

# Pasatiempo

ASPEN SANTA FE BALLET

## Dancing the weight of time: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Michael Wade Simpson | Friday, July 12, 2019



Joseph Watson and Sadie Brown (at left) with Gregg Bielemeier; photos Anna Stonehouse

Choreographer Nicolo Fonte's full-length work for the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet was inspired by dying flowers. It's called *Beautiful Decay*.

Fonte's friend, photographer Mark Golebiowski, had been part of a photo exhibit in Portland, Oregon, where the choreographer is now based. And Fonte found himself enraptured by one aspect: a slideshow of Golebiowski's 3D photographs of decomposing flowers. "The images

were stunningly beautiful,” he said. “With the 3D glasses, you felt like you could step inside decay. There was a poetry to it. The next step for these flowers was death, but the flowers retained so much of their *flower-ness*. There was a real sense of their past. It made a huge impact.

“My idea for *Beautiful Decay* was to translate the feelings I had when I saw the photos. I knew I wanted to use older dancers — at least in their 70s,” he said. “I had an idea of exploring states of being. Identity. Memory. Past selves, still visible and present. Using Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* helped give me a form, a quasi-narrative: The cycle of life.”



Hilary Cartwright (foreground) and Joseph Watson

Fonte’s favorite critique so far? That one reviewer reportedly forgot that the *Four Seasons* was playing during the performance. “I know the music is a cliché. It’s everywhere: the grocery store, the elevator, when you’re on hold. But I found a version with baroque instrumentation. It has a rougher edge and sounds almost improvised. I learned to love it in a different way.”

Fonte's original 2013 production of *Beautiful Decay* was performed by BalletX, a contemporary ballet company in Philadelphia. A critic there wrote that the first act left the audience speechless. Another writer called it a masterpiece.

Since then it has been presented by Oregon Ballet Theatre, where Fonte is resident choreographer, a position he also holds with Ballet West in Salt Lake City.

During June, Fonte was in Aspen, Colorado, staging the piece with the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. The company was expanded to 14 for the performance — including the two senior dancers, Hilary Cartwright, 76, who danced with the Royal Ballet in London in the '60s, and Gregg Bielemeier, 69, a modern dancer from Portland who performed the piece with Oregon Dance Theatre. A set created by Mimi Lien — a 2015 MacArthur Fellowship winner and 2017 Tony Award winner for her designs for *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* — had not yet arrived. The four rooms onstage, which are used to suggest the passage of time, were indicated by masking tape on the rehearsal room floor.

Fonte has created 10 original ballets for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet over the years. He is in demand as a freelance choreographer for companies all over the world. "This is an important work for me. It has a lot of depth in it," he said. "On the first day in Aspen, I did a presentation to the company. I showed them pictures of the flowers, the set, the costumes. I said to them, 'You're going to have to enter into this world for it to work. Otherwise, it will look like sophisticated aerobics.'

"I had to start from zero here," he said. "The last time the ballet was done, I didn't have to teach it. Here, it's been really challenging. I don't remember every step, that's not my job. But the dancers arrived with the video on their phones. We used computers, TV. They were very willing to learn that way, very self-motivated," he said. "And then I coached the heck out of it."

The two acts of the ballet are very different. In the first, the music is by Vivaldi and the four rooms of the set are designed to recall the Palace of Versailles, where chambers open seemingly endlessly, one after the other. "I loved it when Mimi mentioned that idea," Fonte said. "To me, Versailles suggested the same baroque time period that Vivaldi was writing in." The younger

dancers' costumes in the first act also suggest a baroque influence. Lien's set design employs a fabric for the walls of the rooms that is nearly transparent and glows with light. "It has the same translucent quality of aging skin," he said.

The dancers always travel from stage left to stage right in the piece, also suggesting the passage of time. "Time moves in one direction, but the dancers have to do a thousand crossovers backstage. They have to run around the back over and over and over."

There is an immediate contrast between the younger dancers, who are leaping and flying across the stage, and the older ones, who move much more slowly. "We live in an ageist society," Fonte said. "In dance, we value virtuosity." However, he continued, the moment Cartwright steps onto the stage, everything changes. "I've watched this piece in the audience many times, and it's always the same. The younger dancers can be racing across the stage, dancing full-out, but when the older woman enters, downstage, no one is watching them anymore. It's amazing to see."

At a rehearsal, Cartwright's movements were ethereal. She walked with slowly wafting arms. Fonte asked her to recall the part of the Queen Mother in *Swan Lake*, a role she was familiar with from her days at the Royal Ballet. "The last time I was onstage was 30 or 40 years ago," she said. She is still incredibly active. That morning, she'd taught ballet class for the company; she also travels to present her branded yoga class for dancers. In addition, she works with various dance companies to stage the works of Sir Frederick Ashton, the British choreographer. And she is also one of the founders of the Gyrotonic technique, an offshoot of Pilates developed with Swedish ballet dancer Juliu Horvath.

"A dancer starts changing mentally, emotionally, and physically in her 30s," she said. "But the essence of the dancer never stops being inside her. It's alive in me still."

Cartwright described Act 2, which includes a musical excerpt of the neoclassical composer Max Richter's "recomposed" *Four Seasons*, as well as Ólafur Arnalds' piece, *For Now I Am Winter*. At this point in the ballet, the set has been stripped away and the dancers are wearing regular clothes. "The [younger] dancers begin to see who we are," Cartwright said. "In the first act, they

are so busy being themselves that they don't really acknowledge us. Then, in Act 2, they see that this is where they are going. They relate to us. Learn from us. They see that there is something more than virtuosity. There is emotion."

"Part of it is too real. I am an aging dancer," said Bielemeier, who was teaching an improvisation class for young ballet dancers when Fonte discovered him. "It's very painful. I'm backstage tearing up before every performance. The reality of seeing all these young dancers jumping all over the place around me is very emotional for me. I, too, used to jump and scream and lift."

We all want the same things, Fonte said. "Hilary and Gregg offer presence, emotion, history. They give real weight to the ballet." Fonte once danced with several companies (and spent seven years with Nacho Duato's Compañía Nacional de Danza in Madrid) before beginning his choreographic career. He is also a devoted son. "I spent the last eight or nine months of my father's life sitting with him, observing him. He was extremely physically limited, but he could tell stories." As with Golebiowski's flowers, he felt inspired. "I could still see who he was."

"Memory is a funny thing. It's part fact, part embellishment. Imagination exists in the ether. It can go in all directions. There is no present, no past. I think that's beautiful."

## Details

- ▼ Aspen Santa Fe Ballet presents *Beautiful Decay*
- ▼ 8 p.m. Saturday, July 13, and Saturday, Aug. 31
- ▼ The Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.
- ▼ \$36-\$94; 505-988-1234; [ticketssantafe.org](http://ticketssantafe.org)

[https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/performance/dancing-the-weight-of-time-aspen-santa-fe-ballet/article\\_bd233f42-9f06-5f03-b604-9496a4742fa3.html](https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/performance/dancing-the-weight-of-time-aspen-santa-fe-ballet/article_bd233f42-9f06-5f03-b604-9496a4742fa3.html)