

Passion Play

By [Megan Bennett](#) / Journal North Reporter

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New York choreographer Bryan Arias has choreographed a world premiere, "Passion Samples," for the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. It's on the program for the company's summer season opener, which comes to Santa Fe this weekend. (SOURCE: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet/By Joao Canziani)

SANTA FE, N.M. — Bryan Arias didn't come with a plan.

An up-and-coming choreographer who was brought to the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet to create a world premiere, he arrived in Aspen with an open mind.

Arias says he wanted to be influenced by the dancers. He spent the first week getting to know them through improvisational dance sessions and group discussions.

"One topic that became something of a sort of repeated conversation and theme was passion," he said of those talks. "We got into it just talking about it (as something) we can talk about in any state of our artistic journey and personal life – what is passion?"

"Where does the spark start to want to dance, to gain a sense of purpose?"

Arias took that idea and used it to form a nearly half-hour collaborative contemporary dance piece made up of group sections, solos and duets.

His “Passion Samples” will conclude ASFB’s summer season premier that comes to Santa Fe this weekend. The show is a three-piece production that artistic director Tom Mossbrucker described as an “evening of abstract contemporary dance.”

Arias, who splits his time between New York and Basel, Switzerland, has worked as a dancer with the Netherlands Dance Theater and New York’s Complexions Contemporary Ballet. His choreography has been performed by the Charlotte (N.C.) Ballet, the Scottish Ballet and his own Arias Dance Company.

He said he loves a minimalist movement style, and that his choreography is also influenced by his hip-hop and salsa dance backgrounds.

Arias said he and the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet started talking about what passion means in terms of movement. The discussion resulted in many group sessions in which the dancers use minimal movements and dance phrases. He said that when the company makes the moves collectively, the performance becomes “powerful and bigger,” and “creates more energy.”

“We imagined it as a form of breathing,” he said of visualizing passion in the dance.

“It’s a part of something that we gravitate to and we pull away from. There’s a certain type of satisfaction being present and being in your form of passion, and there’s something also just as satisfying allowing it to go away. It became a sort of breath – something that starts small and then expands as if we’re taking a deep breath, and then again it’s an exhale and returns back to a minimal version and grows back out again.”

During rehearsal, Arias had the performers face away from the mirrors so they would have to focus on personal feelings and the energy of their fellow dancers.

“That then offers a form of challenge because you want to live in your passion and you want to exist in that personal unique feeling, but you can’t leave your partner behind; you can’t leave the group behind,” he said. ”

“There is what I always (call) a sweet spot. There is something that is to be gained with soft focus, with your peripheral, working with your senses, and allowing them to influence how you feel and perhaps allowing that to be a part of your passion. It doesn’t just belong to us. I think the driving force of anything is knowing that it’s influenced by the world, people and each other.”

“Passion Samples” is Arias’ first time working with ASFB, though the company’s Mossbrucker has admired his work for years. He said he’s impressed with Arias’ unique artistic voice.

“Believe it or not, that’s the hardest thing to have and we look for (it) the most,” he said, adding “It’s so easy to emulate others in today’s world of social media clips and accessibility on YouTube. You can watch any ballet. Things have gotten very generic in a way.”

Three choreographers



Jirí Kylián's abstract contemporary work 'Sleepless,' a string of solos and duets, visualizes the inner workings of the human mind when someone is half asleep. (SOURCE: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet/ By Rosalie O'Connor)

Arias is one of three contemporary choreographers whose works will be performed in the current show. Mossbrucker said each represents a different stage in a choreographer's career.

There's Arias, who represents someone who is beginning to get noticed within the larger dance community. Sweden's Alexander Ekman has become one of the world's most sought-after choreographers. And the legendary Czech artist Jirí Kylián, whose work dates back to the 1970s, is described by Mossbrucker as one of the early voices in the contemporary dance genre.

The show features Kylián's "Sleepless" and the company premiere of Ekman's "Tuplet." "Sleepless," which premiered in 2004 with the Netherlands Dance Theatre, explores a state of "half-sleep," Mossbrucker said.

"That place in your psyche where you're not awake, but you're not asleep," he said.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is "Tuplet," a high-energy performance that uses music, video and dance to pose the question "What is rhythm?" Clips of jazz musicians and big bands are projected on the stage's backdrop. Mossbrucker said the dancers also make percussive sounds using their bodies.

"It's quite exhilarating in contrast to 'Sleepless,' which is very sedate and almost puts you into a trance," he said.



"Tuplet" famed Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman's six-person contemporary piece that looks at the concept of rhythm, is making its company premiere with the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. (SOURCE: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet/By Rhys Cozens)

If you go

WHAT: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet summer opener

WHERE: Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.

WHEN: Saturday, 8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$36-\$94. Purchase tickets online at www.ticketssantafe.org, by phone at 505-988-1234 or at The Lensic Box Office