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Birthday dances for Paul Taylor

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ADF presents dance programs in honor of choreographer

By SUSAN BROILI

Special to The Herald-Sun

After half a century of making dances, Paul Taylor still feels energized by the process.

"I love to make dances. I just love working with my dancers. It's fun," the choreographer said in a phone interview earlier this week from his New York City apartment.

In celebration of Taylor's 80th birthday (July 29), the American Dance Festival commissioned the world premiere, "Phantasmagoria," and presents vintage

Taylor dances in two different programs. The premiere, set to music by anonymous Renaissance composers, features a diverse cast of characters: Flemish villagers, East Indian Adam and Eve, Byzantine nun, Irish step dancer, Isadorables and Bowery bum.

The title, which means "a series of images that are dreamlike," describes the dance. "It's a real mix," Taylor said. The Isadorables section is a tribute to modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan, he added.

He listened to a lot of Renaissance music, including some by anonymous composers. He wound up using only music by the unknowns. "If I used all anonymous ones, it wouldn't take so much room on the program. I'm a practical guy," Taylor said.

ADF director Charles Reinhart agreed. "He's incredibly practical," said Reinhart, who once served as Taylor's manager and counts the choreographer as a longtime friend. In a recent interview at his ADF summer office, Reinhart also noted Taylor's "genius mind" that has created a number of masterpieces over the years. (The MacArthur "Genius" Award is among the many awards Taylor has garnered for his work.)

Reinhart named the 2002 "Promethean Fire," a response to 9/11, and the 2009 "Beloved Renegade," inspired by poet Walt Whitman, as recent Taylor masterworks.

He still remembers the first Taylor-made dance he saw in 1962 and that dance convinced him to take the job as Taylor's company manager. After climbing five or six flights of stairs to Taylor's studio, Reinhart took a seat on a low bench and watched dancers perform the new dance, "Aureole." "By the end of 'Aureole,' I had literally fallen off the bench and my mouth was gaping I was so blown away by the piece," Reinhart said.

He would be astounded by many Taylor dances in the coming years.

"Of all the great choreographers, there aren't many that have his variety of themes and that continues. Also, I've always liked the way he mixes the dark and light, happy and sad. In that respect, it's as close to life as anything I've seen. He is perhaps the greatest observer," Reinhart said.

From an early age, Taylor liked to watch nature especially during the summers at Edgewater Beach on the South River in Maryland. In his autobiography, "Private Domain," he writes of how he loved to watch sunsets from the top of steep stairs leading from the beach to his mother's cottage. "A wash of pink twilight turns cattails greener and shoulders of red-winged blackbirds brighter; the river darkens; a cove on the far side melts away; and when the last tiny edge of the sun blinks out, all Sunnyside seems to sigh," he writes.

His dance, the 1983 "Sunset," is included in tonight's ADF program.

In addition to being a choreographer and author, Taylor is an artist. An example of his work, a sketch of the costumes he designed for the 1991 "Fact and Fancy," to reggae and New Orleans jazz, appears on the ADF program and T-shirts this season. He also designed costumes for the 1975 "Runes," performed on the Saturday program. But, as always the case when he designs costumes -- something he rarely does these days -- the credit goes to George Tacet, Taylor's favorite childhood imaginary friend.

Taylor's keen interest in the world around him has informed and continues to inspire his dances.

The sight of a woman running to catch a bus in New York inspired his 1975 "Esplanade," on the ADF program today and Friday.

Insects figure prominently in two dances, "Counter Swarm" and "Insects and Heroes." He especially loves butterflies and planted flowers that attract them to his garden at his Long Island home. There, he also likes to watch ocean currents

and uses those patterns in some of his choreography, he told The Herald-Sun in a past interview.

Earlier this week, Taylor said, "I watch animals. I watch people. I watch bugs. I watch how water moves. I'm a spy."

For more dance news and reviews, see Susan Broili's blog at www.heraldsun.com.

Paul Taylor celebration

In celebration of Paul Taylor's 80th birthday on July 29, the American Dance Festival presents two different programs of the choreographer's work.

Today and Friday, the program features the 1983 "Sunset," world premiere of "Phantasmagoria" and 1975 "Esplanade."

The Saturday program features the 1988 "Brandenburgs," 1975 "Runes" and 1987 "SYZYGy."

Performances take place at 8 p.m. at the Durham Performing Arts Center. For tickets, call 919-668-2233 or visit www.dpacnc.com

Also, on Friday, a free, public "Conversation with Paul Taylor" takes place at 10 a.m. in Nelson Music Room, East Duke Building on Duke University's East Campus.

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