

# Arts & Entertainment

## Smuin Ballet to Present Stellar Program Featuring Three New Works

Smuin Contemporary Ballet's founder should be smiling down on the company that bears his name. A passionate supporter of fostering new choreographic voices from within the company, Michael Smuin must surely be proud to see the company launch its 25th Anniversary season—an impressive landmark for any arts organization—with a stellar program that includes three new works by dancer/choreographers.

Smuin Artistic Director Celia Fushille, who took the helm after Michael's death in 2007, has maintained his legacy while enriching the company's impressive repertoire. She has planned a silver anniversary season that launches this month with a vibrant *Dance Series 01*. In addition to three new short ballets by Smuin dancers past and present, the program includes two of Smuin's beloved works (the languorous and sensual "The Eternal Idol," and effervescent "Schubert Scherzo"), and a bold ballet by acclaimed choreographer Trey McIntyre ("Blue Until June," set to the music of blues legend Etta James).

The three new works were all developed in Smuin's *Choreography Showcase*, an innovative event that offers dancers a chance to set pieces on their fellow company members and discover their own choreographic voices. Says Fushille, "We find they create works that are astonishing, brilliant and beautiful. Sometimes the dancers surprise themselves by discovering another facet to their creative gifts. I consider the process vital to the future of dance, a chance to foster and encourage the next generation of dance makers."

Audiences this month will see three such works by tomorrow's top dance-makers: "Merely Players" by Nicole Haskins, "Echo" by Ben Needham-Wood, and "Sinfonietta" by Rex Wheeler. *San Francisco Bay Times* in this issue goes behind the scenes with Smuin Marketing Manager Leslie Irwin and Communications Manager Eva Faizi, who interview the dancers-turned-choreographers to uncover the process of creating these premiere-worthy works.

**Nicole Haskins** is currently in her fifth season as a dancer with Smuin.

"It's difficult to get dancers, time, and space to discover an aesthetic," she shares. "Smuin has allowed me the resources to work without any kind of requirement. They really give everyone the freedom to find his or her voice." While maintaining a brilliant professional dancing career, Haskins has also been busy creating commissioned works for a number of ballet companies and received New York Choreographic Institute's prestigious Fellowship Grant last year.



Smuin's Dance Series 01 will feature acclaimed choreographer Trey McIntyre's "Blue Until June," appearing in Walnut Creek and San Francisco September 21-October 6.

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Smuin dancer Terez Dean with the company in Rex Wheeler's "Sinfonietta," which will be adapted for its main stage premiere in Smuin's Dance Series 01 program in Walnut Creek and San Francisco September 21-October 6.



Smuin dancers Ben Needham-Wood (top) and former Smuin dancer Oliver Paul-Adams (bottom)

"When I saw Nicole's first work, I could see that she possessed a unique voice," Fushille says. She has asked Haskins to create several pieces for Smuin's holiday hit *The Christmas Ballet*, including instant audience favorites "Joy to the World" and "J-I-N-G-L-E Bells." In *Dance Series 01*, Haskins steps outside traditional ballet with "Merely Players"—a piece set to indie-pop music and danced in flat shoes (not *en pointe*). She hopes it will embody "joy, and the different ways that joy is in our lives."

**Ben Needham-Wood** is another Smuin dancer who has made the most of his opportunities to create. In 2015 he notably collaborated with former Smuin dancer Weston Krukow on the widely acclaimed "BaseBallet," a TV feature juxtaposing the athletics of dance with that of America's favorite pastime. It won a Northern California Emmy Award and was followed up by another dance special broadcast on *NBC Sports Bay Area*, which won four regional Emmys. In *Dance Series 01* Needham-Wood debuts "Echo" set to music by composer Nicholas Britell. It was adapted from a work he presented in Smuin's 2016 *Choreography Showcase*.

The third new work is by **Rex Wheeler**, who retired from Smuin's dance corps last season. The company



Smuin dancer Ben Needham-Wood

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will present the mainstage premiere of his "Sinfonietta." Set to a buoyant Boris Tchaikovsky score, the ballet explores the marriage of contemporary and classical technique. Britain-born Wheeler attended the Royal Ballet School and devoted his early career to mastering classical repertoire, before migrating to the U.S. After seeing Smuin's *The Christmas Ballet* he changed his mind about his classical focus, declaring: "It looked like such fun. I thought, 'To hell with my preconceptions, I want to dance like that!'"

Wheeler began creating dances in 2010, learning to develop his own style while performing works by leading choreographers. He now has works in the repertoires of dance companies across the country, including several cheeky dances for Smuin's annual holiday extravaganza, *The Christmas Ballet*.

Fushille's careful nurturing of these talents carries on the supportive attitude and culture Michael Smuin cultivated in the studio—one that benefits all, and not least the audiences who have the opportunity to witness brand new works by the next generation of rising dance-makers.

*Smuin's Dance Series 01 will be performed at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco September 28 through October 6. Tickets (\$25-81) and more information are available online (<http://www.smuinballet.org/>) or by calling 415-912-1899. The Series will also be performed this weekend at Walnut Creek's Leshner Center—info at the Smuin Ballet website or by phoning 925-943-7469.*