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Lar Lubovitch's work is still going strong after 40 years.

Unwavering

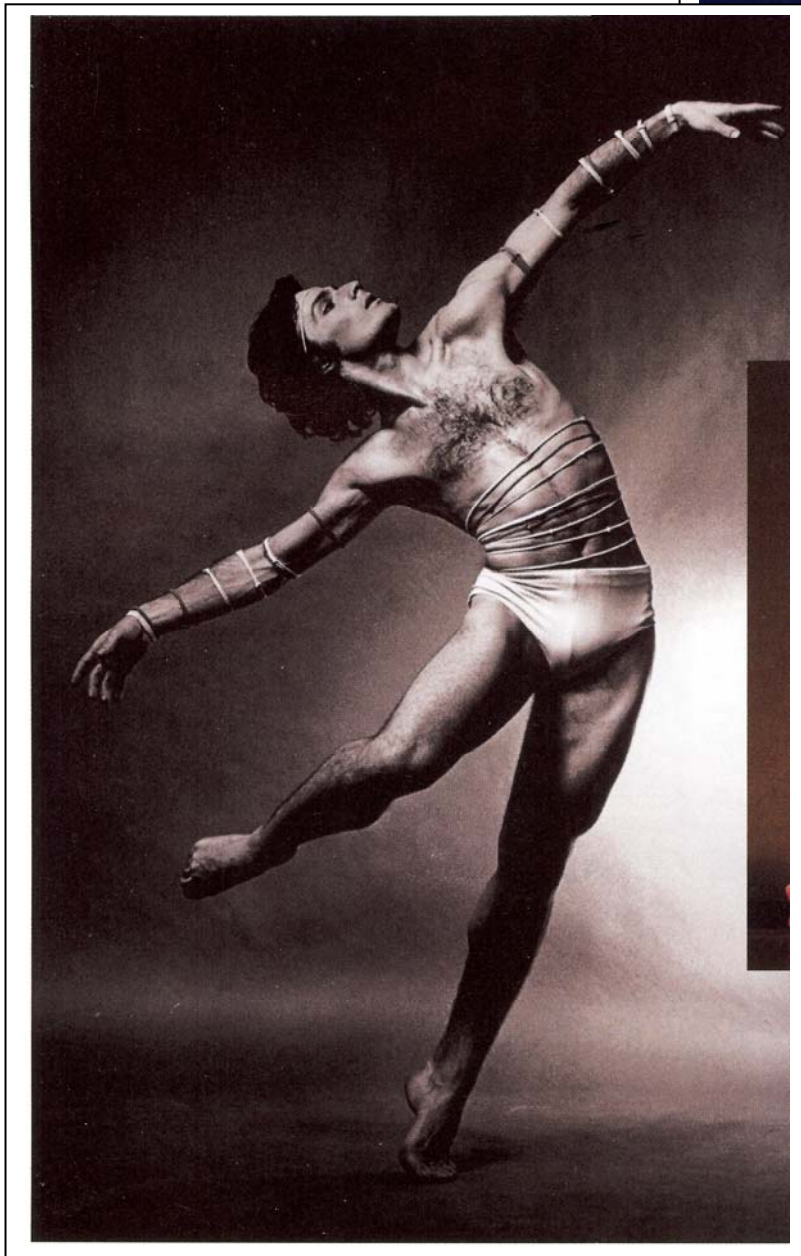
By Joseph Carman

Ten years ago, Lar Lubovitch discovered a 90-second film of a solo he made as a student at the University of Iowa. An early 1960s audition film for the Juilliard School, it provided a microcosmic view of a choreographic career to come. "I was reminded that I knew something intuitively that need never be abandoned," says Lubovitch. "It was a pre-educated sense of movement in space and time. It was encouraging to go back to that young man and his mindset and see why he did what he did."

This year the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company will have ample opportunity to revisit the mindset of that era and beyond. It is celebrating its 40th-anniversary season with an ambitious series of performances: a July season at Jacob's Pillow; a retrospective of the choreographer's minimalist works at Dance Theater Workshop; a weeklong engagement at New York City Center; and an extensive domestic tour. The company hasn't toured in over a decade, using the time to develop new work and set works on various companies. And in celebration of his hometown, the Chicago Dancing Festival, co-founded by Lubovitch last year, returned in August with an expanded edition including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theatre, Ballet Florida, Complexions, Muntu Dance Theater, San Francisco Ballet, and the Joffrey Ballet.

"If there is anything to celebrate, it is that nothing stopped me from going forward," says Lubovitch. "There is something to be said for endurance and stamina." His signature movements—musically fluid, fine-tuned, impeccably engineered, spatially-oriented, and loved by the dancers who dance them—have taken on numerous venues from the Metropolitan Opera stage to an ice rink to Broadway. His company, formed in 1968, has varied over time in its size and scope. He now maintains what he calls a "production unit" of three to five dancers and augments the group for various engagements.

But many dancers are willing to drop whatever they are doing to join him for a project. Jay Franke, a former Hubbard Street Dance Chicago member, says that when Lubovitch created *Love's Stories* on the troupe he fell for his choreography immediately. "So many choreographers had walked through the studio door, but there was a romanticism in Lar's work that felt really good on my body," says Franke. "It's very circular and musical. I studied music and he understands music." After working with Lubovitch's troupe for three years, he's discovered another aspect of compatibility. "As a male dancer, I know that he really connects with the way men move beautifully." Virtuosity and technique are required, but never at the expense of sensitivity.

