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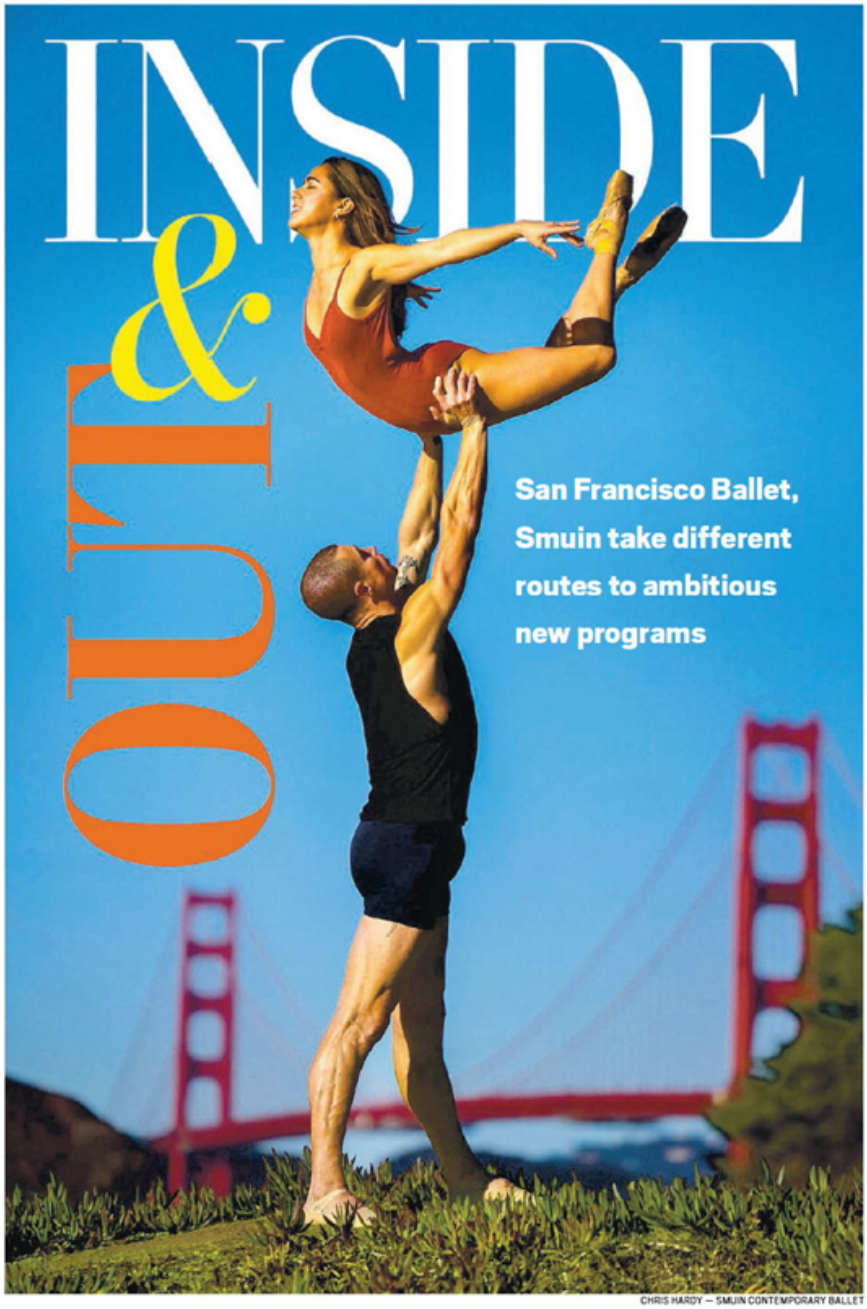
INSIDE & OUT

San Francisco Ballet, Smuin take different routes to ambitious new programs



CHRIS HARDY — SMUIN CONTEMPORARY BALLET

Tess Lane and Max van der Sterre will perform as part of the "Smuin al Fresco" dance series in Orinda and San Francisco Sunday-May 28.

By Andrew Gilbert » *Correspondent*

The long wait is almost over for ballet lovers.

The rising number of Californians fully vaccinated and the state's falling COVID-19 infection rate mean that San Francisco Ballet will soon be able to present dance to in-person audiences.

In the meantime, there are some up-close-and-personal options for SF Ballet fans in need of a terpsichorean fix — and two of them revolve around classic works adapted by company artistic director Helgi Tomasson.

Another venerable Bay Area company, Smuin Contemporary Ballet, has found an intermediate path in the pandemic reopening landscape, offering a blend of new works and old favorites in a series of outdoor performances titled "Smuin al Fresco." The three-week series kicks off Sunday at the Bruns Amphitheatre in Orinda.

