

The 'Rite' time to celebrate Igor Stravinsky's famed ballet, 'The Rite of Spring'

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About a year ago, as the Music Center was anticipating its current dance season and the Joffrey Ballet's return to Los Angeles, Thor Steingraber, the vice president of programming, got to thinking about Igor Stravinsky.

The composer's ballet score, "The Rite of Spring," was approaching its centennial.

Given that the Russian composer was a longtime resident of L.A., Steingraber thought the Music Center "should do something to celebrate Stravinsky as our own."

And so "L.A.'s Rite: Stravinsky, Innovation and Dance" was born.

The festival kicks off Friday with a nine-month program of performances that celebrate the creative legacy of Stravinsky, from his groundbreaking work alongside dance innovators like choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky and George Balanchine to his creative period in L.A. - an important place for dance, which is a little-known fact.

But Stravinsky assumes a central role in the festival with the 100th anniversary of "The Rite of Spring," which got no love from Parisian society on the night it premiered at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in 1913.

As much as Paris was regarded as the center of cultural innovation for its time, the composition's dissonance and angular rhythms coupled with the jolting dance choreography of Nijinsky had pushed the limit.

"It wasn't at all ballet," says Lorin Johnson, L.A.'s Rite artistic adviser. "If we had to describe it today, we would call it modern dance.

"And so here was Nijinsky, the quintessential classical dancer from the Russian imperial theater, creating this choreography that no one had ever seen before."

The audience wasn't alone in its outrage: Stravinsky distanced himself from the piece and Nijinsky's production fell to the wayside and disappeared until its reconstruction by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987.

That Nijinsky reconstruction - famously pieced together by notes, scraps of paper, music score and the recollections of Nijinsky's sister - made its debut on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where it will return to kick off the festival's opening weekend, with performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and at 2 p.m. Sunday.

On view in the Stern Grand Hall (on the second floor of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion) until Feb. 17 is the exhibition "Stravinsky and L.A. Dance," which features Stravinsky surrounded on all sides by the work of local artists and emigres. Exhibition hours vary.

"Through looking at archives, we found all of these really fascinating photographs of dance in Los Angeles in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s and they're surprisingly modern for their time," says Johnson, who curated the exhibition with Mark Konecny. "I learned through my research that in the 1930s, L.A. was a dance mecca really rivaling New York."

Among the featured photographic prints, facsimiles and renderings are images of Lester Horton's production of "The Rite of Spring" performed at the Hollywood Bowl in 1937 and the Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction.

"It makes you take pride in Los Angeles in terms of its history in dance," Johnson says.

The festival continues over the summer with American Ballet Theatre's production of Stravinsky's "Apollo" with choreography by Balanchine as part of a repertory program on July 11. It's followed Aug. 1-11 by "Re-Rite," a large-scale immersive and interactive video installation produced by London's Philharmonia Orchestra under the direction of Esa-Pekka Salonen.

It will fill the backstage area of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

The installation will allow the audience to step inside the symphony orchestra through audio and video, one instrument and one section at a time, as musicians perform Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

But the success of any artist is in his or her legacy.

And so, come Oct. 18-20, the festival welcomes the return of Nederlands Dans Theater with "Chamber," British composer Joby Talbot's new piece inspired by Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," as part of the ongoing dialogue that every great work spawns other great works.

"I don't know that anyone at this point would argue that 'Rite of Spring' is the best or more definitive piece of modern music," Steingraber says.

"Certainly, as is often the case, somebody breaks new ground and many others follow and further or perfect the form. But arguably Stravinsky was the first to make a splash in a very different kind of music idiom, and that has to be noted.

"By celebrating 'Rite of Spring' and its centenary, we're not only celebrating it as a dance piece of course, because we're starting with the Nijinsky production, but we're celebrating the innovation that was Stravinsky."

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