

# weekend



ANNA STONEHOUSE/THE ASPEN TIMES

## THE 'PASSION' OF BRYAN ARIAS

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet to premiere 'Passion Samples' on Saturday

CLASSICAL MUSIC A musical journey to Paris B7 • WHAT'S HAPPENING B2



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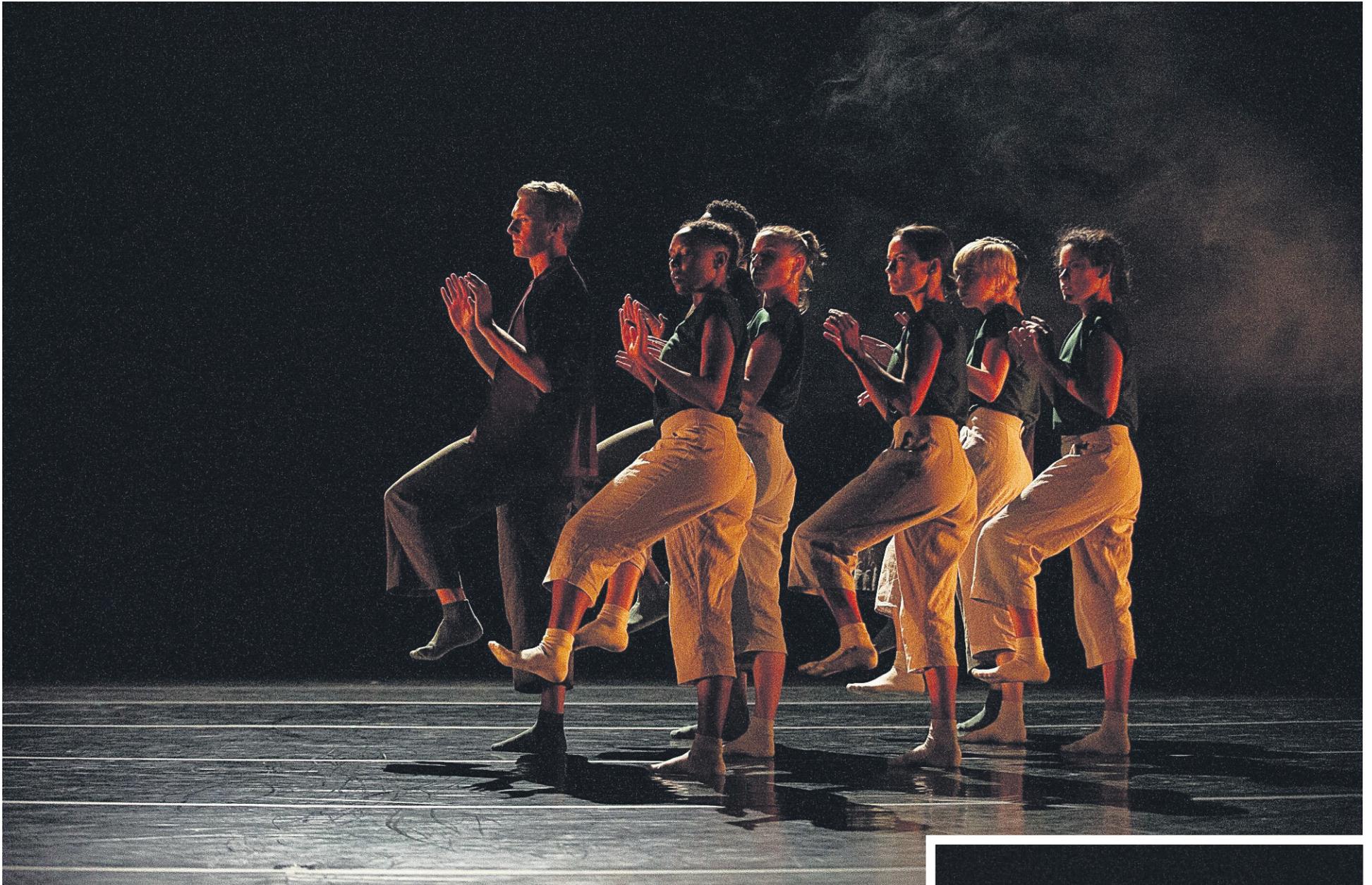
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Aspen Santa Fe Ballet company members rehearse choreographer Bryan Arias' "Passion Samples."

