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Los Angeles Ballet tries the untraditional

The troupe's 'New Wave LA' at Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center is heavily influenced by 'So You Think You Can Dance' choreographers. George Balanchine it's not.

Victoria Looseleaf/Special to the Los Angeles Times/May 9, 2010



Choreographer Sonya Tayeh directs her dancers for a new piece she's created for the Los Angeles Ballet program titled "New Wave LA." Tayeh works on the television reality series "So You Think You Can Dance" and is one of four choreographers that have been asked to work on this program. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times / May 9, 2010)

Three couples are negotiating a series of head-to-head moves, rapid-fire turns and daring leaps to cranked-up tango music of Astor Piazzolla. At first glance they could be contestants in a postmodern dance marathon.

In reality, they are rehearsing a new piece for Los Angeles Ballet's final program of its fourth season. The beneficent task mistress calling the shots is choreographer Sonya Tayeh, the heavily tattooed 33-year-old known for her work on Fox's hit television show "So You Think You Can Dance."

"I want you to feel the energy in your temples," says Tayeh, her rhinestone-dotted ponytail sprouting beneath a purple-streaked neo-Mohawk. "I need to see that connection."

Tayeh's piece is one of four world premieres commissioned by LAB's husband-and-wife co-artistic directors, Colleen Neary and Thordal Christensen. Premiering Saturday at the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center, the program has been dubbed "New Wave LA" and features numbers by "So You Think" choreographers Travis Wall and Mandy Moore and a work by Josie Walsh, an erstwhile ballerina who danced with Joffrey Ballet and Zurich Ballet and who made a work for LAB's first choreographic workshop last year.

The program represents a departure from the young troupe's usual mix of George Balanchine and story ballets such as "La Sylphide."

"These choreographers are young, they're new, they're exciting," says Neary from her office in LAB's 4,000-square-foot Westside studios. A former New York City Ballet dancer, her svelte body still Balanchine-worthy at 57, Neary says she intended to showcase young choreographers from the start. "We're building this company

from a creative place, where L.A. people who are in the arts can come and create.”

Christensen says: “Some of the choreographers haven’t really worked on pointe before, but that’s the uniqueness of a ballet company — the pointe shoes. How wonderful to be able to bring some of these more commercial choreographers in to classically trained dancers and also give the dancers a chance to do something different.”

Straddling the commercial and concert world is not totally foreign to Los Angeles Ballet. A pair of its dancers performed on Fox’s dance show in 2008. And Christensen, who danced with Royal Danish Ballet and was also artistic director of that company before landing in L.A. in 2002 with Neary, choreographed a number for Melissa Sandvig, the show’s “naughty ballerina,” last season.

“So You Think You Can Dance” creator, producer and judge Nigel Lythgoe (the new season begins May 27), says it’s win-win. “It’s important for Los Angeles Ballet to be seen on the cutting edge and show they are not elitist. And working with L.A. Ballet certainly benefits the choreographers from the opposite direction — they’re going to have to adapt their styles to a certain degree, to make the dancers look good.”

With the exception of Walsh, the choreographers are accustomed to making three- to five-minute works instead of meatier 20-minute fare. Detroit-born Tayeh, who graduated from Wayne State University with a bachelor’s degree in dance, relishes the challenge. “We only have two days of rehearsal for ‘So You Think You Can Dance,’ which makes us have to get the point across right away. Working with L.A. Ballet is a nice change, but I’m trying to maintain that same sense of the way I move by being athletic with the pointe shoes.”

At 22, Wall, who grew up in his mother’s Virginia Beach dance studio and won the Capezio A.C.E. Award as choreographer of the year 2009, is the baby of the bunch. Having danced on the recent Oscars’ telecast, as well as assisting producer-choreographer Adam Shankman, the tattooed dynamo with the bleached hair also choreographed a number for NYCB principal Tiler Peck for a recent appearance on “Dancing With the Stars.”

Wall’s work is set to a pastiche of music, including a string version of U2’s “With or Without You.” His eight dancers are swaying to an elegiac violin melody before they begin a sequence of canon-like moves. Scrutinizing his charges and correcting a misplaced arm, Wall instructs them: “You’re telling a story. It’s a broken picture that then gets back to the way it was.”

Wall says he’s used to working with contemporary dancers, but having the luxury to expand an idea is a welcome assignment. “Sometimes choreographers get wrapped up in ideas and average viewers won’t get it. I’m making sure my ideas will be visible to the naked eye.”

A native Coloradan, Moore, 33, has performed on television shows as well as having made dances for “American Idol” and “So You Think You Can Dance.” Her work for Los Angeles Ballet, set to music by Cirque Eloize, features four couples executing whimsical unisons, with the girls in soft ballet slippers.

“We have a tendency as dancers to compartmentalize,” says a bubbly Moore, “but movement is movement. It doesn’t matter if you stand at the barre or put on tap shoes. I think of somebody who’s used to only going to ballet performances, to see the work of Travis, Josie and me, it’s going to be thought-provoking.”

As for the company’s dancers, they seem to thrive on the new movement vocabularies. Andrew Brader, 24, has been with L.A. Ballet since its inception and is in works by Walsh and Tayeh. “Sonya’s movement is not as familiar as what we’re used to. There’s a rawness to it, and getting it into the body is at first uncomfortable, but she keeps pushing and it becomes ingrained. Josie’s movement is more accented. There’s more intention behind it.”

Walsh, 38, has her own company, MYOKYO. She's produced several full-evening works that are a mash-up of pointe shoes, aerial dances and industrial rock music, composed by her husband, Paul Rivera. She calls it "renegade ballet." Walsh's premiere for six dancers, "Transmutation," while making use of classical technique, also features thrusting tango gyrations, huge grand plies on pointe and sexy split leg lifts — all to Rivera's pulsating score.

Says Walsh: "I'm constantly breaking my own barriers and exploring new movement, new dynamics. When it comes to my work with a ballet company, it's definitely harder-hitting."

Los Angeles Ballet continues to dial up the heat. Of their recent all-Balanchine program, the Los Angeles Times wrote that the troupe "entered a new phase ... its dancers showing increasing mastery with a repertory that, while familiar, is unforgiving."

How they ultimately handle unfamiliar choreography, albeit works tailor-made for their bodies, will prove revealing, as will the dances themselves.

"You want a choreographer to have ideas," says Christensen, "and to be able to give them to the dancers. These choreographers are inventive and a good mix. We also like their moods in transition with each other."

"So You Think You Can Dance" notwithstanding, "We're not here to do reality shows," Christensen says. "We're here to produce art."

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