

Tulsa Ballet takes on George Balanchine's innovative 'Four Temperaments'

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The interest dance companies have in performing the ballets of George Balanchine seems to come in cycles.

"It is a little odd how certain pieces become popular all of a sudden," said Victoria Simon, one of the people entrusted with setting Balanchine's ballets on other companies. "A few years ago, there were a lot of requests for 'Western Symphony,' 'Serenade' and 'Who Cares?' are done quite a bit.

"And this year, 'The Four Temperaments' is a ballet a lot of companies are wanting to do," she said.

Tulsa Ballet is one such company - this 1946 work, set to music by Paul Hindemith, is the starting point for its mixed-bill program, "Balanchine and Beyond."

The "and Beyond" in the title is a reference to the other two ballets to be presented - James Kudelka's "There, Below" and "Classical Symphony" by Yuri Possokhov - which take the neo-classicism Balanchine pioneered in new directions.

Balanchine is one of the greatest dance makers of the 20th century, whose ballets are among the most influential ever created. He worked with many of the world's greatest dancers and companies, from the Ballets Russes to New York City Ballet, where he established "The Nutcracker" as a holiday tradition.

He also has a connection to Tulsa Ballet's history. The company's founder, Roman Jasinski, was the star of a short-lived but influential company called Les Ballets 1933, and one of the pieces he choreographed for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, titled "Mozart Violin Concerto," was revived by Jasinski and Moscelyne Larkin in 1987.

The thing is, Simon pointed out, "The Four Temperaments" is an example of Balanchine creating a ballet that goes a bit beyond his own previous work.

"The quality of movement is so very different from what people think of as Balanchine," she said. "It has almost a contemporary dance feel to it. A lot of that is because of the music, which was composed by Paul Hindemith, and the way Balanchine responded to that music.

"It really is an innovative work, and a very important part of his growth as a choreographer," Simon said.

"The Four Temperaments" refers to the four fluids, or humors, that were thought to control human action and emotion. The four sections of the ballet reflect one of those temperaments: Melancholic, Sanguinic, Choleric and Phlegmatic.

And each requires specific things from the dancers performing them.

"The man in Melancholic, for example, needs to have a certain plasticity in how he moves," Simon said. "It's a very weighty role, so it's best to cast a dancer who is not too tall. On the other hand, the man in the Phlegmatic section needs to be tall, and to have a way of moving that suggests a kind of mystery.

"The couple in Sanguinic have to be able to deal with very technically demanding movement," Simon added, "while in Choleric, the female lead needs to be a powerhouse, someone who you believe can be the leader of everyone else on stage."