

# Warm welcome for Rita Joe in Cuba

BY LIONEL MARTIN

HAVANA

**W**HEN ARNOLD SPOHR, the director of the Winnipeg Ballet, had his *Playboy* magazine taken away by customs agents at Havana Airport a doubt fluttered through his mind. Would the Cuban audience be offended by the bed scene in the ballet, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*?

The first night's performance on Wednesday proved that he had nothing to fear. Although there were a few embarrassed giggles when the principals stripped down to their underwear, most of the audience watched the tender love scene in rapt silence and applauded loudly when it had finished.

Rita Joe proved to be extremely popular, in part because the people down here sympathize with the plight of the Indians. Ana Maria de Gorriz gave a magnificent performance in spite of lingering fatigue that had taken her out of action earlier in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Anthony Williams' manly but sensitive portrayal of her lover was appreciated by the audience. At the end of the ballet there was prolonged applause and six curtain calls.

Unfortunately, some of the social meaning and poignancy of Rita Joe was lost because the audience could not understand the narration in English. The ballet would have been more effective if the company had taken the time to do a taped narration in Spanish in preparation for its 10-week sojourn through Latin America which ends with the Cuban performances.

The ballet *Ronda* met with mixed reaction by the audience at the first night's performance. Programs with a resume of the theme of the ballet were not ready in time and this might have contributed to a seeming lack of understanding on the part of the public.

The conflict between higher ethical values portrayed with classical grace and melodic music on the one hand, and on the other, the breakdown of human values portrayed by writhing and mechanical motions underscored by dissonance, met with perplexity on the part of the Cuban audience.

One got the feeling that an understanding of the ballet's true meaning would have required more than one viewing. However, there was obvious appreciation of the technical skill of the six principals (Bonnie Wycoff, Louise Naughton, Ana Maria de Gorriz, Anthony Williams, James Mercer,

and Craig Sterling) and the corps de ballet.

The balletic lyricism of *The Eternal Idol* appealed to the Cubans as did the vivacity of *Grandpa's Espagnol*. The simple themes and melodic music received an agreeable response. The somewhat melodramatic representation of romantic love in *The Idol* was expressed excellently by Craig Sterling and Louise Naughton.

The six principals in *Grandpa's Espagnol* (Robert Shim, Bonnie Wycoff, Jane Thelen, Anthony Williams, Sherry Cook and James Mercer) captivated the audience and in as much as it was the first work to be shown, established a mood of rapport for the rest of the evening.

The Cuban audience seemed to be most impressed by the versatility of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and by its mastery of both classical and modern techniques.

Arnold Spohr told me that the troupe had met with the same favorable response throughout its Latin American tour. What seems sad, however, was that a ballet company like the Royal Winnipeg, which has won plaudits all over the world, is now faced with critical financial problems, a fact that will probably prevent it from making major tours outside Canada next year.