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ASFB Takes Los Angeles

A prestigious residency relationship begins

by Debra Levine

A valued artistic partnership with a prominent Los Angeles performing arts center synchronizes sweetly with the company's 20th anniversary, according to Aspen Santa Fe Ballet co-directors Jean-Philippe Malaty and Tom Mossbrucker. In a rare long-term commitment stretching over three seasons, the Valley Performing Arts Center (VPAC) has named ASFB as its first-ever dance company-in-residence. The architecturally distinguished, jewel-box theater at California State University, Northridge, serves as a gateway to the abundant Los Angeles dance market.

The first of three annual visits rolls out soon, on April 16, 2016. For the start-up splash, ASFB has fashioned a new program—*Cerrudo, Melo, and Soto: Three New Works*—a specially curated showcase of works by choreographers who have a Latin heritage in common.

The unusual collaboration was initiated by Thor Steingraber, VPAC's energetic executive director, who not only chose ASFB from numerous candidates, but is co-commissioning a major new work with ASFB over the course of the relationship.

"If there were a company I would present repeatedly, ASFB perfectly fits the bill," said Steingraber in a phone interview. "I watched them in New York and in Aspen, and saw their precision and beauty. They embody two qualities I like to see on the stage. They are incredibly accomplished as technical artists while being engaging personalities in the service of a choreographer."

The dance company in-residence arrangement offers important benefits for both parties. The venue, a sparkling 1,700-seat theater designed and built by female architect Kara Hill, has been in strong ascendance as it marks its fifth anniversary. Its unusual approach to highly customized, creative programming holds dance as a key component. For ASFB, a dance leader of the American West, the relationship gives access to arguably the nation's hottest dance market, Los Angeles.



The current dance boom taking place in L.A. has not escaped the attention of ASFB executive director Jean Philippe Malaty. “To be where there is so much happening is exciting,” he says. Artistic director Tom Mossbrucker, who has observed the L.A. market since performing there often with the Joffrey Ballet in the 1980s, adds: “L.A. has a completely new identity as a dance town—there’s much more energy there than any place. First dance was New York; then it was Europe. Now there’s a thing going on that is uniquely L.A. We’re delighted to being part of it.”

The first-year program for the residency includes works by two Spaniards: *Silent Ghost* by Alejandro Cerrudo and *Huma Rojo*, the latest ASFB commission by Cayetano Soto. *Re:play*, a ballet by a dance maker new to ASFB—the Brazilian-born Fernando Melo—will round out the L.A. repertoire.

For Mossbrucker, the Latin theme evolved organically. “We set out to do an evening of all-commissioned work. We didn’t pursue a Latin theme specifically; it’s a continuation of the global approach we’ve practiced from the get-go,” he says.

New commissions, the lifeblood of ASFB, are part of the VPAC promise. According to Steingraber: “Creating new work is not daunting to me. I bring a producer’s mindset to my presenter’s role. I think that my willingness to enter that equation probably sealed the deal for all of us.”

Steingraber’s vision takes an adventurous approach. “The current conversation is that in year two we will present a world premiere by a Los Angeles commercial choreographer. That is a big decision, which alone has a lot of meaning.”

Who will be the lucky choreographer? “Tom, Jean-Philippe, and I have had multiple conversations. They have created a short list. All the art-making is in their court. I plan to announce the commission at our April performance,” says Steingraber.

Malaty notes that long-term commitments have become an unfortunate rarity. “It’s something that doesn’t happen much with presenters these days. We see a lot of one-night stands, and then you move on. After three or four years, they cycle you out. So this is very refreshing and different from the norm.”

Building audiences over time underlies the VPAC residency. “We have been very disciplined in building audiences in our home cities, as well as in key markets, performing at the Joyce every other year, Jacob’s Pillow the same. We aspire to do that in L.A. as well,” says Malaty.

Beyond the initial concept, the extended brainstorming and dialogue, and cementing of business details, the success of the venture ultimately rests with the ASFB dancers. Steingraber says: “These are exceptionally outward-facing, congenial, public-minded performers, and not just on the stage. When I first met them, their full investment in their company—beyond their individual performances—came across. They are an ensemble both on and off stage. I eagerly await the moment when I will introduce these dancers to my audience.”

Dance writer Debra Levine is curator of “All That Jack (Cole)” a film retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in January 2016.

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Cerrudo, Melo, and Soto: Three New Works

April 16, 2016 | 8:00pm

Valley Performing Arts Center

Northridge, CA

For more information:

www.aspensantafeballet.com