

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet returns to Irvine with diverse repertoire

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2017-03-03 19:25:52



If you were to start a ballet company, figure that you would first need dancers and then a choreographer. Assuming that you will act as artistic director of the company, the role of choreographer can either fall to you, or, as is the case for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's artistic director Tom Mossbrucker, you can diversify your repertoire by inviting choreographers to work with your dancers on a piece-by-piece basis.

"We don't have one resident choreographer," said Mossbrucker. "We like to say that we have many. But we don't collect choreographers, so to speak. Instead I think we've grown lasting relationships with several choreographers who are a good fit for the company."

Artists such as Alejandro Cerrudo, Jorma Elo, Nicolo Fonte, Trey McIntyre, Moses Pendleton and Cayetano Soto have worked with the company more than once – oftentimes creating original works for the company to premiere.

These works, commissioned by Mossbrucker and executive director Jean-Philippe Malaty, demonstrate Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's reputation for supporting new works by choreographers at the forefront of ballet innovation.

When the company performs at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on Thursday, two of the three programmed pieces, "Silent Ghost" by Cerrudo and "Human Rojo" by Soto, fall into this commissioned category. The third piece, a work by Elo titled "1st Flash," was originally choreographed for Nederlands Dans Theater, but it fits Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's highly physical, contemporary movement style.

Mossbrucker, who performed with the Joffrey Ballet for 20 years before founding Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, had the opportunity to perform modern works by 20th century choreographers such as Fredrick Ashton, George Balanchine, Laura Dean, William Forsythe, JiÅ™í Kylián, Mark Morris, Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp.

He harks back to these experiences as he continues to find adventurous new works for his company to perform.

“All of our dancers are classically trained, so we look for choreography that has a ballet background,” said Mossbrucker. “We’re trying to hold onto that classical vocabulary because it is the most useful tool a dancer has. That way they are a blank slate for choreography.”

Despite the insistence on strong ballet technique, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet dancers are asked to adapt to a wide range of movement styles. You can spot elements of hip-hop, modern and Latin social dances in the company’s active repertoire.

“The way we define what the company is doing and what dance in general is doing is that it’s evolving,” said Mossbrucker. “In order to move forward and be vital, you have to be willing to take a unique approach.”

One performance quality that Mossbrucker thinks sets Aspen Santa Fe Ballet apart from other contemporary dance companies is the idea of projecting past the imaginary proscenium wall that separates an audience from the dancers onstage.

“We hire dancers that have an open and honest quality,” said Mossbrucker. “We talk a lot about (the dancers’) focus being far and slightly higher than maybe what is natural. I think it helps the people feel the dancers’ presence, so that they’re speaking, in a way, directly to the audience.”

Creating a connection with viewers and making dance accessible is something Aspen Santa Fe Ballet has tried to do since the company’s beginning, Mossbrucker said. He describes the work from those early days as “light” and “entertaining,” and though the company now performs works that run the gamut of emotions, he said it is his goal to keep the work accessible.

In “Huma Rojo,” for example, audiences can expect vibrant red costumes, playful movement and fun Latin American jazz that, altogether, Mossbrucker said, make for “something fun and really outgoing.”

“Silent Ghost,” on the other hand, has an almost trance-like quality that Mossbrucker said has elicited an unexpected but appreciated emotional response at performances. He hopes Orange County viewers will be moved similarly by the work they see on the Barclay stage.

“When you’re a performer, that’s what you strive for,” he said. “Contemporary dance can be introverted, I think, because it’s safe to stay inside yourself, but we try to extend past that.”