

PASATIEMPO

Shapeshifting in Silhouette: Pilobolus' "Shadowland"



Details

- ▼ Shadowland by Pilobolus Dance Company, presented by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet
- ▼ 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 28
- ▼ Lencic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.
- ▼ \$25-\$94; 505-988-1234, www.ticketssantafe.org

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Michael Wade Simpson

Pilobolus, the dance company named for a type of fungus commonly known as the “hat thrower,” with spores that travel at high speeds and stick wherever they land, has been around for more than 45 years. However, it wasn’t until Pilobolus was commissioned over a decade ago to create a silhouette outline of a Hyundai Santa Fe for a car commercial that they began exploring bodies in shadow. At the Academy Awards in 2007, the troupe was featured morphing behind a screen into images that suggested many of the previous year’s films, including the penguins in *Happy Feet*, a loaded minivan for *Little Miss Sunshine*, and the obvious for *Snakes on a Plane*. Shadowland, Pilobolus’ evening-length dance and theater work, which they bring to the Lencic Performing Arts Center on Tuesday, Feb. 28, includes dancing both in and out of shadow.

The company had its beginnings in a dance-composition class at Dartmouth College in 1971 when three students — Moses Pendleton, Jonathan Wolken, and Steve Johnson — choreographed their first work, “Pilobolus.” They were joined by four other dancers including their teacher. From the start, there was a provocative earthiness and sensual grounding to their work. Early Pilobolus pieces often featured dancers piled onto and wrapped around one another to create interesting shapes.

According to Renée Jaworski, artistic director of Pilobolus, before the use of silhouettes, two dancers could create a crab, three became a jellyfish, and a “bottle rocket” needed two dancers throwing, three catching, and one small dancer flying through the air. After the use of silhouettes, the same group of dancers could start as a pack of dogs, then become a moving car, and then an elephant. There were more narrative possibilities.

“Honestly? I think this became a phenomenon for Pilobolus because shadow images show up on YouTube really well, and the commercials we made were really popular, even won awards,”

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Jaworski said. “We finally decided it was time to use the idea for ourselves. We just needed to figure out how we wanted to do it, and what we wanted to say.”

Developing an evening-length piece became a collaboration over several years between the dancers; the directors of the company, who often develop work using improvisation; and Steven Banks, lead writer at the time for *SpongeBob SquarePants*, who was brought in to help develop a storyline for the work. David Poe composed an original score. “We picked Steven Banks because he came from the cartoon world, but he was also a mime, so he understood bodies,” Jaworski said.

“It’s magic, the moment you see dancers shifting into some other shape. It takes you out of yourself. We’ve always created worlds on stage. The basis of all our dances is the dancers figuring out how to live in these worlds.” *Shadowland* is a coming-of-age tale. Using projections, dance, silhouettes, and music, the company tells the story of a young girl who learns about fear, love, and accepting her parents, Jaworski said.

During development it became clear that an entire evening of silhouetted dancers wouldn’t work. “Not being able to see faces up on the stage was a problem,” she said. “The artistic challenge became how to make the transition between dancers becoming dogs and cars and elephants, and dancers becoming people. We kept trying to figure out the best way to go back and forth. Finally we realized you just do it, and the audience goes along with you.”

Shadowland has toured extensively, traveling beyond the U.S. to 31 countries. A new production, *Shadowland 2: The New Adventure* is touring in Germany. “It’s not a sequel. We were playing around more with the idea of how shadows and live dance can interact.” There are other Pilobolus casts who tour repertory works. “New works are being created,” Jaworski said. “We like having long form and short forms of work.” Pilobolus also has outreach programs and a commercial unit, involved in awards shows and producing commercials. “We do a lot of product launches,” she said.

On tour, the *Shadowland* cast creates a special tribute to each place they appear in. “At Penn State, there was a famous ice-cream shop which we recreated. In Asheville, it was all about craft beer and rock climbing. We like to talk to people, see what’s going on, read the local newspapers and ask around for funny anecdotes. There’s no telling what will show up on stage in Santa Fe,” Jaworski said. ◀