

Les Sortileges help keep Quebec folk dances alive

By FLAVIA MORRISON

You can hear it as you struggle up the steep staircase of the Residence St. Enfant Jesus on Boulevard St. Joseph. It's a bizarre triple-time tapping — quite unlike the sound of any tap-dance you may remember from a Golden Fred Astaire Oldie. You may not know it — but it's bien de chez nous, it's authentically, 100 per cent Quebecois.

Montreal's folkloric group Les Sortileges is using the original dance shoes with three little metal and wood balls in the hollowed-out heels as they dance their way through their 10th anniversary year.

The star performing group of 24 boys and girls are busy rehearsing for the company's annual production at Plateau Hall which will take place next Monday and Tuesday.

Girls with flushed faces, dressed in leotards, black knee socks and red checked shirts and ruffles brandish brooms and feign indifference. Boys, sporting pale-blue Sortileges T-shirts make their super-complicated way through the Captain's dance with a judicious mixture of lip-biting seriousness and self-mocking hilarity.

Two by two the male dancers vie for the girls' attention through their hyperenergy levels and their dazzling clogging skills. A wholly admirable competitive spirit.

These spell-casters, sorcerers, wizards have come a long way in 10 years — penetrating back into the beginning of Quebecois celebration and joie de vivre, and returning with a vital part of the province's heritage.

It all started so humbly. A high school teacher Jimmy di Genova was given a \$150 budget to train a group of school children for a show of ethnic dances in April 1967.

The group remained together — and director di Genova suggested that more time should be invested in Quebecois dance and folklore. The response was luke-warm at best — but di Genova found himself vindicated when in May 1969 Les Sortileges were chosen to dance at the international festival held at Confolens in France.

Since then it's been a swirl of invitations to dance in Montreal, in Canada and around the world. So far the group has made it to Normandy, Haifa, Martinique, Sidmouth and London (England) and the U.S..

This year the group brought out its first LP record of folk music (on the FRANCO label) — a disarmingly charming medley of jigs, polkas, square dances, waltzes, reels, quadrilles — all lovingly collected



Two members of Les Sortileges model historical costumes, made in the troupe's workshop.

and learned — from sons of Irish lumberjacks, folklore experts in the Saguenay and country dancers everywhere.

Just listen to the "reel des eboulements" and the "reel du train" — Lac Saint-Jean dances in which the dancers' feet simulate the movements of a beaver's tail. You'll realize what a loss it would be if the fiddles and the shoes fell silent.

At the moment there are 70 dancers divided into three groups according to experience. Each rehearse twice a week for three hours.

They pay a subscription of \$50 a year. Frankly it's a steal — as are the evening classes arranged for the public. (Fourteen one-hour classes for children cost \$5 — 14 two-hour courses for adolescents all of \$10.)

Courses are also given in macrame work and ceinture flechee (sash making.)

Les Sortileges has a sensational collection of 35 sashes, (one for each male dancer) some of which demanded a minimum of 250 hours of work. (Multiply that by the minimum hourly salary and eat your heart out. They'll never be for sale.) (The dolls,

however, are for sale on special occasions.)

Apart from sashes and dolls, there are a myriad other handicraft skills. There is a fully equipped workshop which has turned out over 500 ethnic and historical costumes. Outfits for Indians and lumberjacks, Ukrainian, German and Israeli national costumes. The industrious hands of performers' mothers have produced everything from plaited rugs and murals to hand-stitched moccasins.

They get the exact details

from the documentation centre next door — which has 400 volumes on folklore round the world and 20,000 cross-reference files compiled through years of research by members.

Over 300 costumes will be used in this year's annual production. If you see it and decide that clogging is for you, keep an eye open for the auditions to be held in September when recruiting starts once again to fill the ranks of the talented who have left.