

ENCORE! ENCORE!

Here's a look at the renowned Aspen Santa Fe Ballet as the organization kicks off its 20th anniversary season.

By Elizabeth Nix



When Bebe Schweppe asked two dancers with the Joffrey Ballet organization, Jean-Philippe Malaty and Tom Mossbrucker, to leave New York City, the center of the American dance world, and come to tiny Aspen to start a ballet company, the men thought it was “a crazy idea, for sure,” according to Malaty. Yet Schweppe, who founded the Aspen Ballet School in 1990, was persuasive and eventually convinced them to make the move. “We thought, ‘Let’s give it a few years; we can always go back to New York,’” recalls Malaty with a laugh. Twenty years later, the men are still in Aspen and the celebrated contemporary ballet company they created performs for crowds around the world.

First known as the Aspen Ballet Company, the organization’s beginnings were modest. The troupe, consisting of seven classically trained dancers, made long car trips to perform in little towns across Colorado. Sarah Evans, a Roaring Fork Valley native and one of the original dancers in the group, remembers

performing in “funky spaces for audiences who often didn’t know much about dance.” At a theater in Gunnison, there was no backstage passageway, so when a dancer exited stage left and needed to enter stage right, he or she had to go outside and run around the back of the building to the opposite stage door. Meanwhile, Malaty, the organization’s executive director; Mossbrucker, the artistic director; and founder Schweppe did everything from washing costumes to putting up advertising posters to pulling the curtains during shows. Looking back on those early years, Mossbrucker says, “It was a rich time for us as a company. There was a great feeling of building something as a team, and that feeling remains part of our culture.” Adds Malaty, “We felt free because there were no expectations [about what the organization had to become], and that gave us a sense of fearlessness.”

Today, the company has a reputation for presenting groundbreaking pieces by up-and-coming choreographers. The practice was born out of necessity—initially the group couldn’t afford famous choreographers—but it proved serendipitous, as

BOLD MOVE
Katherine Bolaños and Seia Rassenti perform in *Silent Ghost*, a piece created for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet by Spanish-born choreographer Alejandro Cerrudo. Since its founding in 1990, ASFB has become known for its commitment to commissioning new works.

BODIES IN MOTION
From top: Craig Black and Joseph Watson appear in *Re:play*, a work choreographed by ASFB newcomer Fernando Melo of Brazil; Black and Emily Proctor dance in Alejandro Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost*. Both pieces will be on the program this season as ASFB celebrates its milestone anniversary.



many of the promising, young choreographers Malaty and Mossbrucker commissioned pieces from, including Nicolo Fonte, Cayetano Soto, Alejandro Cerrudo, Helen Pickett and Jorma Elo, went on to become renowned in the industry. “Tom and JP’s eye for selecting emerging choreographers is incredible,” says veteran ballet board member and Hotel Jerome General Manager Tony DiLucia. Maintaining relationships with dance-makers as their careers progress also is important to the two ballet directors, and a number of choreographers have repeatedly returned as top-tier artists to produce new ballets for the company. “They want to work with us because they know our dancers will be extremely engaged and contribute to the creative process,” Mossbrucker says. Additionally, Aspen itself offers a nurturing, inspiring setting.

In 2003, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet (as it became known in 2000 after partnering with New Mexico’s Santa Fe Festival Ballet) was invited to perform at New York City’s The Joyce Theater, one of the country’s leading dance venues. Malaty describes this event as “a game changer that put us on the national dance scene.” That same year, the company also made its debut at the prestigious Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Mass., an experience that Mossbrucker calls thrilling. Since then, ASFB has logged multiple appearances at both venues, and its profile on the national and international stage has flourished. DiLucia is always in attendance for opening night when the company dances at The Joyce and says, “It’s amazing to see Aspen represented in a place like New York City and get standing ovations from New Yorkers.”

« *“Dance is about movement, and that’s who we are as an organization. We always keep looking forward.”*

—JEAN-PHILIPPE MALATY,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ASPEN
SANTA FE BALLET »

Twenty years after launching, ASFB has performed 80 different ballets (31 of them original works commissioned by the company) by 40 choreographers. Mossbrucker attributes the troupe’s success to its accessible performances, dancers who love the innovative repertoire and have ownership in it, and the fact that “we perform works by living choreographers who are very much of today.” The company is now at the center of a multidimensional arts organization that includes dance classes for children, teens and adults; the management of the Juan Sidi Flamenco Santa Fe company; and ASFB Presents, which brings acclaimed dances companies (Paul Taylor, Pilobolus and Hubbard Street to name just a few) to audiences in Aspen and Santa Fe. Barbara Gold, a longtime ASFB board member, says it’s been especially rewarding over

the years to witness the organization’s positive, lasting impact on local youth, through both ASFB’s network of dance schools in the Roaring Fork Valley and Santa Fe, as well as through Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklorico, a free, after-school program for kids offering instruction in Mexican folk dance.

Coming up this season, in honor of ASFB’s milestone anniversary, the company will present programs that exemplify who they are. As a reflection of the group’s commitment



to commissioning new works, they will premiere a “fun, celebratory” piece by frequent collaborator Soto, as well as a piece by ASFB newcomer Fernando Melo of Brazil. Also on the program will be a work by Cerrudo, which Mossbrucker notes will be elaborately staged in Aspen and Santa Fe, and a performance of *Sleepless* by Jiří Kylián. “He’s one of the great masters of contemporary dance so we wanted to include him,” Mossbrucker says.

As for what the next 20 years might hold, Malaty says ASFB will continue to evolve. “Dance is about movement, and that’s who we are as an organization,” he says. “We always keep looking forward.” *ASFB will perform in Aspen Feb. 13, with an encore performance March 26. Tickets from \$25, aspensantafeballet.com.* ■