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After 45 Years, Freedom Salted With Hindsight A Showcase for Lar Lubovitch at the Joyce



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The choreographer Lar Lubovitch, center, with Clifton Brown of his company, at a rehearsal of “Vez,” Mr. Lubovitch’s reinvention of his 1989 piece “Fandango.” The troupe’s 45th-anniversary season opens on Oct. 8 at the Joyce Theater.

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About 10 years ago, the choreographer Lar Lubovitch found himself watching a black-and-white [film](#) of an unusual dancer. It showed a slender young man curling up from the floor, then whirling around an empty room, as if discovering how his body moved for the first time.

That young man was Mr. Lubovitch, at 19 in his first choreographed work. The film had been discovered by one of his dancers.

“I didn’t know it existed,” Mr. Lubovitch, 70, said recently with a laugh. “But I was glad to find that I recognized the person who did that dance with no knowledge of how to make a dance, completely intuitively.”



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Clifton Brown and Nicole Corea of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company rehearsing “Vez” for the troupe’s retrospective season, opening next week at the Joyce.

Mr. Lubovitch isn’t ordinarily in the habit of looking back — “I think if I’ve had a philosophy, it’s that if nothing stops me, I’ll keep going,” he said — but at this point in his career, it’s difficult not to reflect. His troupe, the [Lar Lubovitch Dance Company](#), is celebrating its 45th anniversary, and on Oct. 8 it opens a [celebratory season](#) at the Joyce Theater in which Mr. Lubovitch will both revisit and reimagine past work.

“It would appear to be a very, very long time, though it feels like it happened very quickly,” he said of his career over coffee near his apartment in Chelsea. “I see I’ve made well over 100 dances, so I guess there’s some evidence I do know how, but I never remember — which is a very odd state of mind, and yet it is truly the state of mind I’m in when I make a dance.”

These are unusual words from a man whose work is often instantly recognizable for its blend of lyrical fluidity and artifice-free, grounded naturalism. “It’s a genre somewhat unto itself,” said Kevin McKenzie, the artistic director of American Ballet Theater, who has commissioned work from Mr. Lubovitch several times. “You can’t hit it and say, ‘That’s modern dance,’ or ‘That’s contemporary ballet.’ It’s Lar Lubovitch. You could do a blind taste test and know what it is.”

Mr. Lubovitch has never quite identified with any specific dance movement. “I was always sort of between worlds,” he said. “I’ve seen many impressive dance movements come and go, many dance statements that were very magnetic, very compelling and seductive. But I’ve always said to myself, ‘That’s wonderful to see, but it isn’t me.’”

Instead he has moved freely between performance spheres, choreographing not only for his dancers and for major ballet companies but also for theater (the original production of the Sondheim-Lapine musical “Into the Woods,” for example) and ice skating (for Dorothy Hamill and Peggy Fleming, among others).

“I did the best I could,” Mr. Lubovitch said of his work outside traditional dance. “But every time I worked out a dance, I realized how much more wonderful the world of dance was, and how much more authentic was my position there.”

Much of that feeling comes from his close bond with his dancers. A virtuosic group that has included choreographers like Mark Morris and Doug Varone, they are consistently praised in critiques of Mr. Lubovitch’s work. His pieces, though, have in recent years drawn some criticism for their emphasis on lush beauty. (In 2012, Claudia La Rocco [wrote](#) in The New York Times, “Mr. Lubovitch’s polite and handsome choreography often seems content to follow its musical cues rather than fully exert its own voice.”)

Mr. Lubovitch says he hasn’t read reviews in years, but he is clearly aware of them. “People have come not to trust things that are beautiful,” he said. “Precisely why, I couldn’t say. It’s not very modern to be drawn to beautiful forms and shapes, but it’s nonetheless what I do. Beauty exists because it has a place in this world. And it can be an antidote to irony, which I sometimes find a lie.”

Ella Baff, the executive director of the [Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival](#), which has frequently been a showcase for Mr. Lubovitch’s company over the years, points to the complexity behind the supposedly easy beauty of the choreographer’s work.

“He has a great deal of soul,” she said in a phone interview. “He can go from lyrical and romantic to these peculiar works with tensile strength. It’s a very hefty tool kit he brings to the art of making dances.”

In any case, Mr. Lubovitch generally does not obsess over his past repertory. “I generally lose interest in works I’ve done,” he said. “After a while, everything that’s wrong with them seems to loom much larger than anything right about them. I begin to see all the things that need correcting, so all these works seem more a record of my inability than touchstones of some great point in my career.”

The Joyce program, a veritable tour through Mr. Lubovitch’s history, is nonetheless an exception to his don’t-look-back rule. Among other works spanning his trajectory, his company will perform the [watershed duet](#) for two men from “Concerto Six Twenty-Two” (1986); a revival of the combative duet “The Time Before the Time After” (1971); and a reimagining of his popular 1989 piece “Fandango,” now titled “Vez.”

Creating “Vez” was, for Mr. Lubovitch, an exorcism of sorts. He said he had always been “extremely uncomfortable” with the piece, finding it “dated in its content.” What is more, he had “forever hated the music,” which subbed in Ravel’s “Bolero” for a commissioned score that fell through at the last minute.

“The only way I could face the piece again was to get rid of the music,” he said. By setting the work to a new score by [Randall Woolf](#), “I’ve had the chance to complete what I didn’t complete.”

Mr. Lubovitch remains remarkably active in rehearsals. His steps are perhaps a bit more halting, but his port de bras is elegant and open. On a recent afternoon at the New 42nd Street Studios near Times Square, he seemed like a one-man band, singing every note of the challenging string Stravinsky score to “The Time Before” (“It helps the dancers feel the music, and it’s less like marching,” he said) and often jumping up to accompany [Katarzyna Skarpetowska](#) while her actual partner, [Reed Luplau](#), intently watched.

Even as Mr. Lubovitch became engrossed in the rehearsal, his exchanges with the two dancers exuded a casual ease. Perhaps that’s what happens after 45 years of openings — he finds himself somewhat more removed from self-conscious anxiety.

“I feel like I’m seeing that 19-year-old again, and I want to be who he was when he made up a dance,” he said with a smile. “I want to be that free.”

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