

Pasatiempo

The mechanics of movement: Choreographer Bryan Arias

- Michael Wade Simpson | For The New Mexican

Bryan Arias arrived in Aspen in late May with a clean slate. He had five weeks to create a new work for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, and no idea of what he was going to do. Based on what happened in the rehearsal studio during that span of time, he eventually called the new dance “Passion Samples.” The new piece premiered in Aspen on July 7, and will appear on the ASFB program in Santa Fe on Saturday, July 14.

Arias grew up in New York City, the son of a Salvadoran-immigrant mother and a Puerto Rican father who left the picture when he was young. Arias discovered dance in an after-school program he attended when he was nine. “They taught us African dance, how to stretch, and how to point our feet. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I loved it.” His junior high school, eight blocks away from the family apartment in Spanish Harlem, also had a dance program. A teacher there helped him get into La Guardia High School of the Performing Arts, where he studied classical ballet and modern dance. After high school, he dismissed the idea of going on to a conservatory or college dance program. “I was being raised by a single parent in New York City. I wanted a job so I could help out,” he said. He danced with the North Carolina Dance Theater, then Complexions Dance Company in New York, Nederlands Dans Theater in Holland, and a company started by the Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite called Kidd Pivot. Working with the leaders of these dance companies inspired him to become a choreographer himself.

“I absolutely idolized Jiřr Kylin [choreographer and former artistic director of Nederlands Dans Theater] and Crystal Pite. They were so human, such incredible leaders. They each had an honest, authentic process of creating works with their dancers, and they knew how to connect with you — they



helped you find a language to get something new out of you. With them, I felt like I could be my complete self in every work we created together.”



His first rehearsal week with the ASFB dancers involved guided improvisations, conversations, and the beginning of a relationship between Arias and each of the 11 dancers of the company. “With failure, which during an improvisation can just be making a bad choice or having the wrong timing, you begin to see a real person. That’s what I want to see onstage. That’s what I want to see in dance. You start to see each dancer as an individual — from inside out. Otherwise, a leg is just a leg, a pointed foot is just a foot. That’s not interesting to me.”

In the rehearsal studio in Aspen, the idea of passion came up for Arias very early on. “The dancers are my source of inspiration. We had conversations about their own feelings, about their sources for inspiration, about why they danced. It’s easy to lose the initial passion you have for dancing after you become a professional. I asked them how they process and reconnect as dancers in order to stay fresh. Basically, that became the work. How can you find the most simple, purified, minimal source or translation of passion into physicality? What are our narratives for that theme to grow into movement, to take up space, to have colors and textures, and to interact with other bodies?”

It was easy for Arias to see the passion the married couple Seia Rassenti and Joseph Watson have for dance and for one another. “I have them dancing together to a song by José Feliciano called ‘Obsesión.’ My father was a singer and musician, and I grew up listening to him playing a lot of José Feliciano. I was raised in the same barrio. He is also Puerto Rican. It was nice to layer the beautiful story of Seia and Joseph with the music I grew up with as a child, the music played in my house.”

Arias believes there is such a thing as collective passion as well. “You can easily read the energy. There is beauty in the vulnerability of a group moving in a slow, minimal way. The Aspen Santa Fe dancers have a wonderful ability to work together. You can feel the respect and camaraderie they have for each other. You don’t always get that.”

Music for the dance came from a playlist Arias takes with him — pieces that inspire him, which he connects to emotionally, or which fire his imagination as a dance maker. “I play music while we’re workshopping movement ideas the first week. I’ll be giving them group tasks — for example, ‘Just

walk, but take turns following or leading each other.’ It’s amazing how the different music I play affects them. I play an elimination game with music, selecting and rejecting different pieces until I end up, by the second week, putting movement and music together — beginning to set things.” Other pieces of music that made the cut include the blues song “This Bitter Earth” by Dinah Washington, as well as minimalistic music by the composer Nils Frahm.

By the fourth week of rehearsal, Arias had set a dance and was getting ready for lighting rehearsals and run-throughs onstage in Aspen. His method of coaxing a dance from the dancers themselves seems to have worked. “I’m very happy with it,” he said. “Of course, I’ll keep playing until the curtain goes up. We’ll work on little things like timing, intentions, connections. But I’m happy with it.”

Arias will miss the performance in Santa Fe. He is taking a summer break before heading into a couple of two-week residencies in the fall. The plan is for an evening-length production, but there still isn’t much of a plan. “I’ll come into the studio with ideas,” he said. “I’ll have three dancers and four weeks.” ◀

details

▼ Aspen Santa Fe Ballet with choreographer Bryan Arias

▼ 8 p.m. Saturday, July 14

▼ Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.

▼ \$36-\$94, ticketssantafe.org, 505-988-1234