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Aspen Santa Fe Ballet brings back three audience favorites for one-night performance



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Aspen Santa Fe Ballet stages three hit ballets

by Andrew Travers | The Aspen Times



ROSALIE O'CONNOR/COURTESY PHOTO

Alejandro Cerrudo's "Silent Ghost" is one of three audience favorites from its repertoire that Aspen Santa Fe Ballet is staging Saturday night.

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's seasons are just about always punctuated with splashy premieres from progressive choreographers who are shaping the landscape of contemporary dance with the locally based company.

This season will include, for instance, the hotly anticipated March premiere of a new work by Jorma Elo made in collaboration with (and with a live performance by) pianist Joyce Yang.

For a one-night program on Saturday at the Aspen District Theatre, however, the company is looking back at the recent past and showcasing three of its finest commissions and fan favorites from the past three years: Alejandro Cerrudo's "Silent Ghost" (premiered in 2015), Cayetano Soto's "Huma Rojo" (from 2016) and Fernando Melo's "Dream Play" (2017).

As a trio, the pieces showcase the breadth of the company's repertoire — from the moody and enigmatic "Silent Ghost" to the ecstatic, red-drenched "Huma Rojo" to the technical marvel that is "Dream Play" — along with the range of its dancers and the diverse global perspectives of its choreographers.

'SILENT GHOST'

Alejandro Cerrudo — the Spanish-born, Chicago-based choreographer behind "Silent Ghost" — still moves with the alacrity of a dancer and often communicates his ideas through movement.

During the winter of 2014-2015 when he was creating "Silent Ghost" in Aspen — his second Aspen Santa Fe work, after 2012's well-received "Last" — he sprang around the studio making adjustments on dancers as he crafted the piece.

"There's a chemistry in the studio, so I don't have to speak," Cerrudo said during a rehearsal. "I play with different movements and different approaches to the movement. But they feel it. What I'm saying to you, I don't have to explain to them."

Cerrudo first tried his hand at choreography when he was 21 and dancing with the Stuttgart Ballet in Germany. There, he began taking choreography workshops to help him grow as a dancer. His first commission came from Hubbard Street Chicago in 2006. His pieces are now performed by companies around the world.

As a dancer, he grew interested in how the creative process works from the other side, so that he could be a "better tool" in service of a choreographer's vision. Now that he's the one composing, he tries to remember what it was like to work in the company.

"The dancers are the ones that make it happen," he said. "Without dancers, what is this?"

As a young choreographer, he's humble about his expertise and still close

enough to his performing days to approach the company with understanding and kindness.

"I hope I never forget what it's like to be a dancer," Cerrudo said. "Dancers, we are being corrected all day — a hundred times a day. 'No, don't do that, do this.' So it can get very frustrating. You have to be a bit of a psychologist and respect and try to sense when a dancer needs their space and when you can push them."

In "Silent Ghost," he crafted an enigmatic work that ends with a memorable, haunting duet.

He compares the contemporary movement of the work to an abstract painting. The meaning is up to the viewer, and often changes with time.

"The answer, if there needs to be any answers — they're found onstage," Cerrudo said.

'HUMA ROJO'

Cayetano Soto shook off the frequently dark, often self-serious mantel of contemporary ballet when he came to Aspen for five intense weeks in early 2016 to craft the fun, funny and playful "Huma Rojo."

"It's another side of me that maybe Aspen does not know," the Spanish choreographer, who had previously premiered two ballets in Aspen and had another two performed by the company, said during rehearsals. "I don't want to do the same ballet over and over again. For what? I keep moving."

The whimsy of the piece is evident from its first moments, as dancers pantomime an arch voiceover about the power of ego — reminiscent of self-help tapes from an off-kilter motivational speaker. Among their moves in that opening salvo is the international dollar-tossing symbol for "making it rain." The exuberant movements that follow include women doing hip-hop-styled crotch grabs, some light butt-slapping, a group movement with echoes of Michael Jackson's iconic "Thriller" dance and male dancers contorting their arms between their legs and doing jazz hands.

It all plays out to colorful mambo music by Xavier Cugat (himself, incidentally, Catalan like Soto) with dancers in bold red costumes by the Paris-based fashion label Maison Ullens.

The premiere was a smash and the piece has been a hit on the company's world tours over the past two years.

"It's not like the other pieces that we create here, where it's completely physical and athletic and cold, how I like it," Soto said. "This time I said, 'We're going to be physical, we're going to be athletic, but I want to see you. So play with the thing that you're doing.'"

It's also an apt piece for the #MeToo moment.



