

# Guiding *Light*

Ballet Austin aims to go

By Jocelyn Anderson



"People couldn't imagine how you would do a ballet about this subject matter, and truthfully, it is almost an impossibility," says Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin, about creating *Light / The Holocaust and Humanity Project*, an evening-length ballet he premiered in early April.

Against such odds, Mills took on the horrifying story of Holocaust survivors with the goal of creating a community dialogue and offering a meaningful work, something he found imperative after the events of September 11.

"I was working on *Romeo and Juliet* at the time [of 9/11], and we had a deadline to make a ballet," says Mills. "There was no time to feel sorry for ourselves. But I remember feeling like, 'Why are we bothering?' I started to think that I have to have a deeper conversation with myself in the work that I'm making than this."

For Mills, who is not Jewish, that meant traveling to Europe, visiting seven former death camps and meeting 25 survivors. He

deeper with *Light / The Holocaust and Humanity Project*.



*Light* photos by Amitava Sarkar

**Ballet Austin in Stephen Mills’  
*Light / The Holocaust and  
Humanity Project***

also used a Warren Fellowship from the Holocaust Museum of Houston for further study.

“I was determined that if we were going to do a work about this subject, then we had to have community education,” Mills says. “We had to touch the community in lots of different directions, because not everybody is a dance person.” So with the support of many local organizations, Ballet Austin created an event that included a public lecture series, a curriculum course for area teachers, an art exhibit based on the idea of coexistence and a televised town hall discussion. (Other companies have taken on such difficult subject matter. See accompanying story, “Meaningful Dances,” on page 53.)

When it came time to make the ballet, Mills knew that it would not follow a linear story, sets and costumes would be minimal, and there would not be an intermission. The ballet follows one woman—the survivor—as she depicts segregation, terror and coping.

To prepare, the dancers also went through extensive education. They met survivors, took a trip to the museum in Houston, read countless books and held movie screenings. From what they say, dancing this ballet has been an experience like no other.

Allisyn Paino portrayed the survivor on opening night. “We’ve really gone outside the box,” she says, “and it has been such an emotional journey.”

The rehearsal process started the same as always. The dancers listened to the music (by Philip Glass, Arvo Pärt and Steve Reich, among others) and learned the steps. They begin as happy townspeople, unaware of what their futures hold. Slowly, their situation becomes more horrific.

“When we started to run sections and a story began to emerge, it got a lot heavier,” says Anthony Casati, a dancer at Ballet Austin. “I just felt like I was bleeding energy. I can’t do that every day. So I’d feel this little protective bubble come up. I didn’t

allow myself to realize it for what it was—depression.”

He wasn’t alone. “You feel an empathy that you couldn’t possibly understand. None of us can, because it didn’t happen to us,” says Paino. “But by the end, you feel almost there. And I find that I have to break away from it and bring myself back to reality. And when it’s over, it’s like, ‘Whew!’”

As a result, Mills built in time at rehearsals for discussion with the dancers. “We’ve done a lot of talking,” he says. “For us as an organization, it has really changed the way we deal with one another. That is something I never expected.”

To make sure the audience didn’t feel the same distress at the end of this 75-minute ballet, creating an appropriate ending was essential. *Light* finishes with the dancers all in blue and the women on pointe dancing a series of pas de deux. The meaning is open to interpretation.

“Maybe it’s the creation of the state of Israel and everybody starts their lives again forever changed,” Casati offers. “Or maybe it’s a memorial to those who were lost. In any way, it’s a period of

decompression. It takes an open wound and puts a dressing on it.”

As the audience leaves the theater, a spotlight illuminates a cascade of sand as it pours from above onto the stage, and one gets the sense that Mills wants everyone to derive their own meaning from the ballet. “As much as I complain about people putting ballet into the pink tutu category, I myself sometimes do that as well,” Mills says. “With this project, I’ve been able to really step far back from that preconceived idea of what ballet is supposed to be.”

So what becomes of a ballet that had such an impact on one city in Texas? Mills says he would like to see other ballet companies bring it into their repertoires—along with the educational elements. “If there are other communities that felt a need that this might be able to serve, we would want to participate in their community and implement some of the programs,” Mills says. “Whether the work is a good work or not will be proven later, but the success of this project has been the conversations that have happened.”

***Light / The Holocaust and  
Humanity Project***





# Meaningful Dances

Choreographers take dance beyond entertainment with the goal of educating audiences.

**In high school dance class, my teacher gave us a choreography assignment:** Make a ballet about a social issue. It was difficult, because the music had to reflect the topic, and if you weren't careful, it might look like farce. But if you did it right, you could make a poignant work.

I chose to tackle the agony of war and danced to Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, with its bellowing cannons. My classmates portrayed such issues as homelessness, child abuse and discrimination. Until that point, I had always thought you choreographed something because the music was pretty or you wanted to show off your tour jeté.

