

## Joffrey Ballet brings "The Rite of Spring" back to Music Center

By Vicki Smith Paluch LA Daily News

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A little more than 25 years ago, the Joffrey Ballet first presented its historic reconstruction of "The Rite of Spring" ("Le Sacre du Printemps"). The audience at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion did not riot as the Parisians had in 1913 when they first saw Vaslav Nijinsky's shocking choreography set to Igor Stravinsky's groundbreaking score.

But the first performance of the Joffrey's reconstruction by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer was followed the next morning with a different kind of rumbling.

"The audience loved it, but the next morning, there was an earthquake (the 5.9 Whittier Narrows temblor)," recalled artistic director Ashley C. Wheeler, who danced the role of one of the elders in the opening-night production.

Celebrating the centennial of the Stravinsky-Nijinsky masterpiece and the 25th anniversary of its reconstruction, the Joffrey Ballet is returning to the history-making stage at the Music Center Friday night for three performances this weekend of its critically acclaimed "The Rite of Spring."

"This is an opportunity for 21st-century audiences to see and understand what was a game-changer in 1913," Wheeler said during a recent phone interview from Las Vegas, where the company was slated to perform "Rite" as part of its 22-city U.S. tour.

Though there are more than 200 ballets set to Stravinsky's score - including those by Glen Tetley, Martha Graham, Kenneth MacMillan, Maurice Bejart and Paul Taylor - "The Joffrey is the only company in North America to have the Hodson and Archer reconstruction," Wheeler said.

While Stravinsky's libretto for the ballet remained, Nijinsky's choreography was considered lost. Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes performed it only eight times in Paris and London in 1913. Later Nijinsky suffered a nervous breakdown, and by 1914, the world was at war.

Only a few hundred people ever saw Nijinsky's choreography, which broke every rule of ballet, thereby laying the groundwork for modern dance. And few saw the gorgeous sets and costumes designed by archaeologist and painter Nicholas Roerich, whose vividly colored and patterned designs reflected the early Cubists.

Mounting "Rite" after years of it not being performed was in itself a difficult task, Wheeler said. However, "Robert Joffrey and Archer were sticklers about quality" and the sets and costumes remained in great condition. He noted that it would be financially prohibitive to reconstruct "Rite" today.

"It was not easy to get the ballet back on its feet," said Wheeler. "For the dancers, it's a very different language and physically exhausting."

Nijinsky, who epitomized classical ballet, created a new movement language for "Rite." He broke every rule of turned-out, elongated, elegant ballet by hunching dancers forward, turning their feet inward, and moving their arms in choppy, angular movements. Rather than gliding, Nijinsky's ancient pagans jump in place and stamp their parallel feet as they inch their way across the stage.

"This is not a reimagining; this is a reconstruction," said Lorin Johnson, an associate dance professor at Cal State Long Beach who is the artistic adviser for "L.A.'s Rite: Stravinsky, Innovation and Dance," the Music Center's

nine-month festival.

With fragments of information, Hodson, a tenacious scholar- designer-choreographer, and Archer, an English art historian researching Roerich, worked for seven years on Nijinsky's choreography, sets and costumes. The resulting "Rite" has been acclaimed as the closest possible version of Nijinsky's original choreography.

The Joffrey's production was constructed from backstage photographs, reviews, Stravinsky's rehearsal score that noted entrances and exits, a rehearsal score by Nijinsky's assistant Marie Rambert, and notebook sketches of rehearsals, said Johnson.

"Stravinsky and L.A. Dance," an exhibition co-curated by Johnson and Mark Konecny in the second floor Grand Hall of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, includes photographic prints of Hodson's drawings used to reconstruct the choreography and Archer's designs, as well as the score with Rambert's choreographic notes and the sketches of Nijinsky's choreography by Valentine Hugo. Also on exhibit are 80 photographs by Otto Rothschild from the Music Center's archives of the Los Angeles dance scene in the 1920s and 1930s.

"The exhibit, which will be on display through Feb. 17, will help visitors "imagine how all this came into being," said Johnson.

The idea of reconstructing the ballet dates back to 1965 when Joffrey met Rambert in London.

"Then he met Hodson and Archer in 1980," said Johnson. "His vision for the company was always eclectic."

The Joffrey, which was the resident ballet company of the Music Center from 1982 to 1992, was founded in 1956 by Joffrey and Gerald Arpino. The company has preserved the masterworks of the early 20th century and nurtured the new generations of American choreographers.

Wheater, who was appointed artistic director of the Joffrey in 2007, is devoted to that eclecticism.

The Joffrey's artistic vision that blends past and present will be front and center during the Los Angeles engagement.

Preceding the 36-minute "The Rite of Spring" on Friday, the company will show its modern yet classical side, performing "Son of Chamber Symphony," choreographed by Stanton Welch to the music of John Adams, and "After the Rain," three duets choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon to music of Arvo Part.

On Saturday and Sunday, the program will open with an angular and athletic work of classical virtuosity, "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated," choreographed by William Forsythe and set to an electronic score by Thom Wellems. Also on the program will be Edwaard Liang's "Age of Innocence," which is set to the music of Philip Glass, and is inspired by the novels of Jane Austen.

Wheater said that while "Rite" is a collage about the ancient Slavic tribal rite of sacrificing a virgin (the Chosen One) to appease the gods, the four contemporary ballets focus on classical technique, individualism and the expression of emotion.

On the Joffrey's tour, many venues could not afford to pay for an orchestra, but the Music Center has invested in bringing in musicians to perform for all of the works.

"When you put ('Rite') with the orchestra, it has a different impact," Wheater said. "We are so lucky to have live music for all the performances in Los Angeles. Renae Williams Niles (the head of programming for Dance at the Music Center) insisted upon it.

"To truly experience dance, it must have a live orchestra. The music needs to vibrate right through you," Niles said.

The two programs, Wheater said, are intended to help audiences "understand where we came from and how to move forward. It is the evolution of dance."

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