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Statement

NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE FLAGS FLY AT HALF-MAST IN HONOUR OF CANADIAN PERFORMING ARTS TRAILBLAZERS BRIAN MACDONALD AND PAUL BUISSONNEAU

December 1, 2014 – OTTAWA – The National Arts Centre mourns the loss of two of Canada's performing arts icons: prolific and acclaimed director and choreographer Brian Macdonald; and Paul Buissonneau, an award-winning actor and director hailed as a master of francophone theatre. Mr. Macdonald died on Saturday at the age of 86. Mr. Buissonneau passed away Sunday at the age of 87.

Both men had a significant impact of the cultural life of Canada, having received their country's highest distinction in the performing arts, the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement.

The National Arts Centre's flags will fly at half-mast this week in honour of Brian Macdonald and Paul Buissonneau.

Brian Macdonald

Demanding in his professionalism, courageous in his vision, and generous in his teaching, Brian Macdonald passionately supported Canadian performers and creators throughout his brilliant 50-year career as a dancer and choreographer, director and artistic director, and mentor and educator, and played a key role in securing Canada's place on the international stage.

Mr. Macdonald's long relationship with the National Arts Centre began in 1970 when he choreographed a dance work presented here by the Royal Winnipeg called "*Aimez-vous Bach?*" In 1998, he became the NAC's Senior Artistic Advisor with key responsibilities for the NAC's Festival Canada, notably directing and choreographing a major revival of his acclaimed Stratford production of *The Mikado*.

Mr. Macdonald was born in Montreal in 1928. He studied dance in Montreal, Toronto and New York and was an original member of The National Ballet of Canada, turning to choreography in 1953 after a serious injury ended his performing career.

Mr. Macdonald received the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement in 2008. In a National Film Board short film that premiered at the awards gala that year, he described being influenced in his early career by New York City Ballet and its iconic choreographers George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, who pared down the visual elements of dance.

His choreographic range extended from jazzy show-dancing and lively folk-based works to abstract neo-classical ballets set to challenging, contemporary scores. As a choreographer, he described his creative process as a kind of surrender: "Sometimes there is a piece of music floating around in your head that you really want to choreograph to. You surrender to that. You have a space. And you have to create something in that space with the dancers' bodies. You might start with a perfectly conventional movement, but in a moment or two you're inspired into something else. And all I can say there is that you have to surrender. You have to surrender to a part of your brain – not so much your body, but your brain – that is leading you somewhere that you haven't been before. And if you do that, you're choreographing."

As a director, artistic director, choreographer and teacher, Mr. Macdonald worked with some of Canada's leading cultural institutions, including the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, The National Ballet of Canada, the National Arts Centre, the National Theatre School, The Banff Centre, and the Stratford Festival, and with dance companies throughout Europe and the United States.

He was also a renowned director of opera and musicals, and called himself an “eclectic artist” because he loved so many different kinds of music – from classical to jazz, and from opera to musicals. His opera productions were presented by major companies around the world, and his stagings of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas for the Stratford Festival (many of them later televised by the CBC) were hugely successful.

Awards and honours include Officer of the Order of Canada (1967), promoted to Companion (2002); Fellow of The Banff Centre (2004); Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts (2001); Dance Canada Prize (1988); Banff Centre National Arts Award (1988); Canada Council Molson Prize (1983); and Paris International Gold Star for Choreography (1964). His book *Dancing in Thin Air: Looking Back on Sixty Years of Dance at The Banff Centre* was published in 2007.

Paul Buissonneau

Paul Buissonneau’s association with the National Arts Centre goes back to the early seventies. Notably, he directed Jean Tardieu’s *Cabaret des mots* and Molière’s *Les précieuses ridicules*, presented as part of former NAC French Theatre artistic director Denis Marleau’s seasons in 2002 and 2003 respectively.

Born in France in 1926, Mr. Buissonneau first performed with Édith Piaf as a member of Les Compagnons de la Chanson. Shy and timid when he arrived in Canada, he soon developed a boisterously exuberant public persona. However, his temperamental style masked a deeply sensitive nature and a heart of gold. His mastery of all things theatrical, from building sets to acting to directing, set a shining example for the young artists whom he continuously helped.

The City of Montreal hired Mr. Buissonneau in 1952 as artistic director of La Roulotte, an outdoor theatre run by the Department of Recreation which attracted thousands of children and their parents to city parks each summer. “La Roulotte was an amazing learning experience, both for our young audiences and for the actors,” Mr. Buissonneau recalled. “It provided a unique opportunity to try new things, and it sparked ideas about directing and performance that would be considered strong and original even today. Those novel productions and technical discoveries popped up like mushrooms, largely, I think, because we had very little money.”

Four years later he started his own company, Le Théâtre de Quat 'Sous, and over the next thirty-five years conducted a free-wheeling theatrical experiment that presented the early work of many of today's foremost artists, including Robert Lepage. At the same time he wrote and performed, including the famed children's television character "Picolo", a magical, poetic, funny role that provided financial sustenance as he pursued his theatre activities.

In 1968, he directed the legendary *L'Osstidcho* which showcased some of Quebec's brightest young artists, including Yvon Deschamps and Robert Charlebois, bringing something completely new to Quebec's parched theatrical life.

Mr. Buissonneau received many honours including the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement in 1998, and the Prix Denise-Pelletier in 2001. In September 2014 he was named an honorary citizen of the City of Montreal.

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