But choreographers have long taken on social issues. In fact, much of 20th-century modern dance started out as rebellion against what some saw as the superficiality of existing dance—including ballet—and the need to show the realities of life.

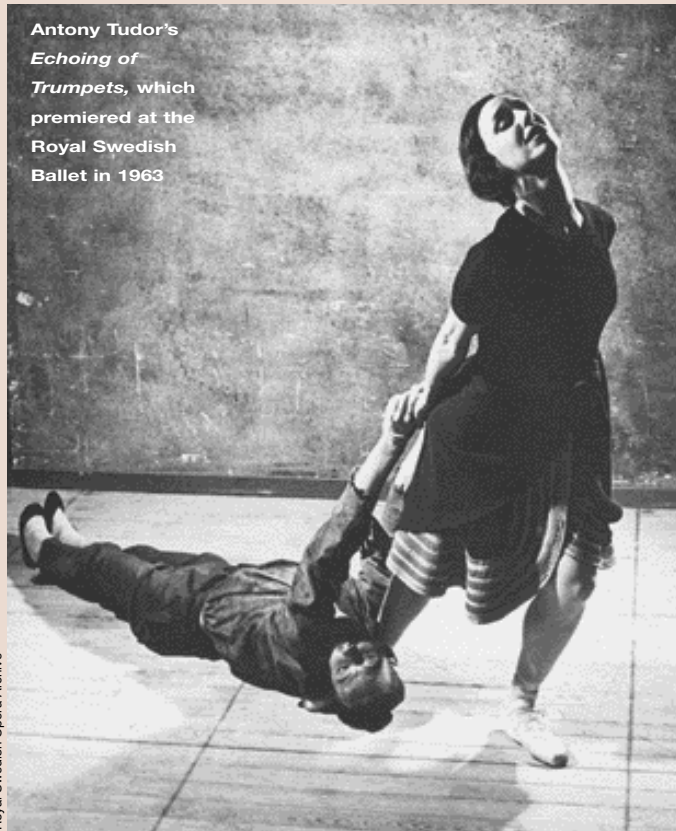
Perhaps the most well-known ballet with a message is Kurt Jooss's antiwar *The Green Table* from the 1930s. Antony Tudor's *Echoing of Trumpets* (1963) is based on the massacre at Lidice, a Czechoslovakian village destroyed by the Nazis in World War II. Maurice Béjart made *Ballet For Life* (1997), about the AIDS crisis. This year alone, Holocaust-inspired ballets premiered at Ballet Austin (see "Guiding Light") and Illinois' Ballet Quad Cities, which unveiled *The Anne Frank Ballet* in June, and Philadelphia's Jeanne Ruddy Dance presented *Breathless* about domestic violence against women.

"I feel that as dancers we have a certain responsibility to talk about the social mores and the issues of the day, because that's originally what the human race did with dance," says Ruddy, a former Martha Graham dancer. "I find dance an extremely human experience. It has always connected me to my own feelings, and I like for others to have that chance [when they see it]."

These days, considering the financial state of affairs at many dance companies, the question of how to make money must enter the equation. Do you let audiences dictate programming as a surefire way to sell tickets or do you try to show them something new? "You're going to put *Hello Kitty: The Ballet* onstage, and it just draws greater numbers because there's a comfort with it," says Ballet Austin Executive Director Cookie Ruiz. "Part of [our] responsibility is preservation, but part of our stated mission here is evolution. It is an issue of maintaining the balance."

Directors who take risks with weighty programming must take even more into consideration. Ruiz says she and Artistic Director Stephen Mills consulted several people in the Jewish community before committing to *Light / The Holocaust and Humanity Project*. They also

Antony Tudor's *Echoing of Trumpets*, which premiered at the Royal Swedish Ballet in 1963



Royal Swedish Opera Archive

had to get approval from every member of their board of directors and every single corporate sponsor.

Ruddy also sought advice from the director of a local women's agency that specializes in domestic abuse. "She cautioned me to make sure that it didn't become too beautiful," says Ruddy. "That was very helpful. It really freed me a lot to go as deeply as I wanted to go."

Back in high school, we didn't worry about selling tickets. (We had a built-in audience of parents and friends.) But now, looking at the videotape of those performances, I see that a lot more goes into a serious subject than pinning a flag to my leotard and pretending to die onstage.

Choreographers today have to balance many interests in order to get approval to move into what is often uncharted territory for ballet. More and more of them are figuring out how to make ballet meaningful without scaring away audiences.

"As young as he is, Stephen [has gotten] over that place where a lot of choreographers only speak to marketing demographics and numbers," Ruiz says. "We have to do that too, but who's to say that one has to be mutually exclusive to the other? Who's to say that a social justice issue cannot also be a marketable work?" —JA