For SF Ballet, the latest work in the streaming queue is Tomasson's captivating "Romeo & Juliet," which will be available from today through May 26. Shot with multiple cameras at the War Memorial Opera House, the film was originally created in 2015 for "Lincoln Center at the Movies: Great American Dance" and stars former company principal dancers Maria Kochetkova and Davit Karapetyan.

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ERIK TOMASSON — SAN FRANCISCO BALLET

Maria Kochetkova and Davit Karapetyan star in SF Ballet artistic director Helgi Tomasson's adaptation of "Romeo & Juliet," a film version of which will stream today through May 26.

ERIK TOMASSON — SAN FRANCISCO BALLET

Helgi Tomasson's acclaimed adaptation of the classic "Swan Lake" will be streamed by San Francisco Ballet May 20–June 9.

Ballet

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A company mainstay since premiering during SF Ballet's 1994 repertory season, "Romeo & Juliet" is set to Sergei Prokofiev's oft-used score, which is performed in the film by the SF Ballet Orchestra under the direction of Music Director Martin West. Among the many different SF Ballet casts featured in the dance, "I felt that Kochetkova and Davit worked very well together," Tomasson said.

"She's 13 at the start of the ballet, and grows into someone who falls in love and marries in less than two hours, and you're aware of her growth from the way she dances. She did that very well, and they played off one another, which is ideal."

Tomasson worked closely with director Thomas Grimm to create a film with its own cinematic character. The dancers weren't performing for the cameras ("They did what they normally do on stage," Tomasson said), but the tightly framed close-ups create a kind of intimacy rarely experienced at the Opera House.

"We were able to use that opportunity to show the human drama taking place," Tomasson said. "In a scene like with Juliet going through the difficult decision of whether to take the sleeping potion or not, you see the human struggle."

"Romeo & Juliet" is part of the online package with Tomasson's 21st century reimagining of "Swan Lake," which is available May 20-June 9 and features sets and costumes by Tony Award-winning designer Jonathan Fensom.

The 2021 digital season also includes Program 5, available through Wednesday, with Cathy Marston's "Snowblind," David Dawson's "Anima Animus" and Tomasson's "7 for Eight."

Rather than waiting for indoor clearance, Smuin has found outdoor venues at which to perform. The company has developed programs working in small groups to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The spring offerings kick off with two live afternoon performances Sunday at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater, the home of California Shakespeare Theater.

Cal Shakes has limited its summer theater season from the usual four shows to one, while inviting other area arts groups to use its stage and its scenic environs. West Edge Opera is scheduled to stage its summer season of three operas there July 24-Aug. 8.

The Smuin programs at Bruns include popular "Smuin Songbook" works set to pop standards by the late Tony Award-winning choreographer Michael Smuin, and excerpts from his story ballet "The Tempest" with music by Paul Chihara. The programs also include a new pas de deux by Smuin alum Rex Wheeler and premieres by eight company dancers.

The Smuin al Fresco outdoor performances continue on an outdoor stage adjacent to the company's home base, the Smuin Center for Dance in San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood.

Drawing on the same roster of works as the Cal Shakes program, the performances take place at noon, 2 and 4 p.m. Fridays, May 14-28. Individual performances will vary, featuring separate sets of Smuin dancers who have been working in pods performing different selections.

The impact of pods on dance will eventually surface at SF Ballet too, as the COVID-19 prevention measure has reconfigured how new works are created. The downside is that creating or rehearsing larger dances takes a lot more time.

CHRIS HARDY — SMUIN CONTEMPORARY BALLET

Tessa Barbour and Brandon Alexander will perform as part of the "Smuin al Fresco" series in Orinda and San Francisco Sunday–May 28.

ERIK TOMASSON — SAN FRANCISCO BALLET

In San Francisco Ballet's "Romeo & Juliet," Maria Kochetkova was able to demonstrate Juliet's growth and maturity by altering her dancing over the course of the two-hour ballet.

CHRIS HARDY — SMUIN CONTEMPORARY BALLET

Like other Smuin dancers Terez Dean Orr and John Speedi Orr, a married couple, have gotten used to rehearsing and performing outdoors.

"When you have to go from one pod to another you have to quarantine for five to 10 days," Tomasson said. "In that way things go slower. You can't jump from one studio to another."

The silver lining is that Tomasson decided to create his first work set to the music of French Baroque composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, "Harmony," which is now slated for next season's Program 5. Limited to one pod, he ended up creating a ballet featuring that group of dancers, "some I had never worked with before," he said. "I used what I had in front of me."

He'd been looking for an opportunity to explore Rameau's music, "and faced with this pod of dancers I found it very interesting," he said. "It was reminiscent of Bach at times, yet at times it was so contemporary in the way the melodies develop. This is not Baroque music. It feels more like today. I was fascinated by that."

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