# ONE FROM THE HEART

## Inside the making of choreographer Bryan Arias' "Passion Samples" at Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

**Andrew Travers**  
The Aspen Times

Some choreographers lord over a dance studio like a drill sergeant, others with the mercurial air of a tortured artist. Bryan Arias, who will premiere his first work with Aspen Santa Fe Ballet on Saturday, works with dancers like a friendly collaborator.

Arias has been in the studio with the dancers of Aspen Santa Fe for the past month developing a new work titled "Passion Samples."

He came in without a preconceived ballet in mind, aiming instead to conceive the work based on workshops with the locally based company.

"I wanted to first get to know them and get to know Aspen, to understand the audience, and from there to start to make decisions about how I can interject my ideas," he explained during a rehearsal break in June.

During his first week in the studio, Arias led open-ended studio sessions with the dancers — getting to know their movement, their personalities as dancers and as human beings. This is not a choreographer who sees dancers as a vessel for his vision — he wanted to know who they were, wanted to hear their ideas and shape a ballet alongside them.

"I enjoy getting to know the dancers, their personalities,

understanding what works best for them and how I can connect with them, so that they have their own narratives," he explained. "That's important and that's liberating."

Discussions with the company about their passions led him to develop a work based around the concept of passion, about the heights of emotion that first drive a person to dance.

"It's something that gets lost," he said. "Not just in dance but in life. Time and experience takes away from that first fire — that first thing that inspires you and motivates you and makes you say, 'This is what I want to do and this is how I want to do it.'"

When he started to translate that into movement, he found depth in simple dance phrases.

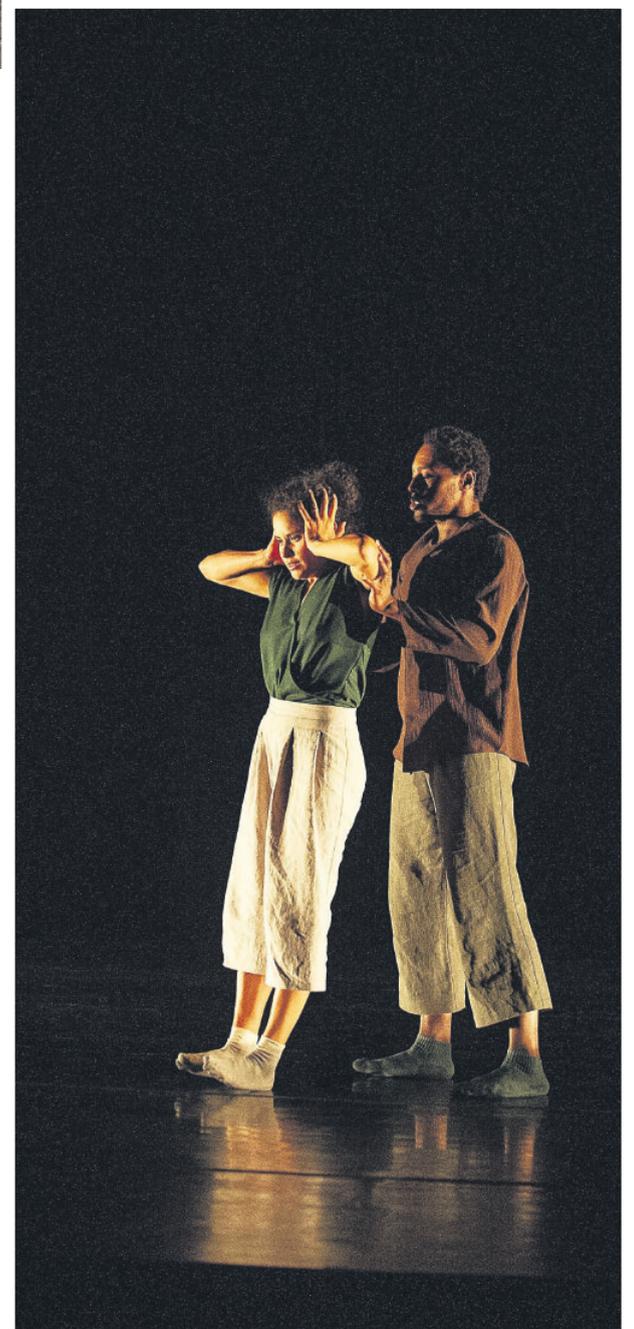
"It's so inspiring holding a mirror to ourselves when we're asked to be in a state of flow and pleasure," he said.

