

# Van Ryzin: Ballet Austin surmounts Balanchine's 'Agon'

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By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#) - American-Statesman Staff

To dance it as well as to watch it, "Agon" is as exacting and beautiful as any 28 minutes of ballet could possibly be.

It is considered by many to be the masterwork by the master of 20th-century ballet, George Balanchine — a dance premiered in 1957 made instantly more historic (and challenging) by its groundbreaking score by Igor Stravinsky in which the composer combined the traditional diatonic musical scale with the more radical 12-tone technique for the first time.



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Ballet Austin dancers Paul Michael Bloodgood and Oren Porterfield rehearse Balanchine's "Agon," which the company will perform Sept. 26-28.

At a recent rehearsal at Ballet Austin's downtown headquarters, the dancers' intensity and focus hangs palpably over the studio.

No less because Paul Boos, a former Balanchine dancer and a master répétiteur with the Balanchine Trust, the organization that licenses the work of the legendary dancemaker, is there to set the choreography on the Ballet Austin dancers.

"Agon" shares the bill this weekend with Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills' "The Firebird," also set to music of Stravinsky. Austin Symphony Orchestra provides the live accompaniment for the three performances scheduled Friday through Sept. 28 at the Long Center.



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Mills wanted to present “Agon” from the first season he assumed the role as Ballet Austin artistic director in 2000. But the Balanchine Trust declined, interested in seeing Mills build the company’s strength first. Nevertheless, the trust granted permission for Ballet Austin to perform five other Balanchine ballets over the years.

Now, it’s time for “Agon.”

At the rehearsal, Boos wears a bright orange Bolshoi Ballet T-shirt, a souvenir of just one of the many companies worldwide to which he is dispatched to set Balanchine’s ballets.

Perched forward in a chair against a wall of mirrors, notebook and pen in hand, Boos barely moves, his eyes riveted on the dancers as they run through the arduous, complex choreography.

Wholly new in style when it debuted, “Agon” is nevertheless rooted in the classical ballet idiom, a combination of the modernist sensibility and graceful clarity Balanchine made his own. The ballet unfolds as a suite of dances for 12 dancers and proceeds with a kind of mathematical precision.

“It’s not a coincidence that Balanchine matched Stravinsky’s 12-tone composition — there’s every combination of 12 throughout ‘Agon,’” Boos says. “Stravinsky said that with ‘Agon,’ Balanchine allowed him to see his own music.”

The 12 dancers combine in duos or in trios or in pas-de-quatre. One movement features four trios, another a triple pas-de-quatre.

Music and dance seem uncommonly inseparable in “Agon,” one of many collaborations between the two Russian emigrés. Rhythms shift abruptly and constantly in Stravinsky’s score. Likewise with Balanchine’s choreography.

Earlier this month, Paul Boos, a former Balanchine dancer and a master répétiteur with the Balanchine Trust, the organization that licenses the work of the legendary choreographer, spent two weeks with Ballet Austin setting the choreography of Balanchine's "Agon," on the company.

Since retiring from dancing in 1990, Boos has been a sanctioned Balanchine répétiteur — a unique and personal connection to the legacy of the dancemaker everybody closest to called "Mr. B."

During an interview with the American-Statesman, Boos reflected on what it was like to dance for Balanchine. A few of Boos' ruminations, which did not make it into the published story, are offered here:

“Mr. B went through a process of initiating people. He wanted to see how a person’s body functioned. Like a sculptor he was constantly pushing, pulling on a dancer’s body, seeing what your body could actually do.

“Mr. B compared training dancers to training horses, and quite accurately too.”

“He worked in extremes and he wanted to know what the extremes were with each dancer: How much your feet can bend, how much your legs can open, how high your legs can extend, how high you can jump.”

“He was extremely critical and he never gave praise. Still we felt that he was 100 percent invested in us.”

Dancers thrust hips forward and kick legs backward into lunges that seem off-balance. Women stab the floor with their pointe shoes, then slide into bent-kneed turns. The men dance on their heels and flex their feet.

There are no static poses; everything is in motion.

“‘Agon’ is one of the most important ballets Balanchine ever made, and the pressure (for dancers) is intimidating,” says Boos. “The very first thing on my agenda is to bring the comfort level down so the dancers are not intimidated by the music. I get them to take a deep breath and listen.”

“Agon” has no specific characters nor a defined narrative. And though “agon” is the Greek word for contest or competition, the subject of the ballet is the movement itself.

Balanchine pared down every ornamental addition. In performance, dancers are clad in simple black and white leotards and tights. And to heighten the austere minimalism, the bright stage lighting never changes nor moves. A simple, plain azure background curtain serves as the only set piece.

“Agon” is ballet in the extreme — streamlined, precise, steely.

As Balanchine described it, “Agon” is “a machine that thinks.”

“Balanchine always said that from Stravinsky he learned to eliminate,” says Boos. “And in ‘Agon’ you see that (Balanchine) does not waste time or energy on anything that is not necessary.”

Though Boos spent 13 years dancing with Balanchine’s New York City Ballet, he never performed in “Agon.”

“I spent my entire career being an understudy for it, and I never got to dance in it,” Boos says with a laugh.

“It’s the crème de la crème of Balanchine’s work. And if you were cast in it, you did not relinquish that opportunity to any one else.”

Born and raised in South Dakota, the son of a sheriff and a mother originally from Brooklyn, Boos began dancing early.

“Mine was a real ‘Billy Elliott’ story. My mother was enrolling my sister in ballet class and the instructor asked me to join and then I stayed with it while my sister didn’t.”

At a precocious 15 years old, Boos relocated by himself to New York and soon afterward landed a scholarship to Balanchine's American Ballet Theatre School. He was asked to join New York City Ballet at age 18. Since retiring from dancing, Boos has been a sanctioned Balanchine répétiteur — a unique and personal connection to the legacy.

Balanchine “was extremely critical and he never gave praise. Still, we felt that he was 100 percent invested in us.”

Says Boos: “‘Agon’ ballet is as relevant and fresh as it was when it was first made.”

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