

Scene changes: Fernando Melo at Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

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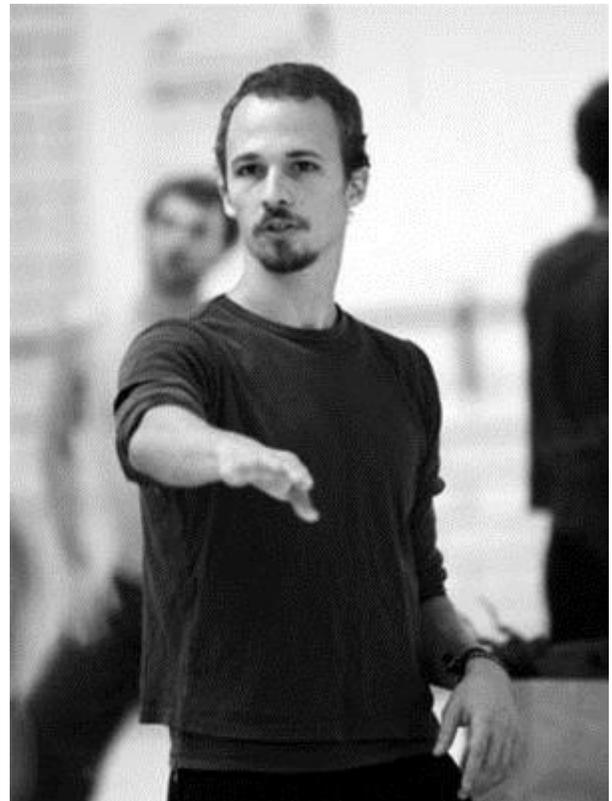
Craig A. Smith

When it comes to contemporary choreography, Fernando Melo is a busy and sought-after man of the hour. From cinema to abstract choreography, from work in music theater to master classes, Melo is on the move.

Melo's *Re:play* comes to the Lensic Performing Arts Center on Friday, April 1, in a program kicking off Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's 20th-anniversary season. It is one of two new company commissions along with *Huma Rojo* by Cayetano Soto. Alejandro Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost*, also made for ASFB and performed here before, rounds out the bill.

Melo, a Rio de Janeiro native and a resident of Europe since age sixteen, is currently rehearsal director for the dance wing of the Göteborg Opera in Sweden. He was a company member there from 2004 to 2014. Prior to that, he danced with Ballett am Rhein in Düsseldorf, from 1999 to 2004. He studied at the ballet school of the Vienna Opera from 1997 through 1999.

Melo has made works for ensembles including Luna Negra Dance Theater in Chicago (*Walk-In and Bate*), Norrdans in Sweden (*Middle of Nowhere*), and Ballet Hispánico in New York (*If Walls Could Speak*) in a co-commission with the Apollo Theater. He has choreographed a number of pieces for opera, such as Strauss' *Daphne* in Toulouse and Detlev Glanert's *Solaris* in Cologne. His dance films, for which he served as choreographer and director, have been



screened in venues and at festivals ranging from Maine, California, Arizona, and Oregon to Sweden, France, Portugal, and Holland.

Melo had not seen Aspen Santa Fe Ballet live before coming to set his piece on the dancers, but he knew the company by name and accomplishment. As he noted, “ASFB has quite an international reputation,” and he was pleased to collaborate with the troupe.

How does a new work begin? With preconceived movement ideas and technical considerations in place? Or completely free and unfettered at the start? “It depends on the parameters of the project,” Melo said. “Often production deadlines demand a ton of preparation and decision making before we even enter the studio. That said, at a certain point, the work tends to gain a life of its own as we surrender to the creative process, often leading to exhilarating, unforeseen results. This was the case in Aspen,” he added. “Some of the theatrical elements, like stage [design] and costumes, had to be established before my arrival. ... We then had four weeks to develop the concept, create the two missing elements [choreography and music], and synchronize it with a complex system of lighting cues, makeup, and costumes.”

Some might think of a choreographer as a stern and unyielding taskmaster, interested only in setting his own ideas in creative stone, with a cast of dancers humbly obedient to his commands. For Melo, nothing could be further from his method of planning and working, and he wouldn't have it any other way. “In my creative process, the exploration of a theme, as well as the development of a physical vocabulary, is a collective act in which all parties involved propose ideas and solutions. The departure point of our concept was to create a work that was entirely made of constructing and deconstructing a single scene. To achieve this goal, we established roles and relationships between the dancers and created a scene packed with action and reaction movements.”



Such collegiality also extends to the technical experts who provide costumes, lighting, and stage design. Melo states online that his creative goal is to connect with, and express, human emotions through movement. As he works to achieve that goal, he said, “I often make use of theatrical elements beyond the choreography, such as the physical environment

in which the performance takes place, the soundscape, the light design, and the costumes — in a nonhierarchical manner. Music, for example, doesn't dictate choices, but rather supports the scene by setting the right ambience. An object or even a light cue is at times given the same importance as a human body.

“Given this nonhierarchical importance of the theatrical elements, my collaboration with the other members of the creative team is as fundamental as the process I have with the dancers. Consequently, having the opportunity to work with the great lighting designer Seah Johnson [in Aspen] allowed me to experiment with giving the light the same relevance as the choreography or music in the piece. I'd go so far as to say the lighting became one of the piece's main characters, with the crucial role of leading the audience on a rhythmic journey of images.”

ASFB has a number of contemporary works in its repertoire, many of them commissions. What criteria does the company use in choosing a choreographer for a new piece? Artistic director Tom Mossbrucker said, “Most of all it has to be a good fit,” between the creator and the company. “When we find a good fit, we like to develop relationships.

“Most of the work we do draws on classical vocabulary with elements of modern [dance], but the classicism is dominant. Also, the environment the choreographer creates in the studio is paramount. They must be nurturing and respectful to our dancers. This environment has proved successful in creating many beautiful works — 30 in our 20-year history!” ◀

http://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/performance/dance/scene-changes-fernando-melo-at-aspen-santa-fe-ballet/article_e98a0cb1-8eee-54e9-8503-8f926bd254db.html