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The choreographer Lar Lubovitch, who has been making dances for 50 years, is known for his musicality. Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times

Lar Lubovitch: His Palette? All Arms and Legs.

Mr. Lubovitch, who's been a choreographer for 50 years, talks about his work and learning from the best: Graham, Limón and the stage of a nightclub.

By MARINA HARSS APRIL 13, 2018

The choreographer Lar Lubovitch didn't discover dance until college, where he had gone in hopes of becoming a painter. The impulse to fill a canvas hasn't left him. When he describes making a dance, he does so not only in kinetic terms but through the prism of painting: "I'm reacting to the effect the music has on me and making that visual by painting the space and the time that the music is occupying," he said recently over lunch at a cafe near his Chelsea apartment

He has been painting with bodies for 50 years now, a milestone that he is celebrating [with a weeklong run at the Joyce](#), beginning April 17. The dances on view date back to his "Brahms Symphony," from 1985, a work he considers a watershed in his career. It vividly embodies the two qualities for which he has come to be known: lush musicality and unabashed emotionalism. (It will be performed by dancers from George Mason University, for whom he restaged it earlier this year.) For his own company, he has created a new dance, "Something About Night," which contains passages from previous works, many of them forgotten. "An anniversary gesture to myself," he called it. The Martha Graham Dance Company is performing "The Legend of Ten," from 2010, also to Brahms, during its current season at City Center.



Mr. Lubovitch's company rehearses his new work, "Something About Night," which contains passages from older pieces. Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times



The Lar Lubovitch Dance Company performed his “Men’s Stories” in 2005. Credit Erin Baiano for The New York Times

Mr. Lubovitch’s passion for movement was awakened during his freshman year at the University of Iowa, where he had enrolled as an aspiring gymnast and art student. It was there that Mr. Lubovitch, who was born and brought up in Chicago, saw his first dance performance, almost by chance. There was a sense of “instant recognition,” as he described it, a feeling that “this was what I was meant to do — art and gymnastics put together.” He gave up painting and gymnastics almost instantly.

