

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

Founded oldest contemporary dance company

By: **Alison Mayes**

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 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 Harkavy, 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 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 Jacqueline 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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