

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Nicolo Fonte's
The Heart(s)pace



Contemporary Creations

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet immerses its dancers in the creative process. **By Gavin Larsen**

In 1996, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet artistic director Tom Mossbrucker was a veteran Joffrey Ballet dancer with no aspirations to direct a company. But while visiting a Colorado music festival with his partner, Jean-Philippe Malaty, also a dancer, a chance encounter changed his mind. "We met Bebe Schweppe, who ran a ballet school in Aspen but always dreamt that the city could have its own resident company," Mossbrucker recalls. "We thought she was crazy and said, 'Good luck with that!' But she thought we were the ones who could do it." After a few weeks of discussion, the pair moved to Colorado and a company was born.

Twenty-three years later, it's clear that Schweppe's intuition was spot-on. The troupe, which started as Aspen Ballet Company, grew into Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, a conceptually groundbreaking contemporary ballet company led by Mossbrucker and Malaty, who became its executive director. With 10 dancers on 52-week contracts (including full health,

dental and retirement benefits), two home cities and flourishing schools serving the communities of Aspen and Santa Fe, ASFB has developed a reputation for bringing fledgling choreographic talent to national attention.

"We had no preconceived notions of what sort of company it should be," Mossbrucker says. "But the fact that we were both still dancers and had seen a lot of dysfunction in ballet companies was really our starting-off point. We thought there had to be a better way." They decided to approach the company from a dancer's point of view and create a healthy, nurturing environment.

Today their dual mission is to develop the careers of both dancers and choreographers. ASFB currently only performs work by living choreographers, most of which it commissions. Mossbrucker notes that Nicolo Fonte, Cayetano Soto and Jorma Elo, who were emerging dancemakers when ASFB first commissioned them, are still major players in the repertoire. "By their third or fourth commission, the work got deeper, the

From left: Sharen Bradford, Courtesy ASFB; Jessica Moore, Courtesy ASFB



at a glance

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Number of dancers: 10

Length of contract: 52 weeks

Starting salary: Undisclosed

Union signatory: No

Performances per year: About 40

Website: aspensantafeballet.com

ASFB in rehearsal with Tom Mossbrucker

dancers understood it better and the choreographers left an indelible mark on the company," says Mossbrucker. In addition to new creations, works by Jiří Kylián and Alejandro Cerrudo have had a significant impact on defining the company's look, which combines classical lines and balletic ability with clean, contemporary versatility.

ASFB's seasons include one to two new works, plus revivals and an annual *Nutcracker*. The most recognizably classical ballet in the repertoire, its *Nutcracker* blends pointework and tutus with authentic traditional folk dances in the Act 2 divertissements.

Company class is designed to help the dancers move from one dancemaker's style to another. "I emphasize simplicity and clarity with no affectations, so the choreographers have a clean slate to work with," says Mossbrucker. "Everyone is very focused, but it's also about coming together as a team." The familial environment may be one reason why dancer turnover is so low. It's not unusual for performers to stay with the company for a decade or more. Fifteen-year veteran Katherine Bolaños says Mossbrucker's demeanor keeps the dancers motivated. "Something I love about Tom is how funny he is—his temperament is typically

joyful and lighthearted, but when we're working on a hard show and need to focus on technique, he's more serious."

While the company's base of operations remains in Aspen, in 2000, its board created a dual-city partnership with Santa Fe, New Mexico, to support its growing quality and ambition. ASFB presents the same programs in both cities and spends roughly a third of each year touring regionally and internationally. They recently performed in France and will appear in New York City and Israel during March and April.

Bolaños says that traveling bonds the dancers. "Working through issues when you're together so much helps us innately understand each other," she says. "Learning to connect with your peers onstage is an important skill, and the times we're most cohesive is when we're touring and performing more."

Since fitting into the fabric of the small group is crucial, auditions involve spending at least two days in Aspen learning rep with ASFB. "Part of our idea was to have a company of stars," Mossbrucker says. "Our dancers have an engaging, charismatic quality that makes them stand out onstage. I want each one to add a unique piece to the bouquet." **P**

Audition Advice Mossbrucker looks for dancers with maturity and experience: "I need them to step right into the group, and also be able to portray an open and honest quality onstage."

Audition is by invitation only. To be considered for a private audition, email your cover letter, headshot, dance photos, resumé and links to performance footage and a video of rehearsal or class to auditions@aspensantafeballet.com.