Arias aims to create an environment, he said, where dancers can be free and let go, to get out of their heads and find a movement that's "all heart."

Arias' rehearsals are often, quite literally, conversations.

Working through a new section in his third week here, he and the company's dancers peppered one another with questions between movements.

He led a group of eight dancers in unison across the



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Joseph Watson II and Seia Rassenti Watson in "Passion Samples."

ASFB, B6



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During a rehearsal for his “Passion Samples,” choreographer Bryan Arias encouraged his Aspen Santa Fe Ballet dancers to “relax more ... you’ve got to feel each other.”

## ASFB

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stage in a slow groove that ended in a series of coordinated overhead arm pumps, set to Dinah Washington’s “This Bitter Earth” (he’d also been setting sections to a Bach symphony, a melonga by Jose Feliciano, and to found-sound ambient music).

“We gotta relax more,” he told his dancers after one run-through.

He directed the company to face the back wall of the studio, away from the mirrors, so that they wouldn’t watch themselves or overthink their movements.

“You’ve got to feel each other,” he told them. “Let’s bring our awareness to that.”

Wearing Nikes and a jumpsuit, Arias — little more than a year retired from his career as a professional dancer — could move alongside the company and demonstrate his own interpretations of the movements he was looking for.

A former dancer with Nederlands Dans Theater and Kidd Pivot, Arias — recipient of the 2017 Princess Grace Choreography Fellowship Award — is emerging as an in-demand choreographic voice. He has mostly exhibited his works with companies in Europe, making Aspen Santa Fe one of the first companies in the U.S. to commission his work.

At Kidd Pivot, he worked under the acclaimed Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite, who served as a mentor and inspired Arias to choreograph full-time.

After a run of Kidd Pivot performances last May, he resolved to leave the stage behind and to focus on making his own ballets.

“I decided, ‘I’m just going to choreograph,’” he recalled. “I’m going to stop dancing. After working for someone like that, I can’t imagine working for someone else as a dancer, because of the incredible human that she is and what I learned from that experience.”

Arias’ “Passion Samples” is joined on the evening program by Jiri Kylian’s “Sleepless” and Aspen Santa Fe’s staging of Alexander Ekman’s famed tour-de-force

### IF YOU GO ...

**What:** “Passion Samples,” presented by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

**Where:** Aspen District Theatre

**When:** Saturday, 8 p.m.

**How much:** \$36 to \$94

**Tickets:** Wheeler Opera House box office; [aspenshowtix.com](http://aspenshowtix.com)

**More info:** The program also includes Alexander Ekman’s “Tuplet” and Jiří Kylián’s “Sleepless;” Saturday’s performance opens the summer season at Aspen Santa Fe, which will host guest companies Hubbard Street Dance Chicago (July 20-21) and Pilobolus (July 28) before closing with An Evening with Pianist Joyce Yang (Aug. 10-11); [aspensantafeballet.com](http://aspensantafeballet.com)

“Tuplet” — an inventive work that employs the dancers’ bodies as percussion instruments in a soundscape integrated with jazz and original electronic music.

Arias said he didn’t know what to expect from the dancers in Aspen. He’d been corresponding with Aspen Santa Fe artistic director Tom Mossbrucker for two years before the company commissioned “Passion Samples.” He knew of their stature in the contemporary dance world as a touring company, had watched film of the company, but had never seen them perform live. After some time with these dancers in the studio, he was overjoyed to discover this talented group “with great stories in their bodies.”

“You feel a layer beyond the skin with them,” he said.

His personal approach to choreography is emotionally taxing, Arias admits, but for this young choreographer, there’s no other path to creation.

“It’s exhausting but that’s the only way that I can do my work, love doing my work and being in this room with these people,” he said. “I need that humanity in my work.”

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