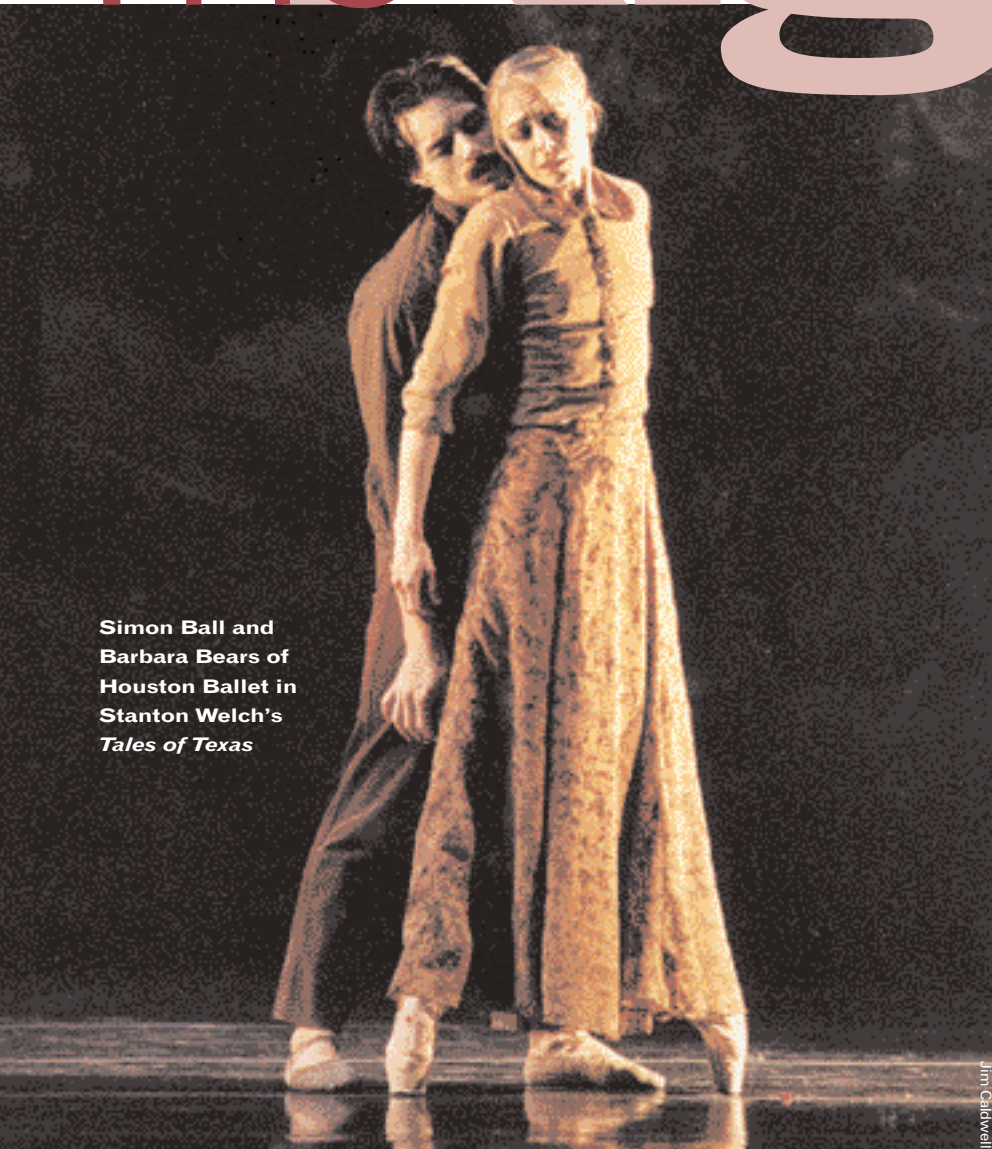


The Right



Simon Ball and Barbara Bears of Houston Ballet in Stanton Welch's *Tales of Texas*



Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley in Michael Smuin's *Stravinsky Piano Pieces*

Jim Caldwell
Robert Stomler

Suppose you were made artistic director of a ballet company. One of your greatest responsibilities would be to add to the company's repertoire—the list of ballets a company is prepared to perform. If it sounds easy, think again. You must take into consideration your company's image, what will keep the dancers happy and challenged, what the audience wants to see, what you can afford and, of course, what will make money.

Your decisions depend completely on the kind of company you lead. How many dancers do you have? How many programs can you do in a season? Is there a mandated focus on classics or contemporary works?

Audiences are attracted to what's familiar. In other words, they're most likely to attend a ballet when they've either seen it before or know the plot. With the tough financial situation for much of the arts lately, many companies are turning to the classics—so-called blockbuster titles—that will guarantee audiences by the truckload. The name

Rep

By Jocelyn Anderson

A lot more goes into developing a repertoire than picking your favorite ballets.



recognition you get with ballets like *Cinderella*, *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* can be invaluable for directors looking to meet their bottom line.