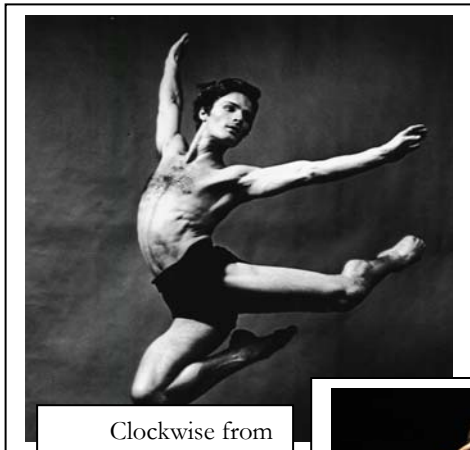


Clockwise from top left: Charlaine Mei Katsuyoshi and Jay Franke in *Love's Stories*; Jay Franke, Rasta Thomas and Sean Stewart in *Little Rhapsodies*; Scott Rink and Drew Jacoby in *Dvorak Serenade*, Lubovitch in an undated photo.

Rasta Thomas, who danced the protagonist in Lubovitch's full-length *Othello* as a guest artist with American Ballet Theatre, rates Lubovitch as "Grade A" and says, "I'll choose to work with him over a brand-name company any day of the week, because his stuff is gold." Thomas has wowed audiences with his performance in the trio *Little Rhapsodies* and will dance with the company during the City Center season.

"To work with a genius like Lar, who has developed his own vocabulary and has the ability to create on you at the level he creates, is an honor," says Thomas, who originated a role in *Elemental Brubeck*. "There is a fluidity and seamlessness to the steps that is almost therapeutic. The movements bleed together organically. It just feels like what dance should be. So many steps that dancers are asked to perform don't feel organic."

Christopher Vo, a 2008 Juilliard graduate, decided to work with Lubovitch for similar reasons. "His works are lyrical and languid and that's the kind of dancer I am," says Vo. "It's a really good fit for me."



Clockwise from above: Lubovitch in 1969; Rasta Thomas in *Elemental Brubeck*; Gabby Malone and Sean Stewart in *Elemental Brubeck*.

The wisdom of feeling when movement is "right" may have come naturally to Lubovitch, who switched from majoring in art in college to dance before he eventually joined the Harkness Ballet. But he credits his mentors at Juilliard for developing his burgeoning skills. The list of teachers is legendary: Martha Graham, Antony Tudor, Anna Sokolow, Louis Horst, José Limón, and Lucas Hoving.

"In learning the physicality of dance, Graham and Limón were very influential," says Lubovitch, citing the concept of using the whole body rather than isolated appendages. As for discovering methods of speaking to music, Tudor led the way. "He had a way of regarding music that was unusually poetic, and I took that to heart."

Finding the authoritative line through a piece of music remains the primary focus in Lubovitch's choreography. "Whatever step has been done can only be responded to with one inevitable next step," says Lubovitch. "There may be many choices to make, but it has to feel and appear inevitable. And this creates fluidity—a kind of ongoing roundness and curviness, so the movements blend in a nonjarring way to the eye and body."

In crafting large ensemble pieces like *A Brahms Symphony*, *North Star*, or the wave-like corps de ballet in *Othello*, Lubovitch relies on his ability to envision a larger picture. "He gives us steps, partnering and formations," says Charlaine Mei Katsuyoshi, who has danced with the company for five years. "From the inside out you don't always see what's going on, but if you step back and look at the whole picture, you see this beautiful sculpture that's happening on the entire stage." She also appreciates his acknowledgement of choreography that isn't working. "He gives it its due gestation period, and comes right back to it. He doesn't just throw some choreography out to the walls. He takes time and care in his craft."

While some critics have equated Lubovitch's smooth aesthetics and unwavering musicality with blandness or lack of originality, he maintains that his work is always unapologetically about dancing. "There are many things motivating a choreographer's creative energy, but for me the dancing itself has always inspired me," he says. "I have done dances that are superficially about many different things, but the subtext is always dancing." Lubovitch's commitment to rich movement has influenced younger choreographers. Mark Morris and Doug Varone, both former Lubovitch dancers, have taken that aesthetic to heart in their own work.

Of the more than a hundred dances that Lubovitch has created, he is proudest of those that "I value as turning points or that captured watershed moments, pieces that show what I was up to personally." Among them are *North Star*, *A Brahms Symphony*, and *Concerto Six Twenty-Two*.

Set to Mozart's Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, *Concerto Six Twenty-Two*, with the famous male duet at its centerpiece, made an intimate but powerful statement when it was performed at the Dancing For Life AIDS benefit at Lincoln Center in 1987. Lubovitch had organized the benefit out of frustration with the dance world's response to AIDS. He had taken care of his dancer friend Ernie Pagnano until his death. "One of the emerging themes during that very difficult period was friendship," he says. "Friends were being challenged to do unprecedented things like helping friends to die. The dance focuses on the theme of the deep love of friendship, and I think it resonated."



Far left : *Men's Stories* with Griff Braun, center. Left: Sylvain Lafortune and Rick Michalek in *Concerto Six Twenty-Two* (1986). Below: Lubovitch rehearsing *Love's Stories* with Katsuyoshi and Franke.



Creating works that succeed, however, can often occur through trial and error. Lubovitch says he embraces mistakes because they lead him to new territory. "Getting to the next one is always a result of being irked by not having gotten it right in the previous one. And I may never get it right," he says. "It's more about the process than the product."

Forty years of experience have reinforced the idea of "speaking a language of my own and being true to myself." Seeing that film clip of his first solo to a simple, uncredited piano piece only reinforced his belief in his gut instincts. "I was pleased to find," says Lubovitch, "that I really hadn't gone very far from the core of what I understood then."

Joseph Carman is a contributing editor to Dance Magazine and the author of Round About the Ballet.