accompanied the group abroad and has in the past scheduled co-productions between local producers and his own Sydney Dance Company (for which he is seeing out his final months as artistic director), said Japan served touring dance companies well.

"Theatre staff are unbelievably organised because they are so used to hosting large touring companies, which is testament to an efficient society that has a profound knowledge and appetite for the arts."

He said Australians had a duty to tour work to the region. "Too much fantastic work that should be liberated into the greater world consciousness and would be readily embraced in Japan is never seen offshore."

Strict schedules continued as dancers prepared for yesterday's opening of another reworked Tchaikovsky ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*, also being staged for three performances.

McAllister said the key to the show's success in Japan would be casting. "Not only is it important to cast the best dancers in the right roles, but consideration must also be made about which dancers embody the aesthetic this culture finds appealing."

Sitting in a bright kimono with chopsticks plunged into her bento box during intermission, ballet aficionado Mayumi Ishi-



The Australian Ballet's Lucinda Dunn with Japanese admirers on Friday night in Tokyo.

PICTURE: NANA SAKAI

awa said she was fond of *Swan Lake's* 21st-century approach.

"I see many dances here at the Bunka Kaikan and these Australians have made a very old ballet become very new and very enjoyable to see," Ishikawa said.

Meanwhile, in the wings,

Kobe-born corps de ballet member Reiko Hombo, who joined the company in 2006 after training at the Australian Ballet School, said she could not quite believe she was making her professional debut on a Japanese stage.

"I never dreamt it would ever

be possible and I know audiences here expect a lot, but I'm just happy my parents will get to see me dance professionally here at home."

LINK

▶ www.australianballet.com.au