"This past fall we did a great repertory show that featured William Forsythe's *in the middle, somewhat elevated*, and it was really an artistic highlight of the season," says Septime Webre, artistic director at The Washington Ballet. "It grossed about \$180,000 at the box office. Three or four months before that, my new full-length *Cinderella* grossed about \$400,000. So it shows you the difference."

Though the full-lengths are proven crowd-pleasers, many of the 20th-century story ballets simply aren't as well-known. "If you [asked most people], 'What's *Onegin*? Or 'What's *La Fille Mal Gardée*?' the majority of them don't know," says Stanton Welch, now in his second season as artistic director of Houston Ballet. "And even though they might come and see the ballet and like it better, it just doesn't have the name recognition."

Repertoire 101

Obviously, there is more to creating a repertoire that meets the eye. Here is what some artistic directors say about the guidelines they follow when developing a season's repertoire.

Septime Webre, The

Washington Ballet: "There are four or five bullet points that need to be present. One is that there needs to be new work, also master works from the canon. Another part would be large-scale, maybe full-length, work that would be challenging for the dancers, but also assist in the marketing effort—it's going to sell tickets. There also needs to be work that connects with young people."

Stanton Welch, Houston Ballet: "You need to have a balance of both contemporary work and classical work. You need to make sure that the principals have a big variety of roles, that they are getting their fulfillment of the big classics, that you are keeping the audience entertained and that there's diversity. It also boils down, sadly, to money at some level. It's just a big juggling act."

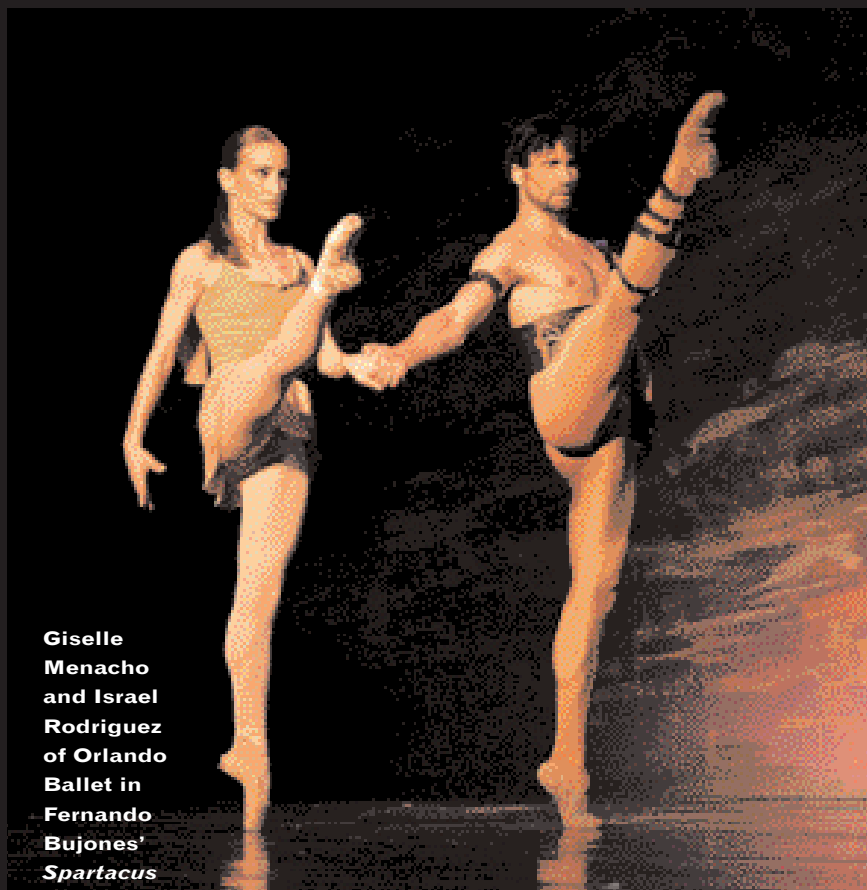
Eldar Aliev, Ballet Internationale: "Basically, my philosophy is 'You have to do what you are best at.' I've been trained in the classical style. I know what I know. Every year, we do one repeat, *The Nutcracker*, a rental [borrowed from another company] and a new ballet."

John McFall, Atlanta Ballet:

"Most definitely there is no formula. I think [in] a world that is evolving and changing the way it is now, you make an effort to really tune in, listen and carefully respond. And you are really there to participate with your audience.... I think it's important to be cognizant of what's going on in the world."

Fernando Bujones, Orlando

Ballet: "Our seasonal programs are based on usually at least two full-lengths, if not three, and at least one or two repertory programs. So we have a season of four programs, but the main vision is that we balance out between full-length story ballets and repertory programs that have an energy that [will] attract our audience members."



