

Passing along a 'Jewel' of a legacy

Company dancers get a deep lesson in Balanchine

By Dana Oland February 5, 2015



Ballet Idaho's Elizabeth Keller and Andrew Taft will perform the pas de deux in Balanchine's "Rubies" this weekend. This is the second Balanchine masterwork that the company has added to its repertoire.
Photo KYLE GREEN

Ballet master Paul Boos keeps the Ballet Idaho company corps on their toes during rehearsal of his restaging of George Balanchine's "Rubies," the centerpiece in his classical masterpiece "Jewels."

Boos (rhymes with "rows") knows the ballet inside and out. He performed it during his 13 years as a New York City Ballet dancer from 1976 to 1988.

Now as a répétiteur for the Balanchine Trust, his job isn't just to teach the steps. It's about sharing the experience of working with one of the greatest dance masters in history.

"Tee-ta, tee-ta, tee-ta," he says in rhythm to the ballet's complex Igor Stravinsky score as he demonstrates a particular step.

"Balanchine never choreographed with counts," Boos says "These strange sounds would come out of his mouth and sometimes it was frustrating but eventually you figured things out. These noises you teach the

ballet are helpful to the dancers because a lot of times there's no rhythm to a count. But there is an architecture to the piece, so how many mmcha-cha, mmcha-chas do you do?"

The company will do them all next weekend as part of its "Mosaic" program that also will feature Artistic Director Peter Ansatos' comic ballet "Aaaaargh! Pirates!" and "This Mortal's Mosaic," a world premiere by company dancer Daniel Ojeda.

As the company works through the piece, Boos answers questions and gives corrections with firm yet gentle humor.

"No, no. Stop," Boos says. "You only have one count here because something else is going on in front of you. We don't want to see this."

His body undulates dramatically and laughter ripples through the room.

"So, it's still full and juicy, but it's only one count of full and juicy."

Georgia-born Balanchine made his name as a choreographer with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, still regarded as the greatest ballet company of the 20th century. It collapsed in 1929 when Diaghilev died.

Then in 1932, Wassily de Basil and Rene Blum resurrected it as Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo with Balanchine as its artistic director until Leonide Massine ousted him a year later.

That's when Balanchine came to America and founded New York City Ballet.

Ballet Idaho in 2012 and 2013 performed Balanchine's first American masterpiece "Serenade," created in 1934. It was staged by another Trust repetiteur, Jillana.

This is a much later work. Balanchine created "Jewels" in 1967 after meeting jewelry designer Claude Arpels of Van Cleef & Arpels.

Each section - "Emeralds," "Rubies" and "Diamonds" - is an abstract exploration of the characteristics of three precious gems. They were staged around the five star women soloists at the time. "Emeralds" is cool and slightly aloof - so French. Balanchine used music by French composer Gabriel Urbain Faure. "Diamonds," performed to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, is a salute to his Imperial Russian roots. "Rubies" is flavored by Balanchine's passion for all things American.

For the music, he turned to his favorite collaborator and fellow Russian-American immigrant, Stravinsky.

"They both embraced America and everything American," Boos says. "So, 'Rubies' has this energetic feel of America."

Balanchine had an affection for American cheerleaders and showgirls, Boos explains. So you see those iconic characters incorporated into the piece in the lines and silhouettes the dancers create, he says.

Those lines have come to define American ballet technique, so learning Balanchine style is almost a requirement for today's dancers. And learning it from someone who worked with Mr. B, as he's affectionately called, is an incredible opportunity.

"It's been awesome having him here," says dancer Adrienne Kerr. "He teaches such a great Balanchine class, he's so funny and he's got his tee-tas all over the place. This is really pushing us, and I love it."

There's an edge to NYCB that came out of the collaboration between Stravinsky and Balanchine.

"It is something very American that Balanchine developed over decades," Boos says. "Now it's something we take for granted. This piece is just a tremendous example of what he accomplished."

"There were so many things that impressed him about America," Boos says. "You know, he married an American Indian (ballerina Maria Tallchief). He was in love with the great expanse of the country and he felt the same thing about the people. Everything was open and big, so he put that idea into dancers' bodies."

Balanchine impressed his love for his adopted country into the human body in what dancers know as Balanchine lines that open up the hip and back and make the legs look longer and the physical expression more expansive.

"It's interesting," Boos says. "I've set this piece on companies in France and Russia, and they have a much harder time getting it."