

ARTBURST

ASPEN SANTA FE BALLET: CREATING THEIR OWN SUCCESSFUL STRUCTURE



Photo by Rosalie O'Connor

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The Aspen Santa Fe Ballet artistic director Tom Mossbrucker and executive director Jean-Philippe Malaty have thrilled audiences world wide with stimulating and exciting performances, and Miami will be given the opportunity to see the single premiere performance of the ASFB at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center Auditorium this Saturday.

The 12-member company has not only survived and grown, but ASFB continues to thrive.

Running a dance company these days is no easy affair. With funding requirements more elusive than ever, program needs, dancers to nurture, tours, choreographers to discover, not to mention choosing appropriate repertory; the list goes on. Directors wear many hats and even then, doing all the supposedly 'right' things, survival is a struggle.

Mossbrucker described some of the challenges and successes; how the company developed, why they continue to thrive and what is the magical formula that audiences find so captivating when they see an ASFB performance. The looming question, especially here in South Florida where dance is trying to find a sustainable existence, is one of survival.

How has ASFB been such a success? For most dance companies, the goal is the visible, performance aspect. In the ASFB model, each part of the organization cohesively works to strengthen the other and allows the company to flourish. Mossbrucker speaks in detail about the many other programs that function on a local basis in both of its base cities, Aspen and Santa Fe.

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“We have really large schools in both Aspen and Santa Fe. We have a huge Mexican folk dance outreach program reaching hundreds and hundreds of children. And we are presenting series bringing in other dance companies to perform. This happens in both cities,” Mossbrucker says. “We have tried to diversify; being lean and compact and making the most of our resources.”

Probably the most telling aspect of their journey has been the discovery process along the way.

“A lot of it was trial and error, there was a lot of intuition. ‘Let’s see if this will work.’ I don’t think you can set out to create what we have created, you have to let it grow organically.” Mossbrucker uses the word, ‘organic’ often. “When we [Malaty and Mossbrucker, who are also life partners] had the opportunity to build a company, we said, ‘Let’s try something new, let’s approach it from our point of view.’ We had both been dancers with the Joffrey, had a lot of knowledge, but had no pre-conceived ideas.”

Being in the small city of Aspen, where there was no formal dance company, allowed the twosome the luxury to develop without being under a microscope. Mossbrucker says laughingly, “Aspen had no expectations at that point. It didn’t matter if we succeeded or failed. No one was watching.”

While the model is the right one for ASFB, it is not necessarily the formula for every city. Mossbrucker and Malaty talk about this all the time. “We live in two unusual cities. They are very culturally minded and physical; there is a lot of athleticism. Both cities are surrounded by nature and mountains. I think our structure works because we adapted to where we lived.”

There is only a 500-seat theater in Aspen, “so if we do two shows, everyone in Aspen who wants to see dance, sees it. We had to become a touring company, we had to partner with Santa Fe. We had to bring in other companies to show good dance and that what we were creating was of a high caliber.”

Being a small and young company, Mossbrucker found that they had to be very selective about which choreographers could be brought in to work with the dancers. “We don’t work with a choreographer just once, we like to develop relationships. These consistent voices have also imbued the company with its identity.”

Mossbrucker says the work environment is everything and that is what gives the company its soul. He comes from the Joffrey Ballet and is very old school. “I tried to take all that I had learned working with the Joffrey, even things that I thought were not so great at the time, and to turn them into positives. I’m very strict about class, but in a nurturing way. There is a lot of explanation. The dancers trust me and I trust them.”

Every year gets more expensive to function, however. That being said, in ASFB, dancers are paid 52 weeks a year with about 40 weeks of actual employment, receive full health benefits and matching retirement benefits -- a real rarity in dance. The salaries are high in comparison to companies of a similar size.

This Miami stop is part of the big 20th Anniversary tour that includes performances at the Joyce Theater in New York, Los Angeles, Palm Desert, Houston, and Philadelphia among other cities. The three pieces that will be performed in Miami offer an assortment to showcase who the company is and why audiences clamor to see them. Two of the works are commissioned and one was premiered on Netherlands Dans Theater.

Mossbrucker says, “We travel very lightly,” says Mossbrucker, “keeping to our lean and mean profile!”

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, Saturday, Jan. 28 at 8:00 p.m., South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center Auditorium, 10950 SW 211th St., Cutler Bay, tickets \$25 - \$45; 786-573-5300, smdcac.org; \$10 tickets are available through the SMDCAC with student ID; \$5 tickets are available to 13-22 year olds and one accompanying guest, exclusively through CultureShockMiami.com.

Pre-performance reception and moderated discussion with Jean-Philippe Malaty and Tom Mossbrucker, and Dimension Dance Theater Miami directors Jennifer Kronenburg and Carlos Guerra from 6:00 - 7:30 in the Lab Theater. RSVP at 786-573-5300.