

The Gazette

Born to dance 'Born to Run:' CityDance at Strathmore

By Chris Slattery

The Gazette (Montgomery County, Maryland)

Wednesday, June 11, 2008

In the day they sweat it out, all right – but not on the streets, as Bruce Springsteen’s classic “Born To Run” puts it. No, the dancers in the CityDance Ensemble do most of their sweating in the rehearsal rooms of the Music Center at Strathmore. And when they perform their interpretation of the Boss’ anthem — choreographed by artistic director Paul Gordon Emerson — the company will evoke the misty beaches and jammed highways of Jersey right on the North Bethesda stage.

“Just because music is popular doesn’t mean it’s not good,” says Emerson, who plans to include “Born to Run” and four other contemporary pieces ranging from folk and blues to rock and roll in Friday’s dance concert “The Songwriters.”

“We thought about calling this “The Storytellers,”” he adds. “When you get a guy like Bruce Springsteen – he’s talking about things that are really timeless...and he’s not afraid to say, ‘I learned an incredible amount from Bo Diddley’ – who’s on my mind right now, obviously – ‘I learned a lot from Woody Guthrie.’”

And just as Springsteen mines the past for inspiration, CityDance reaches back to the early days of modern dance to create this concert, their season finale.

“‘Harmonica Breakdown’ is from 1938,” notes Emerson, referring to the modern dance created by Jane Dudley. “It was very much a social statement, a comment on race relations.

“Dudley was looking at society through a folk lens.”

The choreographer’s inspiration — some 70 years ago — came from harmonica player Sonny Terry. The blind blues musician’s 1938 “From Spirituals to Swing” performance at Carnegie Hall was one of the first times an African American had taken the stage there, and Dudley was able to translate the songwriter’s art into dance.

Putting that dance – and the others – on stage at Strathmore is the challenge.

“It’s both liberating and demanding when you go into a hall



of that level of elegance and grandeur,” Emerson admits. “It motivates you to bring your A+ game.

“In a great hall, you do great work.”

Sights and sounds

In a great hall, you also attract great performers. Emerson says that Strathmore’s “wow factor” caught the attention of jazz harmonicist Frederic Yonnet.

“Musicians walk in, look around and say, ‘Yeah, I’m in!’” says Emerson, who notes that the 2,000-seat hall feels much more intimate from the stage. “For Fred Yonnet, there’s no need for amplification, and for a musician, it doesn’t get any better than having people hear you as you.

“It gives the music a level of humanity you just don’t find.”

The humanity kicks in right away, with modern dance pioneer Sophie Maslow’s 1942 masterpiece “Folksay,” which features eight dancers, two guitarists and the traditional folk songs of Woody Guthrie – paired with a recitation of Carl Sandburg’s poem “The People, Yes.”

A bit of a departure – “We don’t usually work with words,” Emerson says – but one that has won CityDance an NEA American Masterpieces: Dance award. The grant for “Folksay” is “given to “support the reconstruction and

restaging of historically significant American dance work that will tour nationally.”

Emerson is happy the company has been recognized, but he’s even more pleased that they’ve been successful in pushing the envelope in terms of defining art.

“We’ve created this false taboo,” he says. “You know: ‘That’s not art!’

“But that’s foolishness. You limit yourself that way. Why not reflect on where you come from? You should dance to the things you believe in.”

Which leads to one of the concert’s most interesting pieces — Emerson calls it “the theoretical oddball” — called “On a Train Heading South.”

Choreographed in 2005 by Brenda Way, artistic director of the dance company ODC/San Francisco, “On a Train...” tackles global warming, and does so with the added drama of melting ice blocks suspended over the dancers.

Rock and roll

Where the past meets the future, though, is in the application of rock and roll to modern dance. Not all the music is live. “Born to Run” uses the title track from Springsteen’s career defining 1975 album because, really, how does anyone improve upon the Boss? “Falling,” on the other hand, features Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” as interpreted by the Stevie Wonder-loving Yonnet. The former drummer, who grew up in France, uses harmonica as a lead instrument. And that adds

to the theme of not-the-same-old-thing that CityDance takes so much care to cultivate.

“I’m jumping into things that are familiar and therefore comforting,” says Emerson, “to get to things that are unfamiliar and therefore challenging.

“I think art should be both.”

And so “Falling,” which the artistic director choreographed, uses the well-known rhythm and blues classic as a jumping off point that takes the viewer through a relationship portrayed in dance. And “Born to Run” turns the idea of a music video upside down, underpinning a song most boomers could recite by heart with modern dance choreography.

“We try to program around an idea, not a particular choreographer,” says Emerson. “And this is the first time we’ve gone after this particular concept.”

But the notion of a show built around the work of American songwriters is particularly appropriate for a dance company based at Strathmore, as CityDance has been there these past three years.

“This is a place that eats, breathes and sleeps music,” he says. “And we are a company that wants people to go home saying, ‘I never thought of it that way before.’”

The CityDance Ensemble concert “The Songwriters” starts at 8 p.m. Friday in the Music Center at Strathmore, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda. Tickets are \$25 and \$35. Call 301-581-5100 or visit www.strathmore.org.