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PERFORMING ARTS

Smuin's diverse dance program comes to town

Series includes ballet segment celebrating Frank Sinatra's music

By Paul Freeman
For The Daily News

Smuin Ballet has always been known for presenting excitingly eclectic and inventive programs. That's definitely the case with its current "Dance Series 01," which comes to Mountain View Center for the Arts, Feb. 22-25.

It's a diverse combination of works. "I like to think of as three independent short stories that are on one program," said Smuin artistic director Cecilia Fushille.

The program's one connective thread is appropriate for Valentine's month. "Each of the ballets has a reflection on love and relationships," Fushille said, "but I love that they also showcase the dancers' extraordinary abilities to master so many distinctive styles."

"Serenade for Strings" opens the program. It employs the music Balanchine used for his renowned 1934 ballet, "Serenade," but with a lively new interpretation by Garrett Ammon.

"It's interesting for me to see a contemporary choreographer's fresh take on the same centuries-old Tchaikovsky score," Fushille said. "It's using the ballet idiom, but with a little twist and lot more humor. It's perfect for Smuin. It's fantastic music and you see the athleticism and speed of the dancers. And I love that Ammon was able to add little whimsical gestures into his creation."

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's acclaimed "Requiem for a Rose," from a Schubert score, offers a different mood. Smuin presented the piece's West Coast



Smuin dancers Lauren Pschirrer, from left, Terez Dean, Erin Yarbrough-Powell and Mengjun Chen in Michael Smuin's Sinatra tribute, "Fly Me to the Moon," presented as part of Smuin's "Dance Series 01," with performances in Mountain View on Feb. 22-25.

KEITH SUTTER

DANCE

What: "Dance Series 01" Production of: Smuin Ballet

By: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro Street, Mountain View

When: Feb. 22-25; 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday; 2 p.m. matinees Saturday and Sunday

Tickets: \$56-\$72; 650-903-6000; www.smuinballet.org

premiere last fall. It features 12 dancers portraying a dozen red roses. Ochoa's costume design has the male and female dancers wearing full skirts to represent the flowers.

"I thought this would be a beautiful vehicle for us, as well," Fushille said. "It was such an honor to get to do her work. She's in demand all over the world. She doesn't consider herself to be a typically romantic choreographer and yet this piece is in fact, very romantic.

She was inspired by the question of, what is love and what is romance?"

"It's a spectacular, visually stunning piece. Ochoa is a fantastic choreographer with a unique voice and this is one of her masterpieces."

Fushille said that Ochoa gracefully melds the worlds of classical ballet and contemporary dance. "We want to have freedom of movement, but also the lightness of having the women up on their toes. And this is a perfect example of that."

The company's founder, the late Michael Smuin, designed "Fly Me to the Moon," another program highlight, as his 2004 tribute to Frank Sinatra. Smuin had fond memories of his parents dancing in the kitchen when Sinatra songs came on the radio.

Fushille was one of the original dancers in the work, which features nine of Smuin's favorite Ol' Blue Eyes tunes, including "The Lady is a Tramp," "That's

Life," "New York, New York" and the, in this case, ironically titled "I Won't Dance."

There is variety even within this one ballet. Styles range from ballroom to tap to classical on-point. "That was the joy of working with Michael," Fushille said. "He had such a diverse dance vocabulary."

Dancers sport fedoras in this segment. The women wear costumes resembling 50s cocktail dresses.

"It's a piece that Michael created that he would have loved dancing in. I can see him showing the men how to manipulate their hats — there are little hat tricks here and there — and to have that Sinatra panache. It's Michael's nod to Sinatra, but to romance, as well."

This piece is a crowd-pleaser. "It's so fun to watch audiences tap their feet and hum along all through the ballet," Fushille said.

Smuin believed that ballet should be entertaining, which

some staid critics viewed as a negative. "Well, why shouldn't it be entertaining? People want to go out to have a good time," Fushille said, laughing.

The "Fly Me to the Moon" ballet reflects Smuin's dedication to an adventurous approach and a desire to expand the public's perception of what ballet should be.

"That's why, as a dancer in Michael's company, you never felt that you were working with the same choreography, the same formula, the same type of music. Michael could create to everything from Bach to The Beatles, Mozart to the Gershwins to Sinatra. He thought all music should be danced to and that dance was fantastic in any form. He wanted to make it accessible. Certainly, this program is something that people can relate to."

The appeal of the Sinatra ballet spans generations. "Music can be such a unifier. Dance can bring people together and help us find a commonality."

Fushille is thrilled that both audiences and dancers continue to appreciate Michael Smuin's work. She doesn't want the company to be seen as a museum ensemble, but enjoys occasionally bringing back gems such as this from the past, mixing them into programs with works by dynamic new choreographers. "We keep Michael's legacy alive in that way," Fushille said.

As for what she wants audiences to take away from this program, Fushille said that "dance is approachable... and fun. It blends — with artistry — athletics and music. I want the audience to feel inspired and uplifted. And if you've never seen dance, this is the perfect entry point."

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