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ADF season will answer question: 'What is dance theater?'

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DURHAM -- The American Dance Festival's 77th season spotlighting dance theater could be memorable in more ways than one. Along with a number of dance theater works that include ADF-commissioned world

premieres by Mark Dendy and Martha Clarke, the festival also offers Duke University professor Ruth Day's free memory workshops for audiences.

Since this summer's festival explores the question, "What is dance theater?" both festival director Charles Reinhart and co-director Jodee Nimerichter offered their own interpretations.

Reinhart took a broad view of that question because, he noted, "There's no such thing as abstract dance." That's because dancers are people and the audience sees them as such and wonders about their relationship to each other especially in duets. "From that respect, everything is dance theater," Reinhart said in a recent interview.

Nimerichter got specific.

"Dance theater takes concert dance and theatrics and blends together to make something new," she said in a recent interview.

The ADF premiere of the 1999 "Oyster" by the Israeli couple Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak presents a prime example because the two choreographers come from different backgrounds: She from dance and he from theater, Nimerichter said. While the couple has collaborated with Pilobolus to create new work at ADF for the past two years, this season marks their company's ADF debut.

Even though Nimerichter saw "Oyster" in New York many years ago, it has stayed with her. "It triggers so many different emotions. It's magical, has fantasy dreamlike sequences. It's visually spectacular," she said. "You don't want it to end but you do want it to end because you want to rush out and tell everyone to see it."

This production features 21 performers as well as "huge sets, amazing costumes and wigs," she added.

Dendy and his company will offer a "reincarnation" of Martha Graham, Vaslav Nijinsky and other dance greats in his new work about a Southern boy (Dendy was born in Weaverville, N.C.), who moves to New York to become a dancer. This dance is a prequel to Dendy's 1999 "Dream Analysis," never performed at ADF. Nimerichter saw it in New York and considers it his masterwork. "He's a very good storyteller" and has a talent for characterization of people, she added.

The life of Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker movement, inspires the new work by Martha Clarke in collaboration with Academy Award-winning writer Alfred Uhry ("Driving Miss Daisy").

Birthday cakes and other images from dreams appear in Rosie Herrera's "Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret" performed at ADF last summer and brought back this season along with a new dance commissioned by ADF.

"That blew me away. The imagination was formidable," Reinhart said of Herrera's dance performed by ADF students last season. At times, the dance also made him "laugh and catch my laugh at the same time," he added.

Paul Taylor's work, that catches the light and dark sides of human nature, sometimes in the same dance, has a similar affect on Reinhart. While most would not classify his work as dance theater, Taylor has spoken of the theatrical aspects influenced by Martha Graham. The festival's celebration of Taylor's 80th birthday (July 29) includes an ADF-commissioned world premiere by Taylor and two free events: a screening of the documentary "Dancemaker" at 8 p.m. July 14 at White Lecture Hall and a discussion between Reinhart and Taylor at 8 a.m. July 16 in Nelson Music Room, both on Duke's East Campus. The two are longtime friends. When they spoke last week, Reinhart asked him, "Do you feel like it's an effort to choreograph a dance now?" And, Taylor replied, "Absolutely not. It excites me," Reinhart said in a recent interview.

The "Past/Forward" program offers some dance theater as well as another milestone. Performed by ADF students, this program features Jerome Robbins' 1995 "West Side Story Suite"; an ADF-commissioned world premiere by Tatiana Baganova; and a reconstruction of Merce Cunningham's 1983 "Inlets 2."

Cunningham died July 26, 2009, at age 90. Reinhart described his legacy as showing that "anything is possible" -- including that dance and music are separate entities even when occurring together. This and other innovations, prompted Reinhart to sum up Cunningham's contribution as "a huge step in the definition of modern dance, which is we don't know what it is."