

# LEGACY MATTERS: ASFB Ballets Given New Wings

By Debra Levine



Pacific Northwest Ballet in *Silent Ghost*  
PHOTO: ANGELA STERLING

Dances are not living beings. Compared to the humans who produce them—choreographers, dancers, composers, costume, lighting, and set designers—dances are nearly vaporous. But even if taken as vapor, dance is a powerful mist to reckon with. The steps form a bond uniting all players. During performance, the audience feels the vibe. When restaging dances, you feel the force. A successful piece of choreography radiates a living aura!

Over the course of 25 years, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet performed approximately one hundred ballets—forty of which were original, commissioned works. One-by-one, year-after-year, these ballets, wrought in an Aspen basement ballet studio, emerged as calling cards with audiences around the world. After Aspen Santa Fe Ballet made the difficult decision to sunset its resident performance troupe, it left behind this body of work representing some of the brightest choreographic lights in the contemporary-classical ballet space.

Surprisingly this treasure trove of forty ballets is the handiwork of as few as fourteen choreographers. But a smallish list of dance makers is not by accident; it reflects a strategy pursued by ASFB Artistic

Director Tom Mossbrucker. ASFB never had a resident choreographer; so Mossbrucker believed that repeat commissions by particularly simpatico choreographers would yield deeper results and benefit both dancers and audiences. That is how an elite clutch of dance makers came to have such an enduring impact on the company's culture. Topping the list is Nicolo Fonte, who completed eight creations for ASFB; Jorma Elo made five. Cayetano Soto and Alejandro Cerrudo, both Spaniards, each choreographed three works for ASFB. Four ballets came from Dwight Rhoden.

Mossbrucker implemented this approach in close connection with ASFB's Executive Director, Jean-Philippe Malaty. "Having an in-house dance company serving as an incubator for new work for so many years was a luxury," says Malaty, in near nostalgia. He adds, "It's truly been a labor of love."

Revivifying a dormant dance work is a kind of sacred stewardship. On the wings of these original ballets—some sophisticated, others high-impact, others whimsical and fun, many emotionally charged—today's ASFB organization can "find ways to honor our long history of creativity," suggests Malaty.



Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre in *Petal*  
PHOTO: YOSHIKI NAKONO

For years, companies around the world have licensed ASFB-commissioned ballets. Fonte's *Left Unsaid* entered Goteberg Ballet, Oregon Ballet Theater, and Ballet Austin. Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost* has been performed by Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. Elo's *Red Sweet* found a home at Oklahoma City Ballet. Helen Pickett's *Petal* has been restaged by no less than eight companies. Cayetano Soto's *Uneven*, as danced by the Perm Opera Ballet, won Russia's Golden Mask Award.

But the pace has picked up recently. Three ballets have recently been restaged: two at large ballet institutions, Pacific Northwest Ballet and Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, and one to the smaller Island Moving Company in Newport, Rhode Island. All were made possible by a special packaged approach developed by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet.

Culling from many years of first-hand experience, Mossbrucker and Malaty identified ways to be efficient, while comprehensive, in transferring as minutely detailed a "product" as a dance. Archival information about staging, lighting, costumes, copyright issues, and music rights are made available across varying media. Performance videos, introductions to choreographers, and staging notes are offered. Even photography for use in marketing materials may be of interest. ASFB can personally assist with staging where requested. In some cases, financial support may be arranged through Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Fund for Innovation in Dance, a new venture launched in March 2021 as a vehicle to support dance in Aspen and Santa Fe and to honor 25 years of creativity.

In a role-reversal after years of hosting visiting choreographers, Tom Mossbrucker is now rolling up sleeves and entering far-flung dance studios as a guest répétiteur. After Tom sets the bones of a given work, the original choreographer (in the case of the Newport, Rhode Island-based Island Moving Company it was Nicolo Fonte) can economize on time and labor, by arriving to polish, tweak and coach at a higher level.