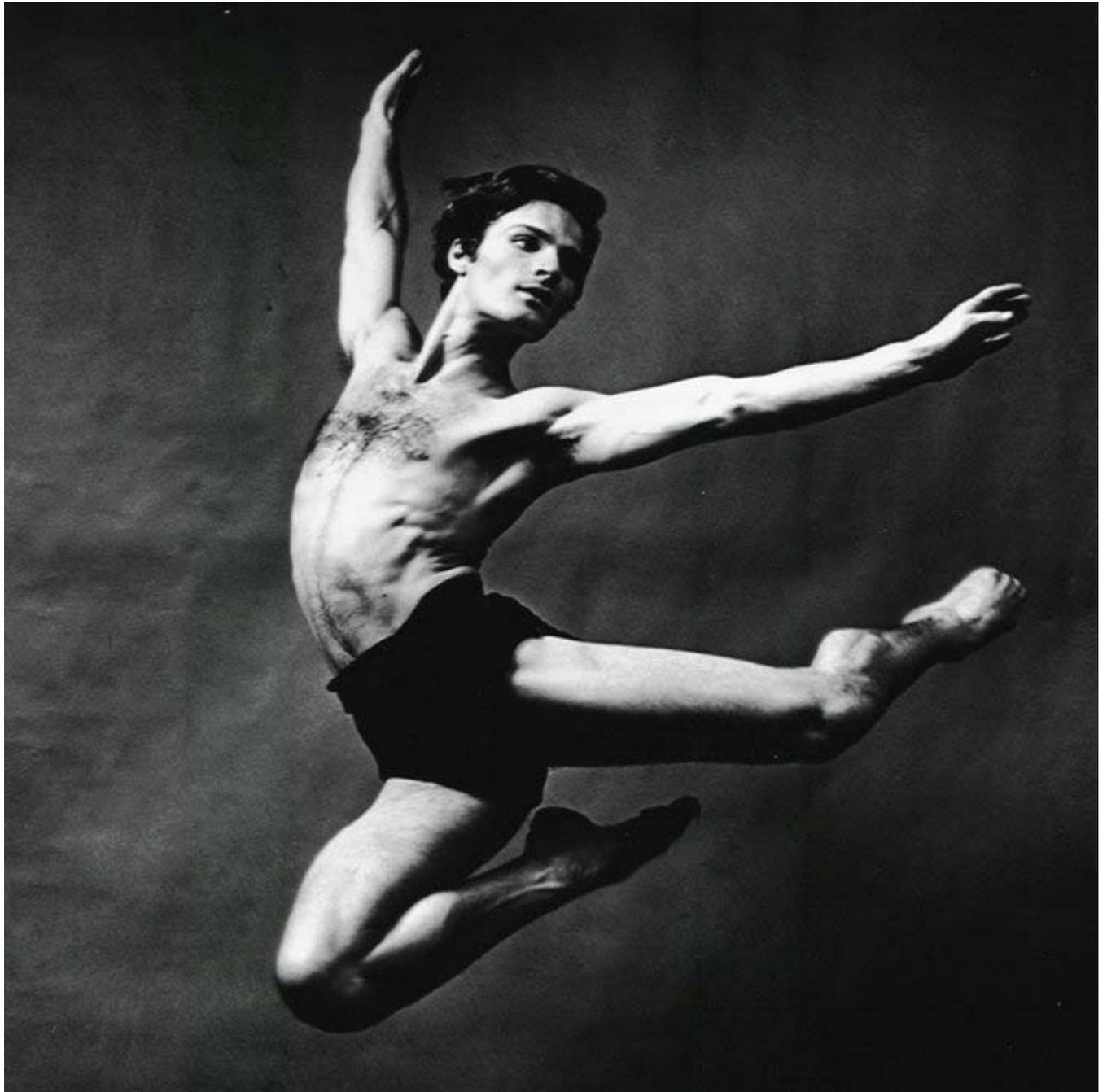
Mr. Lubovitch, 75, was lucky to discover dance when he did, in the early 1960s — the tail end of the heroic age of American modern dance. The summer after his freshman year (1962), he headed to the American Dance Festival “to find out what dance was.” His first class there was taught by Martha Graham; the second, by Alvin Ailey; and the third by José Limón. Graham and Limón were already titans of the modern dance world. And Ailey had created [his most famous work, “Revelations,”](#) two years earlier. “I was 19,” Mr. Lubovitch recalled, “and I had no idea who they were.” But he felt the power of their personalities and was moved by what he saw.

That fall, he left college and went to study dance at Juilliard. In addition to Graham and Limón, who were both on the faculty, he came into the orbit of the [British ballet choreographer Antony Tudor](#), whom he still considers one of his strongest influences. Tudor taught his students that physical skill and technique, however necessary, were merely tools for revealing deeper meaning, an idea that resonated with the young Lubovitch, as did Tudor’s emphasis on visualizing the music as he danced. “It was about *being* the music,” Mr. Lubovitch said.

His eclectic and compressed training — he spent only two years at Juilliard — also meant that he didn’t have time to absorb the enmity that simmered between modern

dance and ballet, two artistic camps that looked upon each other with suspicion. (To a certain extent, they still do.) “To me it was all dance,” he said. His own choreography embraces both the grace and line of ballet and the weight and purposefulness of modern dance. For him, there is no tension among abstraction, beauty and honest expression. (He has at times been criticized as sentimental, not that he minds, he said.) Nor has he shied away from making dance to “important” classical music, including compositions by Brahms, Schubert, Schumann and Mozart, composers often considered too monumental for dance.

The following are edited excerpts from a conversation looking back at his 50-year choreographic career.