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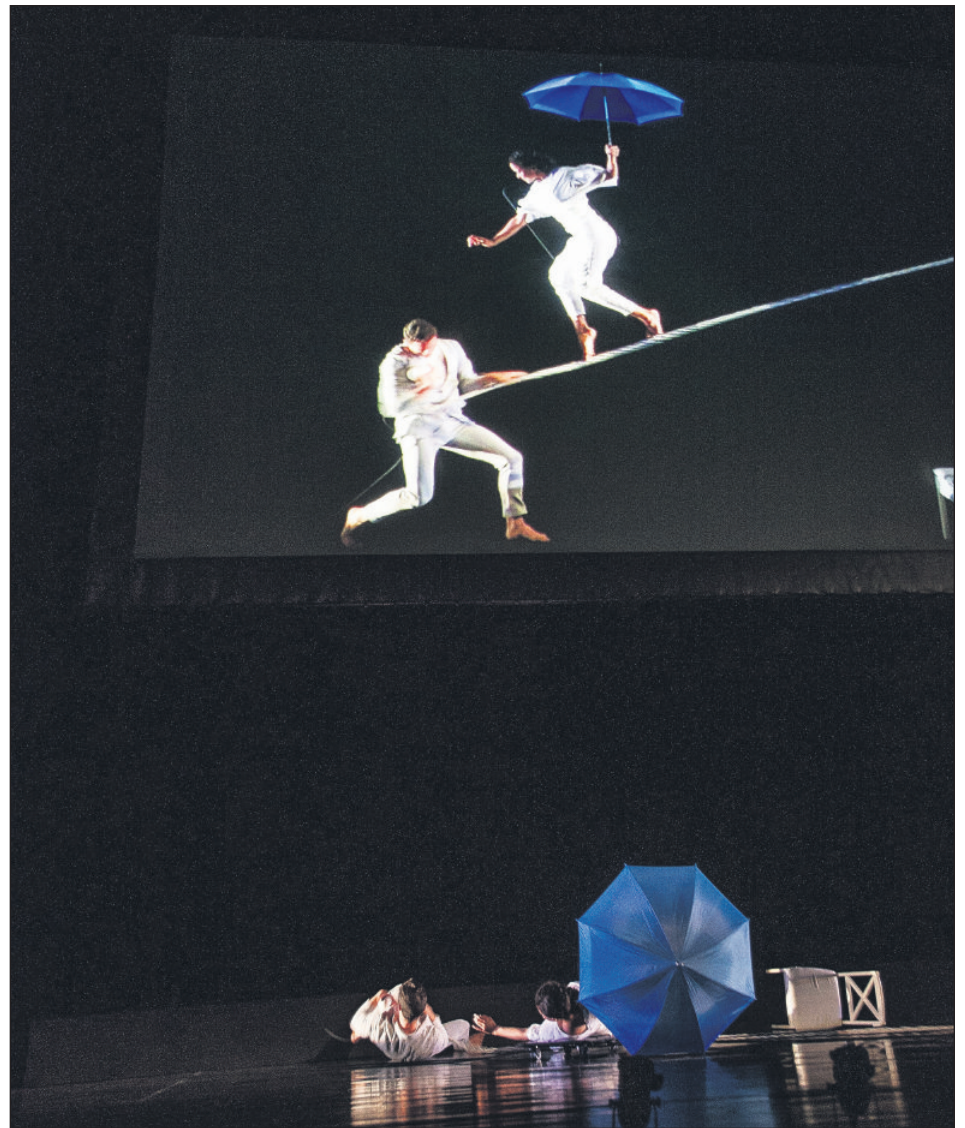
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ANNA STONEHOUSE/THE ASPEN TIMES

A scene from a dress rehearsal for Fernando Melo's "Dream Play" at Aspen Santa Fe Ballet last July.

BALLET

From page B5

"It's about strong women all around me," Soto said.

Thinking about women and power as he contemplated what he wanted to do with the piece, Soto returned to one of his favorite films: "All About My Mother" by Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodovar. Specifically, he found himself thinking about the actress character Huma Rojo (translated "Red Smoke" in English, played by Marisa Paredes). He named the piece for her.

"It's an homage, in a way, to all of the strong women in my life," he said.

'DREAM PLAY'

Fernando Melo set out to do nothing less than reinvent the concept of ballet with his extraordinary "Dream Play."

A ballet without steps, the groundbreaking and mind-bending work premiered in Aspen last summer. In it, Melo crafted a work where dancers do not stand on their own two feet. They are lying down throughout, filmed from above. The fantastic scenes they create on the ground — where they fly and flip and seemingly defy gravity — are projected live onto a movie screen, set to music by Chopin and Erik Satie.

"I'm interested in a broader definition or a different approach to choreography than the conventional one," Melo said during rehearsals in June. "I see choreography more like organization. For example, organizing bodies in space, in an organized environment. Organizing the lights and sounds in combination with the movement. There is much more to it than steps and music. I'm trying to explore that."

IF YOU GO ...

What: "Silent Ghost," "Huma Rojo" and "Dream Play," presented by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Where: Aspen District Theatre

When: Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

How much: \$36 to \$94

Tickets: Wheeler Opera House; www.aspenshowtix.com

The Brazil-born, Switzerland-based choreographer wants to shift the audience's perspective and challenge the expectations of contemporary dance. His "Re:Play," which premiered here in February 2016, did this by creating a stop-motion effect with strobe lighting on the dancers, creating an eerie beauty and a work that drew critical praise around the U.S.

But he's quick to note that the innovations in these pieces are not technology-driven. The lights — hundreds of precisely timed lights — in "Re:Play" were basically analog theater equipment, he points out. The camera and screen in the new piece "Dream Play," he noted, are standard tools of the theater. He's not dealing with bleeding-edge special effects, though the effect is extraordinary.

"What we're doing is very simple — it's a camera and a projection," he said. "It's a tool that exists in the theater. We're using the tools of the theater to tell a story and give an audience a different experience. It can be a positive or a negative experience, but it will definitely be an experience."

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