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Dancing through life

BY MEGAN BENNETT / JOURNAL NORTH REPORTER
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SANTA FE, N.M. — It's easy for a ballet about the aging process and the life cycle to sound morbid.

But Nicolo Fonte stressed that his work is not that at all. In fact, the choreographer describes "Beautiful Decay" as just the opposite.



A production image of the Oregon Ballet Theatre performing Nicolo Fonte's "Beautiful Decay." The Aspen Santa Fe Ballet will be performing the production this month. (Photo by James McGrew)

"There's a lot of energy in the work and, in the end, I believe, (it is) uplifting and life-affirming," the New York native said during a recent phone interview from Aspen, where he was rehearsing the full-evening ballet performance with the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet ensemble. The cast of intergenerational dancers will stage ASFB's premiere of Fonte's "Beautiful Decay" at the Lensic Performing Arts Center on Saturday. The show will return for a performance Aug. 31.

The two-act show, which interprets and juxtaposes the different stages of human life through modern dance, premiered in 2013 with Philadelphia's BalletX Theater. Fonte's inspiration for the piece came from a series of three-dimensional photographs a friend of his had taken of decaying flowers.

"They just retained so much of their identity," of what they had been as fully living, blooming flowers, Fonte remembered of the images he saw now about a decade ago.



The Aspen Santa Fe Ballet will stage Nicolo Fonte's "Beautiful Decay" Saturday, and again on August 31. Pictured is the Oregon Ballet Theatre, which performed the show in 2016. (Courtesy of Jingzi Zhao)

"And there was still so much movement in them," he said. "... or they were just in a process of decaying and about to fall off the stem."

"So that was a really beautiful and compelling image to me," said Fonte.

"Beautiful Decay" is based on the feeling those flowers gave him, which he translated by using intergenerational artists.

In ASFB's production, the main ensemble full of twentysomethings will share the stage with two guest dancers in their seventies – international teacher and former Royal Ballet of England soloist Hillary Cartwright and Gregg Bielemeier, an Oregon-based artist and teacher.

Fonte said the roles specifically call for former dancers because he wanted to address the fact that we live in an ageist society in which youth and physicality are so revered.

He said he wanted to show that “there is something as equally important in having 40 years’ experience, and the emotional maturity and elegance and depth to be on stage still.”

“We shouldn’t devalue people who don’t have physical prowess any more,” he said, adding that “there’s a different virtuosity in a seasoned, experience performer that’s been performing for 50 years.” “That’s very, very valuable and that’s really another premise of the work; that it’s not to say one is better than the other, but that we actually need both.”

“Beautiful Decay’s” first act is set to Antonio Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons,” for which Fonte choreographed each season to symbolize a section of life. Spring is a renewal, summer is the full-on experience of life, fall is the beginning of decay, and winter is death and the beginning of the life cycle again.

The set for the first act, designed by Tony Award-winner and MacArthur Fellow Mimi Lien, comprises four rooms that Fonte described as arranged to look like they go on for infinity. The young dancers race through the rooms, he said, while the older duo is elsewhere on stage moving at a slower pace.

“(It) sets up this juxtaposition of youth is all about racing through life, and carelessness and freedom, and when you’re older it’s all about reflection, slowing down and thinking about the choices you’re making,” he said.

The more “ethereal” Act II, with an audio track by contemporary Icelandic musician Olafur Arnald – from his 2013 album “For Now I am Winter” – takes place in a wide open stage that Fonte likened to one’s imagination. This part of the piece, he said, represents how the inner self and one’s “inner world” remain the same at any age. “Whether you’re a 22-year-old performer or a 75-year-old performer, what you feel in your heart, what you feel in your mind, your emotional state can be shared and experienced,” Fonte said. “And we’re more or less equal in that plane.”

If you go

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet’s ‘Beautiful Decay’

WHEN: Saturday, 8 p.m. Another performance will be held on Aug. 31 at 8 p.m.

WHERE: The Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco

TICKETS: \$36-\$94. Purchase at ticketssantafe.org.

<https://www.abqjournal.com/1337184/dancing-through-life-ex-aspen-santa-fe-ballet-performs-beautiful-decay.html>