UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

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‘Distance and Desire’

Marking its 43rd year as UC Santa Barbara’s resident professional dance company, Santa Barbara Dance Theater (SBDT) continues to push the boundaries of movement and imagination.

In “Distance and Desire,” the company presents a program of new works by guest choreographers Josh Manculich and Yusha-Marie Sorzano and by Christopher Pilafian, the company’s artistic director. Also on the program is a guest performance by Doug Elkins’ New York City-based company, doug elkins choreography, etc., made possible by support from the Jody and John Arnhold Guest Artist Fund.

The curtain rises at 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 11, in the campus’s Hatlen Theater, with four more performances at 8 p.m. Jan. 12, 18 and 19, and at 2 p.m. Jan. 20.

“Santa Barbara Dance Theater is a professional company in that the core dancers work at a professional level of skill and artistry; and are paid,” said Pilafian. “They provide an example of excellence in creativity and performance that inspires our undergraduates. They demonstrate what is possible beyond graduation, reminding students that they can make a real contributions as artists who love this art form and want it to thrive.”

Pilafian likens the dance company to a laboratory that enables undergraduates to see how their area of study can be expressed and take shape in the world. Over the years, the company has hired many UC Santa Barbara alumni, including, most recently, Lauren Serrano, who joined SBDT in 2018. “She graduated from UC Santa

Barbara in 2011 and went on to earn a master's degree in dance education from Hunter College in New York City," explained Pilafian. "When she moved back to Santa Barbara, I invited her to work with us. She has very clearly been developing her potential to an extraordinary extent – and that's so much of what this field is about."

Originally founded as Repertory-West Dance Company in 1976 by UC Santa Barbara dance professor emerita Alice Condodina, SBDT provides a forum for faculty choreographers and dancers, as well as guest artists. The name changed in 1991 when Pilafian's predecessor, Jerry Pearson, became artistic director.

"I am committed to Santa Barbara Dance Theater continuing as a repertory company," said Pilafian. "I'm a choreographer and I love doing that work, but this laboratory is not about my work alone. Part of the joy of directing the company is curating — identifying and inviting artists who are a good fit for us; introducing our students to gifted choreographers, many of whom have been stellar performers and, in some cases, still are."

The company is small, consisting of four core dancers. But three years ago Pilafian initiated an apprenticeship program that has become part of the curriculum in the Department of Theater and Dance. "We have 10 undergraduate apprentices — four men and six women — who have been working with the company this year. They will perform with us this weekend and next," he said.

Other programs Pilafian has established serve the mission of the company, the theater and dance department and UC Santa Barbara as a whole by bringing in guest choreographers who are thriving in their fields and in their careers, such as Manculich and Sorzano. "We've brought mostly emerging choreographers, though some are already well known," he said, "and some are established masters in the field. We can offer younger artists opportunity to boost their careers. And they, in turn, boost the cultural richness of our community environment."

Of 'Distance and Desire'

With music spanning the 17th century through the 21st, SBDT's upcoming program features premieres of Sorzano's "To All Our Ends" and Manculich's "The Grey Area," as well as a company premier of his award-winning "Monologue" and Pilafian's "Chanson."

“Division, separation and isolation lead inexorably to a desire for connection,” Pilafian said, “and this theme drives the program.” In his new work, “The Grey Area,” for example, Manculich suggests a middle ground between poles where we can listen, be present with the less-than-obvious and, perhaps, learn to coexist. His solo “Monologue” considers an individual’s desire to communicate within isolation.

In “To All Our Ends,” Sorzano, a native of Trinidad, reflects on the temporary but traumatic separation from her work as she recovered from an injury. The all-female contemporary work explores how women balance nature and instinct within expectations of self and community. As a woman, a Caribbean immigrant and a classically trained dancer, Sorzano sought answers to this personal question after a major injury threatened her identity as a performing artist. The result is an expression of the internal battle waged to maintain control over one’s identity, but also a recognition that being a complete human is about finding harmony among our many selves and distinct voices.

Elkins’ “O, round desire” explores the connections that bind people, both emotionally and physically. Figures in continual orbit around one another are both drawn together and pulled apart in ethereal and intricately grounded configurations. Through experiences of solitude, passion, camaraderie, loss and longing, the piece asks, what unbreakable bonds remain?

Pilafian’s “Chanson,” which features a cast of 14 dancers, including 10 SBDT apprentices, shifts tones as it moves through a cycle of states and textures informed by the song “Dis, quand reviendras-tu,” written and originally performed by the French singer Barbara. Since the song’s debut in 1962, numerous musicians have offered their interpretations, which taken together demonstrate the broad range of artistic possibility.

Questions about “Distance and Desire” may be directed to Una Mladenovic at una@theaterdance.ucsb.edu. Additional information, including ticket purchase, may be found at www.sbdancetheater.org and at www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu.

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