Mr. Lubovitch in his dancing days. He came of dancing age in the early 1960s at the tail end of the heroic era in American modern dance. Credit Jack Mitchell

You discovered dance as a freshman at the University of Iowa. How did it happen?

Marsha Thayer, who was a choreographer, dancer and teacher, came into my gymnastics warm-up one day and asked if there were any men there who would like to lift some women. That was how she put it. It was intriguing enough. She took me to my first dance concert, and it happened to be the Limón Dance Company. I remember everything they performed: “There Is a Time,” “The Emperor Jones” and “[The Moor’s Pavane](#).”

Why has musical expression been so central to your idea of dance?

Music visualization sounds so corny now, but I do think it’s a bottom line of why people dance. Something about music filling our spirit and our having a physical reaction to it. But it’s spoken of less, and in certain circles it’s thought of as very old-fashioned.

Early on, in addition to dancing with [Donald McKayle](#), Pearl Lang, John Butler and various ballet companies, you were a go-go dancer at a nightclub in Greenwich Village. What was that like?

[Yes, Trude Heller’s](#). I wore white bell-bottoms and white go-go boots. In those days, go-go dancers stood on a ledge above the dance floor and demonstrated the latest dances. I was really good at it. Go-go dancing was where my spirit of dance came alive. I became more interested in choreographing because there was no other place I could dance where I felt that free.

Did you always think of yourself as a choreographer?

I made up my first dance when I was about 3. I first heard the word “choreography” as a child in a movie theater with my parents. It was a [movie with Danny Kaye and he was doing a parody of Martha Graham](#), and the name of the dance parody was “Choreography.” I asked my father, “What does that word mean?” And he said, “That’s the guy who makes up the steps.”

What qualities do you value in movement?

My style of movement is very fluid. I always knew that one step had to come out of another, with a sense of inevitability. All of the movement comes out of itself and delivers the next idea.

You’ve said that [“A Brahms Symphony” \(1985\) was a turning point for you](#). In what way?

Dance was exploding, and things were going in this much more conceptual direction. And I had to ask myself, was that really me or not? And I said, no, it isn’t me. So I went in the opposite direction and took this music by Brahms and did this very passionate, very sentimental, very physically expressive dance. It was a statement to myself and whoever was watching that this was my truth.

Some of your most well-received dances, like the duet from “Concerto Six Twenty-Two” (1986), [“Men’s Stories”](#) (2000) and [“Little Rhapsodies”](#) (2007), were made for men.

I like the way men dance, and I like women who dance like men. What I mean by that is that they have gravity and weight in their movement. So what I really like is a dancer who has gravity in both senses of the word: physical gravity and spiritual gravity.

You were also a pioneer in same-sex partnering. “Concerto Six Twenty-Two,” for example, contains a very moving pas de deux for two men. How did that come about?



Griff Braun and Jay Franke of the Lubovitch company, performing “Concerto Six Twenty-Two” in 2008. Credit Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

We were at the beginnings of what was clearly going to be a worldwide crisis of AIDS. I had lost a close friend already. I thought that one of the emerging themes was friendship. People, very young people who didn't expect to escort their friends to death, were helping people to die out of friendship. So I decided to do a dance that was basically about honoring friendship. The central duet was for two men, and the whole dance is about that. It resonated.

What is the idea behind your newest piece, “Something About Night”?

It's composed of fragments of many dances I've done over the years, little moments in duets and trios. But mainly, my motivation was that I want to be quiet. I think I value quiet now. And in this dance, I'm seeking a quieting of the mind.

You've also taken up curating dance; you started the Chicago Dancing Festival in 2006, and now you've begun a new festival, NY Quadrille, at the Joyce. How do you see the current state of dance?

There are a lot of people making really, really good, deep dance right now in spite of the economic climate. On the ballet stage as well. We've seen a plateau for some time, but a plateau is just the place you know someone will use as a springboard. It's inevitable. Art always moves forward.

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