Danielle Genest, Island Moving Company's Associate Artistic Director, remembers first seeing *Where We Left Off* (2011), Nicolo Fonte's commissioned work for ASFB set to a driving piano score by Philip Glass. She says, "We got an immediate sense of the incredible beauty of the work." The company's Artistic Director Miki Ohlsen says that the learning sessions on this ballet were extraordinary. "Tom



Tom Mossbrucker and Nicolo Fonte rehearsing the dancers of Island Moving Company in *Where We Left Off*  
PHOTO: EMILY BAKER

[Mossbrucker] used his uncanny ability, in his soft-spoken, respectful way, to draw out the strengths in each dancer. He was able to bring the dancers to the point of looking as if the work had been made on them."

Not one month later, in March of this year, *Where We Left Off* received a standing ovation at a concert celebrating Island Moving Company's 40th anniversary. Looking back, Danielle Genest says, "Support from ASFB made the entire process seamless, allowing all of us to really focus on the art."

It's yellow. It's pink and blue. It's sensual, feminine, and strong. It's *Petal*, a work to a score by Philip Glass and Thomas Newman first rendered by choreographer Helen Pickett for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in 2008. "Petal has enjoyed the most iterations of any work we commissioned," says Mossbrucker, with no small amount of pride. The rollicking ballet, full of lifts that put sensual female dancers out front, has entered the repertoires of Boston Ballet, Cincinnati Ballet, Atlanta Ballet (twice), Kansas City Ballet (twice), Oklahoma City Ballet, Oregon Ballet Theatre (twice), Smuin Ballet (twice), Alberta Ballet (Canada) (twice) and University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

Shepherding *Petal* first in North Carolina and then again, for Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, where she was Artistic Director, Susan Jaffe (newly appointed Artistic Director of American Ballet Theatre) shares her delight in *Petal*'s "pure joy, energy, rhythms, surprises and architecture." Facilitating its staging, says Jaffe, "the support by ASFB was very special to me. I always admired the groundbreaking works ASFB had been doing for years, so it was meaningful to be recognized and supported by them." She says, "Our audiences are mesmerized by *Petal*. They absolutely loved it and there were standing ovations here in Pittsburgh." She adds that personally, "I could see it every year,"

Helen Pickett deeply associates her popular work with its creation in Aspen. "Choreographing *Petal* on ASFB will always be a bright light



Pacific Northwest Ballet in *Silent Ghost*  
PHOTO: ANGELA STERLING



Pacific Northwest Ballet in *Silent Ghost*  
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Tom Mossbrucker in studio with Island Moving Company  
PHOTO: EMILY BAKER



Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre in *Petal*  
PHOTO: ROSALIE O'CONNOR

memory for me," she says. "It was one of my early commissions and on a company with a formidable reputation. It was a company built upon new work. One of the few to commit to this idea. This act is courageous in our ballet world."

In a moodier mode is a work by Alejandro Cerrudo, the newly named director of Charlotte Ballet who choreographed it in Aspen on a 2015 commission. With its swooping circular lifts and pretzel pas de deux, *Silent Ghost* took its place on an all-Cerrudo program presented by Seattle's Pacific Northwest Ballet in October 2021. "Silent Ghost lingers long after the fact," says PNB Artistic Director Peter Boal. "Audiences remain in the glow after each performance. It's been like a fine wine, sipped, savored, considered, and truly enjoyed."

"People struggle to put words to Alejandro's work," Boal continues, "but they want more of it! And they don't want it to end. I also look forward to the next glass."

A supportive gift to PNB enabled the staging. Boal says, "ASFB's gift is thoughtful and deeply informed. It speaks to legacy and the very heart of our profession which can be on tentative grounds. Support equals stability; but truly informed and heartfelt support not only stabilizes, it endorses and empowers. We are so grateful."

Malaty and Mossbrucker's values for the ASFB organization have remained consistent: "We have always been about relationships—with choreographers, dancers, audience and patrons. These relationships have been lasting. Our renewed focus on continuing to support these choreographers who were so meaningful to ASFB feels natural. They are still part of our family."

*Dance critic Debra Levine has written for the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Huffington Post, South China Morning Post, Santa Fe New Mexican, Dance Magazine, and more. She has produced and hosted dance talks and screenings at MoMA, Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, UCLA Film & Television Archive, and on Turner Classic Movies (TCM). A recent Fellow at the Center for Ballet and the Arts at NYU, she is finalizing a biography of the jazz choreographer Jack Cole. Debra is editor/publisher of arts•meme, the fine-arts blog she founded in 2008.*