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DANCE

Lar Lubovitch on choreography and crisis-making

By Karen Campbell

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ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES/FILE

Lar Lubovitch (here rehearsing in 2010) was among the first choreographers to use the music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

Choreographer Lar Lubovitch isn't content to stick to the tried and true.

"I have to leave my comfort zone in order to stretch my imagination, to keep the interest alive for myself," he said recently from a company engagement in Philadelphia. "I keep the possibility alive that my best work is yet to come."

Over the past four decades, the versatile 69-year-old has had commissions from major companies around the world, from New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre to Paris Opera Ballet, Royal Danish Ballet, and Stuttgart Ballet. He has worked in television, in film, and on Broadway, and has choreographed ice-dancing routines for Olympic skaters.

But the heart of his work beats within the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, which comes to the Citi Shubert Theatre Friday and Saturday, presented by the Celebrity Series. Three of the program's dances are recent: "Little Rhapsodies" (2007), set to Schumann's "Symphonic Etudes"; "The Legend of Ten" (2010), set to Brahms's Quintet for Piano and Strings; and last year's dark "Crisis

Variations,” which just won the prestigious Prix Benois de la Danse, and which Lubovitch calls “a tone poem evoked by the feelings of crisis.” Leading off will be “North Star” (1978), a rippling ensemble piece set to Philip Glass’s eponymous score.

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Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

Citi Shubert Theatre, 866-348-9738.

Also performing:

Celebrity Series

First performance:

Oct. 19

Closing date:

Oct. 20

Ticket price:

\$60-\$75

Company website:

<http://www.celebrityseries.org>

For such a prolific choreographer, Lubovitch came surprisingly late to dance. Born and raised in Chicago, he was the second of four children. He recalled, “I danced from the time I could walk as an intuitive response to music, and my family nickname was ‘The Dancer.’ But the idea of such a profession didn’t exist in my family.” So he took gymnastics and studied visual arts.

He didn’t see his first professional dance performance until he was enrolled as an art major at the University of Iowa, and the José Limón Dance Company came to town. He was hooked. “I recognized instantly that that was who I was,” he said. “It had a sense of inevitability, of being delivered to something that had been waiting for me.”

The following summer, he began taking dance classes; he ultimately won a scholarship to Juilliard. He later studied at the Martha Graham School and the Joffrey Ballet School, while supporting himself working at night as a go-go dancer and during the day as a carpenter. After he won a spot in the Harkness Ballet, he began finding opportunities to choreograph. In 1968, he started his own troupe.

Early on, Lubovitch’s work tended toward a minimalist formalism. He was the first of the major choreographers in the ’70s to use the music of Glass and Steve Reich. “There was a real spirit of newness and crossing some threshold,” he said. “It was a very heady period.”

But his work since the mid-’80s has tended toward a lush, unabashed romanticism. He is a master of flow, his aesthetic characterized by a fluid lyricism cast in rigorous formal structures and alluring spatial designs. He calls it “creating inevitable action,” an attempt to construct natural physical expression in which each movement seems born from the one preceding.

It is this distinctive style that lured modern dance superstar Clifton Brown to join the company last year after being a featured performer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for more than a decade. “I’d seen Lar’s work for years and always loved and appreciated it,” Brown said. “Not only was it beautiful and brilliantly constructed, but it looked like it felt so good to dance.”

The accessibility of Lubovitch’s work has made his company one of the most popular troupes in the country. But critics continue to be divided, some dismissing his choreography as favoring beauty over depth. Gary Dunning, Celebrity Series president and executive director, disagrees.

“I’ve heard it said, ‘Oh, he does “pretty” really well,’ which can come off as extremely condescending, with the implication there’s not a lot of intellectual depth,” said Dunning, a former executive director of American Ballet Theatre. “Personally, I think he’s quite cerebral, both in the

construction of the pieces and the analysis of the music. He has a big romantic heart and favors that big sweeping movement that he's known for, but I think of that as being responsive to the music. Lar is an intensely serious choreographer, and that's part of his personality: He's a deeply thoughtful guy."

Lubovitch says music is the inspiration and underlying groundwork for almost all of his pieces. But in the creation of his "Crisis Variations," it played a particularly unusual role. He choreographed and rehearsed that work to a recording of Liszt's monumental piano pieces, the "Transcendental Etudes." Then, just two days before the premiere, he replaced the Liszt with a commissioned suite for five instrumentalists, written by Yevgeniy Sharlat and based on the Liszt.

The process of springing the new music on the dancers at the last minute fed into the piece's underlying sense of looming catastrophe. "I wanted to create an authentic crisis," Lubovitch said, "and it was fairly catastrophic for the dancers, who were forced to confront this new reality, replacing something that was well known with something that was foreign and alienating."

Yet another step out of the comfort zone? "I don't know that it's that different," he demurred. "It was the next right piece for me to create at the time, an effort to expand my movement language and feeling. The motivation to create is curiosity that comes from a childlike place. I'd just as soon that little element didn't grow up."

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