

Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet Artistic Director & CEO Stepping Down



Celebrating 50 Years of Achievement

WINNIPEG, MB, Feb. 23, 2023 /CNW/ - On behalf of the Board of Directors, Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet chair Don Leitch is pleased to announce Artistic Director & CEO André Lewis, O.M. will step down in the spring of 2025 culminating a 50-year career with the organization – first as a student, then a dancer, and lastly, a leader.

"The months ahead will be ones of celebration, transition, and renewal," says Leitch. "André held the appreciation of the ballet world and our broader cultural community with his outstanding contributions. He's brought greater recognition to the vibrancy that defines arts in Manitoba."

The Board of Directors has begun the transition and will launch an international recruitment for Lewis's successors. They anticipate announcing a new Executive Director by the end of June 2023 and a new Artistic Director in 2024.

Born in Gatineau, Quebec, Lewis began his dance training in Ottawa before being accepted into the Professional Division of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School in 1975. He joined the Company in 1979 where he enjoyed an accomplished career as a dancer for over 10 years. During his tenure with the Company, under the mentorship of Arnold Spohr, Lewis was identified by RWB leadership as someone whose passion for the art form, commitment to excellence and bold artistic vision could help steer an organization of the RWB's prestige. On his retirement from dance in 1989, he was welcomed into the position of Associate Artistic Director prior to becoming Artistic Director in 1996. In 2018, Lewis was also appointed to CEO of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and has held the dual role ever since.

Lewis has sought out original creations and commissioned choreographers the world over, while maintaining a distinct Canadian voice shared with generations of dance enthusiasts in Manitoba and around the globe. From the moment he stepped into the leadership role, He has been the driving force in maintaining the RWB as a world class ballet company and in promoting innovative works and classical recreations that continue to contribute to extraordinary repertoire on stages far and wide.

One of Lewis's best-known accomplishments is the RWB's popular annual production of *Nutcracker*, which he adapted to reflect prairie life and Canadian traditions, with an emphasis on children and families during the holiday season; *Nutcracker* continues to tour across North America to sold-out audiences. Lewis is also a firm believer of the importance of ballet's classic productions such as *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle* and his personal favourite, *Romeo & Juliet*, ensuring these masterworks are presented on a regular basis.

Along with the classics, Lewis's vision revolves around creating and building full-length modern story ballets with Canadian and international choreographers including *Dracula*, *Moulin Rouge® – The Ballet*, *Val Caniparoli's A Cinderella Story*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on the novel by Margaret Atwood and *The Wizard of Oz*. "I've had the honour and privilege to lead this organization for 30 years and this decision is one of the most challenging for me personally and professionally. I have dedicated my life to the RWB and our vision to teach, create and perform exceptional dance for our community and around the world. It brings me a great deal of joy and pride to look at how far we've come, and I'm excited to see what is next for the RWB," says Lewis.

The commission of *Going Home Star – Truth and Reconciliation* is a significant contribution to the Canadian cultural landscape and Lewis spearheaded the RWB's commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. As a result of his careful and sincere efforts to build and enhance relations, the RWB established an Indigenous Advisory Circle and incorporated Elder-led practices such as smudging ceremonies and sweat lodges into organizational operations. These steps, along with many others, demonstrate how the RWB and the art of dance contribute to reconciliation.

Over the past five years as CEO, Lewis worked closely with the board and staff to make substantial progress in strengthening the fiscal sustainability of the organization. He was pivotal in the construction of a new student living centre that is revolutionizing education and training for the next generation of dancers; he also played a key role in expanding child protection measures through the formation of a School Crisis Management Team and the development of a Child Protection Policy and Procedures Guide. Most recently, Lewis was at the helm of steering the unprecedented challenges associated with a pandemic that impacted the world.

Whether Lewis was recruiting global talent or traveling the globe on dozens of international Company tours, he never lost sight of the lifeblood of the organization – the homegrown community and audience in Winnipeg and Manitoba, including staff, dancers, donors, patrons, alumni and volunteers.

According to board member John Osler: "It's not often you find someone as uniquely qualified to take on both the artistic and administrative vision of an organization and to do so with such heart and passion. I think everyone, especially the Board of Directors, is incredibly grateful we've had André as a student, dancer, and leader with the RWB; he has forever changed the landscape of dance in Manitoba, and internationally as well."

André Lewis's 2023/24 season repertoire is a dazzling reflection of Canadian premieres, classics, and new works, to be announced on Wednesday, April 5, 2023. For those who would like a preview of our "*Celebrating André*" season, please purchase a ticket for the performance of *Fast Forward* on March 31 & April 1, where the season trailer will be shared with audience members only. For more information, please go to rwb.org/tickets.

Quotes About André Lewis

"André's brilliance and humanity was truly captured in his commitment as the Artistic Director of the RWB to take the company, staff and board into a partnership with Survivors and Commissioners of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the horrific Indian Residential School history to create the breath-taking *Going Home Star*. It was a testament to his old friend and patron of the ballet, Anishinaabe Elder Mary Richard. Miigwetch, thank you, merci, André."

Tina Keeper, O.M., M.S.M.

Producer/Former RWB board member

"I have always remembered Kathleen Richardson's words to me over 30 years ago while working in Winnipeg, as she said: "Watch André Lewis – he will soar at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet beyond his dance career." And soar he did. From acquiring or staging innovative, diverse works, while keeping audiences engaged with the classics, and using his natural ability to foster significant international partnerships, to making the art of dance more widely accessible and brilliantly navigating turbulent times during a persistent pandemic, André Lewis became the face, as well as the heart and soul of the RWB. There will never be another ground-breaking work like *Going Home Star–Truth and Reconciliation*, which represents the many stories of Indian Residential School survivors and their families, because you can only be first once. André, thank you for your exceptional talent, persistence, and leadership. You're a tough act to follow!"

Charles S. Coffey, O.C.
Former RBC executive, Toronto

About Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet

The heart of dance in Canada and the world, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet teaches, creates, and performs, enriching lives through the power of exceptional dance. Founded in 1939 by Gweneth Lloyd and Betty Farrally, the RWB holds the double distinction of being Canada's premier ballet company and the longest continuously operating ballet company in North America. The RWB received its 'Royal' designation from Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, the first Royal Charter granted during her reign.

As a result of the outstanding leadership of Artistic Director & CEO André Lewis, O.M., versatility, technical excellence, and a captivating style have become the trademarks of the RWB, qualities that have garnered both critical and audience acclaim. The RWB's superlative standards keep the Company in demand across North America and beyond. In addition to the Company, the RWB is home to the RWB School, consisting of both the Professional Division, our internationally renowned dance education and training centre for aspiring professional dancers and dance teachers, and the Recreational Division, one of Winnipeg's largest dance schools for all ages, levels, and interests.

www.rwb.org

André Lewis [Biography](#) and [Photo Link](#)

For further information: For further media information and to arrange interviews, please contact: Jo Magnifico, Public Relations & Communications Specialist, P. 204.957.3456, C. 204.509.8023, jmagnifico@rwb.org