

**Jacques Lemay:  
Dancer, choreographer, director, producer ... and more**

“I was born a dancer,” says Jacques Lemay. “It’s a gift, and I say this in the most humble way, not in an egotistical or vain way, because we are all gifted with different skills, different abilities. For me it was dance.”

Lemay began his early training in Montréal with Maurice Morenoff, who taught social dance, flamenco, jazz, acrobatics, physical conditioning and stretching, as well as ballet. This “non-purist” approach was frowned upon by many at the time, but it resonated with Lemay and had a profound effect on his future career, which has been both broad in scope and deep in accomplishment.

Lemay has made a life-long practice of trying every dance style that interests him. As a young dancer, he was a member of the renowned Canadian folkdance troupe Les Feux Follets before venturing into contemporary styles, which brought him, on a full scholarship, to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre’s training program in New York City in the mid-1970s. He left New York after he was recruited by Winnipeg’s Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre to work in musical theatre. In 1976, he moved just a few blocks away to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, where he was founding director of the company’s brand-new Modern Jazz Dance Department, a position he held for 13 years, until 1989.

While teaching for RWB in both the general and professional schools, Lemay continued to perform as a freelancer, appearing in more than 125 television shows and making guest appearances with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal, and the Winnipeg and Edmonton Symphony Orchestras. He also began to choreograph and direct ballet, contemporary dance, musicals, TV shows, and special events. His *The Big Top — A Circus Ballet*, created for RWB, was televised by the CBC on Christmas Day, 1988, while RWB commissioned his ballet version of *Anne of Green Gables* for the company’s 50th anniversary in 1989.

After Lemay served as artistic director/senior choreographer of the opening ceremonies for the 1988 Calgary Olympics, more big spectacles soon followed. Lemay was producer/director of the 1989 and 1991 Jeux Canada Games, the 1994 Victoria Commonwealth Games, and the 1997 Special Olympics World Winter Games. He served as a member of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies team for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics as well as creative advisor to the executive producer, and been artistic director for six Royal visits to this country.

In addition, Lemay was artistic director of the Charlottetown Festival from 1992 to 1997 and, from 1992 to 2003, also co-produced (with his wife, Janis Dunning, whom he met at RWB) and directed *Spirit of a Nation*, a summer training and performance program that was in residence

at Charlottetown's Confederation Centre of the Arts from 1993 to 1996, and in Greater Victoria from 1997 to 2003.

In 1998, Lemay and Dunning co-founded the Canadian College of the Performing Arts here in Victoria for emerging talents who want to act, sing and dance in equal measure—like Carly Rae Jepsen, who may be the school's most famous graduate, but only one of more than 650 now working in the performing arts across Canada and around the world.

After retiring from the College in 2010, Lemay has continued to build his résumé as a freelance choreographer, fight director and director for dance, theatre, musical theatre, classical music and opera productions. He's met her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and JLo (not at the same event: one was a Royal Gala, the other the launch of the New Seven Wonders of the World in Lisbon, both of which he staged); received the Queen's Jubilee Medal for his work in arts and culture; and been named Victoria's Community Arts Leader of the Year.

While he now claims to be entering "the twilight of my career," Lemay does not appear to be slowing down. In a throwback to his days with Les Feux Follets, Lemay was a featured performer in Pacific Opera Victoria's 2017 production of *Les Feluettes*, showcasing traditional Québécois clogging. And in the last two years alone, he directed and choreographed Phoenix Theatre's runaway hit, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, as well as the fight sequences for its production of *Othello*; choreographed *La Traviata*, *Countess Maritza* and *Flight* for Pacific Opera Victoria; and did movement and fight work with the Belfry Theatre. He also continues to teach at the Canadian College of Performing Arts and at the University of Victoria, where he is an adjunct professor.

"I'm really fortunate to be working with all of these organizations," Lemay says, which does not always happen in other places. "Here, it's very open." That openness has allowed him to continue to pursue his multitude of interests: "I'm one of the few choreographers that crosses over from theatre to dance to ballet to opera to special events," he says. That, in turn, has allowed him to develop different techniques to meet the different demands of each new project and each new cast (opera singers, for example, are renowned for having two left feet).

"If I'm choreographing an opera or musical theatre piece that is character-driven and, say, there's a specific style to the period," like the glamorous and risqué 1920s, "obviously you have to take your vocabulary from that period," Lemay says. "You can modernize it, but it's usually character- and style-driven as opposed to creating a piece just for the sake of creating a piece inspired by the music. You have to look at the character, you have to look at the period, you have to look at their costumes, you have to look at the space you're working within." You also, he says, "have to look at the ability of the interpreter. If you're working with a classical dance company with a high level of skills, then your approach will be quite different because you can demand a lot more. If you're working with 'actors who dance,' they may be limited in their particular ability," and it's his job is to make them both look as good as possible and feel comfortable in the work.

“Every human being is different,” Lemay says. “You have to be a bit of a psychologist in a way. You have to be able to speak different languages. By that I don’t mean speaking French, English, German, but adapting your dialogue with the artist—you have to sense where their comfort zone is and then try to help them come up with the best performance that they can.”

Sounds almost easy when he says it, but doing that when you’re choreographing 6,500 people, as Lemay did for the Calgary Olympics, must be astoundingly difficult. You need to tell a clear and coherent story, but “you’re physically limited by the space, the music, the time frame you’re given to work in, all the logistics as to how you are going to get so many people to centre field.” For Lemay, though, it’s a little like architecture, another of his great interests: to pull off a major special event with thousands of moving parts, you need a clear design plan and a solid foundation, then you can build on the fancy bits that the audience will remember.

Over time, what Lemay did throughout his career has become a lot more common today. “Dance has evolved a great deal even in my lifetime, in my career,” he says. “Historically, you were a classical dancer, period, you were a jazz dancer, period, you were a contemporary dancer, you were a folk dancer, or you were a gymnast. But now you look at dancers and they do all of that.” The benefit, he thinks, is significant, especially for choreographers. “The broader the vocabulary that you have, the better the position you are in to create a story. If your vocabulary is limited by what you studied, then you will be limited in your choreographic skills.”

Above all, after a lifetime spent crossing over all kinds of platforms—performing, teaching, choreographing, directing, producing—Lemay has concluded that dance really is for everyone. “It is an expression of life, and a part of humanity. It is something that we have in our being,” he says, but are sometimes too afraid of looking foolish to show it. Lemay may have been born a dancer, but he is not the only one: “There is a dancer in all of us.”

*About this profile:*

*This profile was written by Robin J. Miller, with files from University of Victoria students Megan Switzer and Natasha Simpson, who created the accompanying podcast in association with UVic’s Community Engaged Learning Initiative.*

*It is part of Dance Victoria’s Community Dance Archive, a project created in honour of Dance Victoria’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary to celebrate our city’s fabulous dance history.*

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