

Dance Up Close: Ground Breaking Ballet

Artistic inspiration comes in many forms. For Festival Ballet Providence Artistic Director Mihailo Djuric, the muse for his company's upcoming production was a series of orchids photographed in various states of decompose. "It's amazing how drying orchids look like dancers," notes Djuric. "They even have faces." Indeed, after viewing several photographs, the imagery becomes remarkably apparent. In one photo, wilting petals take on the appearance of arms and legs with one dancer gently lifting another. Resident FBP choreographer Viktor Plotnikov, charged with creating a ballet based on the photographs, was also struck by the imagery created by the orchids. "I look at the pictures of the orchids and they describe dance movements through the lines. So what I would actually like to do is bend the dancers into the lines of those orchids, what you see in the pictures. Blend it in and make the picture live." Thus, *Orchis*, based on a series of black and white images that photographer A. Cemal Ekin started taking in 2004, came to fruition. This world premiere ballet will debut with the RI premiere of George Balanchine's masterpiece *Agon*. Billed as *Agon and Orchis: Then and Now*, these two groundbreaking ballets will be presented at The Vets March 8-10.

When speaking with Djuric about the upcoming production, it doesn't take long before he launches into a subject he feels very passionately about: the local community supporting local artists and arts organizations. He refers to the touring dance companies that have performed in the area the last couple of months with several more due this spring. "All the money generated by these shows goes to help these outside organizations. Our performance is 100% local. Our artists all live here, work here and do their art here. They are also educators."

He then proceeds to run through the litany of names associated with *Orchis* and their local ties. "Cemal teaches at PC. Alan Pickart [set and lighting design] is a professor at RIC. The costume designer [Beth Bentley] graduated from RISD. Toots [Zynsky] is a world-renowned glass artist and lives right here in Providence. The composer, Sonya Belousova, is a former student of RI Philharmonic conductor Francisco Noya. These people are not outsiders. Who would you rather support?" he concludes, barely able to catch his breath.

Incorporating the unique talents of all these dynamic artists, Djuric hopes to create a "new concept for multimedia art utilizing projection, lighting and unique materials." He is especially excited to see how the multi colored textiles sewn to the dancers' costumes will interact with the lighting. The end result could very well stretch the limits of visual artistry and dance.

When talk turns to *Agon*, Djuric sticks to his guns. "All these people going to see these touring productions and not coming to our shows would be shocked by Festival Ballet and our dancers. Not many companies are mature enough artistically or intellectually to do *Agon*." In fact, a ballet company cannot perform a Balanchine ballet without first applying for and receiving permission from The Balanchine Trust. The Trust then sends a répétiteur to oversee rehearsals and to ensure that the ballet is performed correctly.

First performed in 1957 by New York City Ballet, *Agon* is actually the Greek word for contest and many consider this ballet to be Balanchine's crowning achievement. Interestingly enough, he and composer Igor Stravinsky set the choreography while simultaneously creating the music. Thus the term "contest" takes on greater significance.

Djuric observes "there are times when the choreography goes against the music and then the opposite. It is like a contest between the music and dance, the composer and choreographer. For the dancers, it is challenging for the body and the brain. They are pushed to the limit." With 12 dancers clad simply in black and white, the music counts out a specific cadence and exact timings as the dancers interact in pairs, trios and quartets. Several variations are also based on 17th century French court dances. "I

liked this ballet the first time I saw it as a teenager,” confides the smartly greying Djuric. “I was struck visually by the patterns and the movements. I have always wanted to do it. Now I can.”

Agon and Orchis opens March 8 at The Vets with repeat performances on March 9 and 10. For tickets call: 401-421-ARTS or go online to ppacri.org.