

THE ASPEN TIMES

Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in Aspen

Tour hiatus gives choreographer more time to create

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The Aspen Times

Aspen, CO Colorado

Friday January 16, 2009

Like many things these days, the idea of a touring dance company needs serious rethinking. Much of the cutting-edge work in dance is being created for alternative spaces, or for site-specific events, and this resists the model of the touring company. Young audiences are not generally flocking to dance: Even on college campuses, it is often outside presenters, not the universities, who bring in dance troupes, resulting in crowds made up predominantly of non-students.

Lar Lubovitch, the 65-year-old choreographer who founded his namesake company 40 years ago, seems to have been ahead of this shift. Ten years ago Lubovitch pulled his company off the road.

For a decade he turned his attention to presenting work in New York City, where his organization is based, and to collaborative efforts like a three-act "Othello," which was created with the American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet. That evening-length work was broadcast nationally on PBS, and earned a Grammy nomination.

The principal reason behind the break from the road, however, was not to re-examine the state of the touring company. After three decades of focusing on touring, Lubovitch had come to believe that the road was sapping him of the energy and freedom he needed for his primary job, of creating new works. The result was not so much an institutional reinvention as a personal reawakening.

"I felt, creatively, we were marking time, revisiting a process that prevented moving ahead," said Lubovitch from his home in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. "The business of creating a tour and repertoire and keeping the company became the work. My work was not moving forward. And that's the main reason for what I do, to further my imagination and my creative energy. I didn't feel challenged."

After an extended break from the road, a time spent creating new dances, Lubovitch was itching to get back to touring. More than anything, he longed for the thrill of presenting his visions of dance to



"Men's Stories," a 2000 piece by Lar Lubovitch, is part of the program when the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company performs Sunday at the Aspen District Theatre. *Photo: Rose Eichenbaum.*

audiences outside of New York. “It really is a pleasure having my work performed in front of people. I missed that,” he said.

Last June, partly in celebration of its 40th anniversary, the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company began moving again, leaping from prominent festivals in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Chicago — where they appeared at the Chicago Dancing Festival, a start-up event founded by Lubovitch — to dates from Boston to San Luis Obispo. The winter leg of the tour makes a stop at the Aspen District Theatre on Sunday, Jan. 18, as part of the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet’s Winter Dance series.

The performance, the company’s first in Aspen since the mid-’90s, spotlights how its founder and artistic director spent his last decade. The program features three works from the 2000s. “Dvorák Serenade,” said Lubovitch, is “a purely lyrical response to a very romantic score” by the 19th century Czech composer. “Jangle (Four Hungarian Dances)” is also closely tied to its music, this time by Hungarian composer Bartók. Just as Bartók used folk music as a foundation for his compositions, the choreographer is looking to folk roots: “It’s a dance that explore Slavic dance. It capitulates to Bartók’s folk music, gypsy music, Slavic music,” said Lubovitch.



Lar Lubovitch. Photo: Rose Eichenbaum.

The centerpiece of the program is “Men’s Stories.” The 2000 work features a lesser-known composer — Lubovitch himself, who collaborated with Scott Marshall to create “an amalgam of sound, computer-generated sound.” The piece, danced by nine men, has become one of Lubovitch’s career highlights. In *New York Magazine* it was described as “well-nigh perfect — lusty and elegant”; as the *New York Post* had it, “Lubovitch has never done better.” “Men’s Stories” is described on the Lar Lubovitch company’s website as an “exploration of masculinity, biography and character,” but Lubovitch adds that the large-scale piece contains more expansive themes as well.

“It is about the beauty of ruin,” said Lubovitch, noting that the collage-like score is built around variations on Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 3.

“What we’ve done is ruin a very beautiful, very profound Beethoven concerto. Think of the Parthenon — it looks nothing like it did in the 5th century B.C. But over its history it has accumulated other layers of beauty. It’s picked up a patina.”

The Parthenon comparison can be applied to Lubovitch as well. He can hardly be called a ruin, but at 65, he is looking for ways to create and convey facets of beauty in new ways.

Getting off the road was a start. Dismantling the touring component freed up not only his time and energy, but also the constraints that come with the touring format.

“When you maintain a touring company, you have to maintain a repertoire,” he said. (The company is planning its next tour, but also being cautious to allow sufficient down-time.) “There is time to create just one new dance, it has to suit the existing dancers and fit into the program. All these considerations narrow the creative choices.” The change of the last decade has done him good. “Now all the works have been standalone works. That freedom is tasty and satisfying.”

Alongside that sense of achievement has been worrisome tidings in the dance world. A chief concern is that dance hasn't been capturing the attention of young audiences. Lubovitch isn't sure just how to contend with the issue, but he is certain of one thing: He can't alter his vision of dance, nor can he.

"I can't re-tailor myself for the fashion of the moment," said Lubovitch, whose responses reflect having done some deep thinking on the subjects at hand. "I've done what I do for a long time and I'm entitled to continue doing it that way, making art exactly the way I have. That's the highest thing for an artist to do, to find his voice and maintain it and keep speaking in it.

"Dance is always exploring another way to speak. As younger people came in, they have different things to say and different ways to express it. My voice is not the voice of a 22-year-old person. It's the voice of a person who has been doing this a long time. To jump ship and try to create something like a young person, that's absurd. And I couldn't do that."

If Lubovitch has no desire to turn back his personal clock, he would like to see a return to a time when young audiences were more attuned to dance. When he began his career, he says, audiences were generally young — "And they went nuts," he added.

"I'm puzzled. And only disappointed that young people are not drawn to the world of dance and dance theater," he continued. "I think if you put it in front of them, it would be something they could use in their lives, that they would want. They're going to mosh pits. They're going to pop music. They need something else expressed. I think they would appreciate that if they saw it."
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The details

Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

Sunday, Jan. 18, at 7:30 p.m.

Aspen District Theatre

Tickets are \$64, \$44 and \$20 (aspenshowtickets.com)