**Giselle
Menacho
and Israel
Rodriguez
of Orlando
Ballet in
Fernando
Bujones'
Spartacus**

Tanya Schmidt

Nevertheless, Welch says, Houston Ballet took a chance on Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée* last June. While it didn't sell very well initially, it was the kind of ballet that benefited from positive word of mouth. "The audience started to come," he says. "It's a matter of teaching them which choreographers they want to come and see."

Aside from being dependable successes, familiar classics have another value. Directors say that the importance of these works is immeasurable for dancers. "You have to be somebody else [in a classic]," says Dennis Nahat, artistic director of Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley for the last 30 years. "So when you get into *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Coppélia* or *Swan Lake* or *Romeo and Juliet*, you find a character in those works that you can take to abstract works. You have to express something."

No matter how lucrative and meaningful the classics are, these days, most artistic directors will tell you that it's essential to strike a balance, especially between the classics and the more modern ballets. "Balance enhances your repertory," says Fernando Bujones, artistic director of Florida's Orlando Ballet and former star of American Ballet Theatre. "ABT had room for classical ballet tradition and for contemporary theatrical style. One night a program [might] start with Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, followed by Antony Tudor's *Pillar of Fire*, continuing with a classical pas de deux and finishing with Alvin Ailey's *The River*. That kind of schooling helped me have that mindset in terms of enriching [Orlando Ballet's] repertory."

While at first glance, the rep at The Washington Ballet might look as if it's solely based on cutting-edge works by rising choreographers, Webre premieres his full-length *Giselle* in October. And lest you classify Indianapolis' Ballet Internationale as *only* steeped in Russian classics, Artistic Director Eldar Aliev is quick to point out that the company performed Vladimir Angelov's edgy one-act *Interzone* last season.

"No, it cannot just be the classics," Aliev says. "Our [foundation] in our repertoire is classics. But that doesn't just mean *Sleeping Beauty*, *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*." That's why Aliev is open to new versions of old classics, in addition to contemporary works like *Interzone* and Flemming Flindt's *Phaedra*.

In fact, company directors realize they have a responsibility to further the art form and create new—sometimes experimental—ballet, thus broadening the vocabulary



The Washington Ballet in Septime Webre's *Cinderella*

Carol Pratt



Ballet Internationale in Flemming Flindt's *Phaedra*

Courtesy of Ballet Internationale

and expanding people's minds and giving the dancers something new to tackle.

Again, it comes back to the dancers and what is good for them. "[Contemporary ballets] broaden your scope," says Welch. "I think it's not too different from an actor who does both stage and film work. They are going to be a stronger actor. It's the same in dance. I think that to understand your body moving in different styles is important. It makes you a better dancer."

Nahat's company in California recently downsized to 20 dancers for budgetary reasons, and as a result, the 2004-05 season features many one-act contemporary pieces and premiere full-lengths that accommodate 20 dancers. But he doesn't consider this a drawback.

"You have to look at your company's longevity," Nahat says. "When you do those classics over and over again, you don't build new audiences. Those pieces

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Season Highlights

Atlanta Ballet

David Blair's staging of *Swan Lake*, in celebration of the company's 75th anniversary

Ballet Internationale

New version of *Le Corsaire* by Eldar Aliev

Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley

Middle Kingdom, Ancient China, a collaboration with the Chinese Performing Artists of America

Houston Ballet

First Mark Morris ballet for the company and a Houston première of *Giselle*

Orlando Ballet

World-première of full-length *Camelot* by Samantha Dunstar

The Washington Ballet

Brand-new *Nutcracker* by Septime Webre

Continued from page 55

have got to come back every four or five years and in between you've got to come up with something [else]."

That "something else" can often be a risky venture. Such works require salesmanship on the part of the director to convince the board of directors of the piece's merit and the benefits to the dancers and, of course, to the audience.

"I think all companies try to educate audiences and try to get them to appreciate different things," says Welch. "New York City Ballet is a perfect example of that done successfully. I mean, Balanchine really set out to teach audiences to appreciate mixed rep and appreciate one-act ballets. And he did that very, very well."

Welch is trying to introduce the same idea to Houston audiences, who are very familiar with former director Ben Stevenson's proclivity toward storytelling in ballet. "As much as I love that," Welch says. "I think an appreciation of the mixed rep is just as important."

But directors should be wary of the pitfalls of contemporary ballet. "If you are going to be trendy, it's very shallow and has no lifespan whatsoever," says John McFall, artistic director of Atlanta Ballet. "Trends are just that. They come and go."

Bujones adds, "I try to avoid a work that may be just experimental or a chance [success]. If you are right, then you know that you have a work that you can bring back in the future."

All said, some repertoire decisions can come down to a matter of directors' tastes. As an artistic director, you must be able to weigh all of these elements for the good of the company. "Repertoire can mean a lot of things," says McFall. "If you break it down, it's a bunch of steps, with costumes and music. It's really a partnership between audience and artists. If you've gotten there, you are in a really good place." ■

Jonah Hooper
and Emily Cook
of Atlanta
Ballet in
Balanchine's
*Tschaikovsky
Pas De Deux*



Charlie McCliers