

Renowned choreographer Shen Wei treated Durham residents, members of the Duke community and dance lovers from across the globe to a performance of his work June 18-20 at the Durham Performing Arts Center. Pilobolus will perform its two newest pieces-in addition to three classics-at DPAC in July.

American Dance Festival takes the stage

Pilobolus unveils two new pieces as Durham hosts the annual ADF showcase

By: Sanette Tanaka

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Although a summer staple at the American Dance Festival since 1973, the dance troupe Pilobolus is anything but commonplace. And this year, they are back to prove it again.

From performing in the 2007 Academy Awards to touring internationally, the group quickly established its reputation for pushing dances to the physical limit, seeking both to move and to shock.

"They're innovators," said Charles Reinhart, President and Director of ADF. "They put movement together in a way that no one else had done before."

Pilobolus combines elements of acrobatics, athleticism, flexibility and body exaggerations to create both serious and humorous pieces. To date, the group boasts a repertoire of more than 85 works, five of which will be performed at this year's festival. The lineup includes two ADF-commissioned world premieres: 2b by Israeli choreographers Avshalom Pollak and Inbal Pinto and Redline by Jonathon Wolken, Pilobolus' Development Director and co-founder. Redline features "pedal-to-the-metal" energy while 2b is more theatrical, he said.

The other three pieces are Pilobolus classics. Before 2b, Pollak and Pinto collaborated with the troupe to produce a dramatic dance called Rushes. Ocellus features a men's quartet engaged in almost-primal body contortions. Finally, the silent Walklyndon features six comedic jocks bopping about in vaudeville-style. According to Wolken, all the works, as varied as they are, are meant to incite the audience.

"We want people to have strong reactions and to say, 'I love it,' 'I hate it,' or 'it's disgusting,'" he said. "The day we have only one thing to say is a sad day, indeed."

Since its inception, Pilobolus has been marked by this tendency to provoke and stand out. Wolken and fellow Dartmouth students founded the group in 1971 after the chaotic '60s. As the meaning of the company's name suggests (Pilobolus is a type of fungus), none of the founders were especially trained in dance. Almost immediately, they diverged from the traditional art form.

"The whole glorious explosion of the sixties made them free to explore different directions that were not possible ten years ago," Reinhart said. "There is this modern dance tree-and Pilobolus is this glorious mushroom."

The synthesis of these forms is a major theme of this year's ADF. Contemporary styles and traditional ballet used to exist independently from one another, but recently that gap has shrunk "as evinced by the presence of choreographers like Shen Wei. Through panels, discussions and showcases, participants will weigh the pros and cons of the fusion.

Although Pilobolus' multifaceted performances fit especially well with this focus, the group has been a constant at ADF for years. Reinhart found that the company appealed to a wide range of audiences.

"It is a rare case when you believe in the talent and the public agrees with you almost immediately," he said.

Theresa Ai, Artistic Director of Duke Chinese Dance and a Duke senior, emphasized Pilobolus' easy popularity.

"The group has a universally appealing style," Ai said. "Both men and women, young and old, can appreciate body flexibility and athleticism, especially when the dance looks effortless. I've never heard of any other group like them."

For a troupe as constantly evolving as Pilobolus, Wolken believes that all fans will find something enthralling about this year's performances.

"I hope our works are wildly inventive, strangely innovative, pregnant with imagery, thought-provoking and a lot of fun," he said. "Come open-minded because you never know. You just never know."

Pilobolus will perform July 9-11 at 8 p.m. at the Durham Performing Arts Center. For ticketing information, visit the ADF Web site.

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