

L.A. Shows the Rite Stuff

by Jeff Favre | Posted: Wednesday, January 30, 2013 5:00 am

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Although there have been numerous attempts in recent decades, Los Angeles still lacks a ballet company synonymous with the city. Despite that fact, a strong argument can be made that L.A. deserves to be considered one of the world's hotspots for innovative dance and contributions to the art form.

The latest argument for L.A.'s dance relevance begins this week and continues for nearly a year. "L.A.'s Rite's: Stravinsky, Innovation and Dance" takes place at the Music Center.

The proceedings start Friday, Feb. 1, with the first of three performances of the Joffrey Ballet's famed reconstruction of the seminal 1913 *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). The festival, which runs through October, also includes a historical photo exhibition, a symposium, two additional highly anticipated performances and a revolutionary digital interactive experience.

Created by Music Center Vice President of Programming Thor Steingraber, "L.A.'s Rite" honors the city's contributions to the dance world, and to *Rite of Spring* composer Igor Stravinsky, who settled in the City of Angels.

"L.A. was Stravinsky's home for the majority of his adult life," said Steingraber, who began planning the event a year ago. "He conducted here on the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion stage. And *The Rite of Spring* is considered by many people to be the birth of modernism in music and dance."

A collaboration between Stravinsky and Ballets Russes choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, *The Rite of Spring* premiered at the newly opened Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1913. Reports, or maybe it's exaggerated legend by now, say that the performance caused a near riot in the audience between a faction who expected a traditional performance and a group longing for something new in music and dance.

Other versions of the ballet were performed over the years, to the extent that Nijinsky's original was considered "lost." That was the case until the 1980s, when Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer spent seven years using notes, sketches and other material to re-create the original for the Chicago-based Joffrey.

In 1987, the Joffrey's rediscovered *Rite of Spring* premiered at the Music Center in Downtown Los Angeles. Ashley C. Wheater, the company's current artistic director, took part in that original reconstruction as a dancer.

"It was one of Robert Joffrey's missions to revive works from the Ballet Russes and from the early 20th century," Wheater said in a recent interview. "Even though there were questions as to

whether it's exactly what it was originally, I think it's as close as you can get to it from all of the research Millicent did. It shows that what Stravinsky and Nijinsky did with *Sacre* was so transformative and radical for that time.”

The piece was so different, Wheater said, that it took the Joffrey members, all of whom had deep experience on the stage, time to become accustomed to the pacing and movement.

Mixing Eras

The Joffrey performances on Feb. 1-3 at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion will balance the Stravinsky classic with some newer works. The Friday night program also holds *Son of Chamber Symphony*, choreographed by Stanton Welch, along with Christopher Wheeldon's *After the Rain*. The Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon shows will augment *Rite of Spring* with Edwaard Liang's *Age of Innocence* from 2008 and William Forsythe's 1987 dance *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*.

The mixing of works created nearly a century apart is intentional, Wheater said.

“I didn't want a whole program from 1913,” Wheater stated. “Our audiences want to see what is also being choreographed today, so I think the juxtaposition is intriguing and that it works very well.”

Before each Joffrey show, students from the Colburn School of Performing Arts and the California Dance Institute will perform. There also will be pre-dance lectures by Sasha Anawalt, director of the USC Annenberg Arts Journalism Program.

Both programs will highlight *The Rite of Spring*, but that won't be the only way to experience it. The photo and artifact exhibition *Stravinsky and L.A. Dance* will be on display inside the Chandler. It was co-curated by Lorin Johnson, the festival's artistic advisor, along with Mark Konecny.

Johnson, an associate professor in the Dance Department at California State University at Long Beach, noted that the seeds for the exhibit were planted a year ago when he started brainstorming with Steingraber. It quickly proved surprising.

“I educated myself on early dance in Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s,” he said. “I found so much fascinating material that I didn't know.”

The exhibition is divided into themes, with the centerpiece being Stravinsky's conducting and other work in Los Angeles. Additional sections focus on Russian choreographers including George Balanchine, whose collaboration with Stravinsky, *Apollo*, will be performed July 11 by the American Ballet Theatre at the Music Center as part of the festival.

Johnson has photographs detailing non-Russian dance innovators in Los Angeles, and there's an area displaying materials used in the reconstruction of *The Rite of Spring*.

On Feb. 2 at 1:30 p.m. in the Music Center's Grand Hall, a panel of experts will hold a symposium on the Stravinsky-Nijinsky ballet. The speakers include Hodson and Archer, who reconstructed *The Rite of Spring*, Lynn Garafola, a professor of dance at Barnard College, as well as John Bowlt, an author of numerous books on the Ballets Russes.

The most unusual offering in the festival, Steingraber said, comes in August. It's *Re-Rite*, a so-called "digital residency" from London's Philharmonia Orchestra. The event on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler is the brainchild of Esa-Pekka Salonen, the L.A. Philharmonic's longtime music director who preceded Gustavo Dudamel.

For *Re-Rite*, Salonen developed a virtual experience that allows visitors the chance to be enveloped by Stravinsky's music. There are 29 screens that show footage from each section of the Philharmonia. Visitors can stand in any portion and hear what *Rite of Spring* sounds like from that section. They can even take a post at the conductor's podium and assume Salonen's role.

The festival's final offering is a Nederlands Dans Theater performance inspired by *The Rite of Spring*'s 100th anniversary. *Chamber*, co-commissioned by the Music Center and choreographed by NDT company member Medhi Walerski, will be performed in October.

"The festival is new to us and it represents a stepping out in a major way to combine innovative new programming with some of our existing programming around a single theme or ideal," Steingraber said. "This will be our first festival, but I hope our first of many."

It also proves that a century after he was born, Stravinsky's influence is still being felt.

L.A.'s Rite's: Stravinsky, Innovation and Dance *runs through October at the Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., (213) 972-0711 or musiccenter.org. The Joffrey Ballet performances are Feb. 1-3.*

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