

Innocence and Experience: Tulsa Ballet's 2012-2013 Season Opener

Tulsa Dances

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Tulsa Ballet's 2012-2013 season opener is called *Age of Innocence*, but the innocence on offer in this triple bill is more radical purity than childlike naivete. The program sums up both what the company has been working towards for decades and what it aspires to, all in a single performance.

For almost 20 years, Artistic Director Marcello Angelini has brought to Tulsa works by some of the greatest innovators in the world of dance: George Balanchine, William Forsythe, Jiri Kylian, and many more. Their creations—as well as the brand new work being made each year in TB's own Studio K—expand ideas of what ballet can be and revitalize the art form from the inside out.

"It's important to me to extend the box [of how we understand ballet], not just for the dancers and the company, but for the community," Angelini said. "If we don't continue to challenge ourselves and our audience, the art form will die. The only way to stay fresh is to go a little bit out of our comfort zone."

TB's program this weekend builds upon and totally reimagines the classical tradition with three contemporary works: *Age of Innocence* by Edwaard Liang (who created last season's world premiere *Romeo and Juliet* for the company), *Slice to Sharp* by Boston Ballet's Jorma Elo, and *PreSentient* by the English contemporary dance phenom Wayne McGregor.

McGregor—whose choreographic credits include the film *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and Thom Yorke's dance in the video for Radiohead's "Lotus Flower," as well as stage work for the Royal Ballet and other companies around the globe—is perhaps the most famous dancemaker in the world today. His work explores both technology and vulnerability, voracious intellect and visceral sensuality.

PreSentient, created in 2002 for Ballet Rambert in England, has never been performed by any other company since its creation. McGregor's assistant Antoine Vereecken, who staged the piece at TB, said, "Wayne has never found the right company for this piece, but he certainly found it in Tulsa." This weekend's performances will mark its historic American premiere.

"It's an abstract piece of work, a visual response to a complex piece of music," Vereecken said. "Wayne describes it as movement spilling out of you. It's not like ballet where your limbs are moving around your torso. Here it's coming from the inside, your limbs move from your torso and your back. At the same time, there are a lot of really precise counts. The journey for everybody is finding the balance between counts and movement quality. It's a different approach for the dancers.

"But these dancers are so curious and hungry for new stuff, they're so experienced in doing such a wide repertory, they're very prepared and open when we throw the information at them."

"In this piece the music [Steve Reich's Triple Quartet] is very aggressive with lots of contrasts," Vereecken continued. "Some sections are slow and mellow and then you've got two group pieces which are very dense in structure and almost claustrophobic. The juxtapositions are fascinating."

"It's as close to modern dance as we have ever gone," Angelini said.

Slice to Sharp has a modern sensibility as well, exploring extremes of flexibility and quickness, but at the same time Angelini described it as "very classical. Created for New York City Ballet, the abstract work involves clean, fast movement and challenging pas de deux for eight dancers to music by Vivaldi. When the work was first presented in Tulsa last season, it was an instant audience favorite. "The bypass product of 'dancing on the edge of a scalpel' is the pure energy and joy this piece radiates," Angelini said.

Liang's *Age of Innocence*, created for the Joffrey Ballet and making its Oklahoma premiere this weekend, creates a completely different sort of world. Inspired by the novels of Jane Austen, it describes an era in which "a woman really had no voice of her own, and very limited contact with others, especially men," stager Suzanne Lopez explained. "Liang imagined how it must have felt to go to a ball or a dance, and see men for the first time, or touch a man's hand while dancing."

"He was also struck by the idea of arranged marriages," she said, "how sometimes it works out and you're really in love with your partner, but sometimes it doesn't work and you're possibly in love with someone else, or you're stuck in an abusive relationship and there's really no one you can turn to."

Set to music by Philip Glass and Thomas Newman, *Age of Innocence* brings 16 dancers into complex relationships. Two couples perform intense pas de deux, the first showing the thrill of a happy relationship, the second diving deep into a difficult marriage.

"This is definitely ballet, but it has to have all the expansiveness and breath of a contemporary piece," said Lopez. "Tulsa Ballet handles all of this with grace, and they have worked with [Liang] before, so that helps too."

"I think this ballet has struck a chord with audiences for many reasons," she continued. "First of all the title: if you hear 'Age of Innocence' you instantly picture this time period. And when you see the opening of the ballet, you can imagine the setting.

"But it's really a ballet about relationships, and anybody can relate to that. I think this ballet really tells a story without the need for pantomime. A person can really see what is happening through the choreography. And in this day and age of story-less ballets, it's refreshing to see emotion on stage."

Tulsa Ballet presents *Age of Innocence* September 14 and 15 at 8pm and September 16 at 3pm at the PAC. A memorial tribute to the late TB co-founder Moscelyne Larkin is scheduled for 7pm on September 16, also at the PAC. It will feature dancing by company artists, video footage of Miss Larkin, and a narrative of her life. Admission to the memorial is free to the public and tickets are available by calling the TB box office at 918-749-6030.