

Dance Victoria opens season with first visit from top U.S. company

Sarah Petrescu / Times Colonist

NOVEMBER 16, 2017 06:00 AM



Huma Rojo, by Spanish choreographer Cayetano Soto, was commissioned by Aspen Santa Fe and is part of the contemporary ballet company's program in Victoria this weekend.

Photograph By ROSALIE O'CONNOR, ROSALIE O'CONNOR PHOTOGRAPHY

ON STAGE

What: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

When: Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Royal Theatre

Tickets: \$29 to \$95

For more information: dancevictoria.com

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet is both a dance company and creative hub for choreographers from around the world, says artistic director Tom Mossbrucker.

“The relationships we develop with choreographers are a hallmark of what we do. Success is bringing them back again,” said Mossbrucker, a former principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet who grew up in Tacoma, Washington.

Since 1996, he has helped build Aspen Santa Fe into a thriving contemporary ballet company and school in two American cities. The company has commissioned 35 works over 22 seasons.

“We like to give choreographers carte blanche to do what they do and really bring themselves to the work,” said Mossbrucker, noting they are given five or six weeks to create, with access to a rehearsal space and the company of 11 dancers.

“This is a luxury for many choreographers.”

The company performs in Victoria this week for the first time, bringing three distinct works to open the season for Dance Victoria, which has dubbed this the “Year of the Choreographer.”

Finnish choreographer Jorma Elo’s 1st Flash, which features music by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, was not created for Santa Fe Aspen, but Mossbrucker said it has become one of their signature pieces.

“It’s very romantic, yet a highly athletic and physical piece ... the dancers enjoy it, too, as it’s a badge of honour to perform a work like this,” Mossbrucker said.

Silent Ghost by Spanish choreographer Alejandro Cerrudo is an emotional piece featuring duets, or pas de deux, as they’re called in ballet.

“It takes you to a place you don’t expect to go emotionally. It’s very hypnotic,” Mossbrucker said.

The third piece in the program, Huma Rojo by Cayetano Soto, was commissioned by Aspen Santa Fe, with a special request for the company’s 20th anniversary.

“His work tends to be very dark and serious with shadowy aspects. As a person, he’s so funny and playful, so we asked him to incorporate that,” Mossbrucker said of the Spanish choreographer, who is also Ballet B.C.’s new resident choreographer. The upbeat work incorporates Latin influences and American jazz.

“He stepped out of his comfort level and it was so great. It spawned an incredible piece and maybe some other things as well,” Mossbrucker said.

The artistic director said he’s often asked by audiences what contemporary ballet pieces are about or how to watch them.

“The thing with contemporary dance, compared to traditional ballet, is that there might not be a story or theme,” he said.

“I’d compare it to abstract painting, where pieces can be interpreted in different ways. It’s not so much about how you intellectualize a piece as how you feel or respond to it.”

Stephen White, executive producer of Dance Victoria, said the organization chose to highlight choreography after looking at the upcoming season and seeing the diversity in the works and their creators.

“It’s a very international year, with choreographers front and centre,” White said.

“We have three Latina choreographers featured in Ballet Hispanico and then [British choreographer] Wayne McGregor is a star in contemporary dance,” said White, who travels to festivals and trade shows with general manager Bernard Sauv   to find performers for upcoming seasons. Other highlights include modern pieces by ODC/Dance from San Francisco and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

White is especially excited about the Vancouver-based Indigenous company Dancers of Damelahamid, which brings executive and artistic director Margaret Grenier’s Flicker to town.

White said that over the 18 seasons he’s been with Dance Victoria, audience appetite has shifted from classical ballet to more contemporary work.

Part of the reason is that many large ballet companies don’t tour like they used to, with the entire cast, orchestra and technical team.

“It was like touring a small town across the country,” he said.

Another reason is a broader interest in dance, thanks to the internet and television exposing more forms and works. Dancers are also more versatile and athletic, he said, especially in ballet.

“Contemporary ballet is less about the idealization of the female form, her being framed by a male partner or lifted and twirled,” he said, noting contemporary dancers still have that training, but are learning more repertoire. “It’s not so much about holding a position as it is expressing an idea, having a supple spine and being emotionally connected.”

spetrescu@timescolonist.com