

ENTERTAINMENT

O.C. project gives choreographers freedom, good dancers

BY JEAN LENIHAN / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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'NCI Discovery 2014'

Where: Irvine Barclay, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

How much: \$20-\$60

Tickets: 949-854-4607

Online: thebarclay.org

It's more than a resume builder. For each of the four choreographers who earned a coveted spot at the National Choreographers Initiative, this rare chance to work with a hand-picked group of professional ballet dancers to create whatever they wish, no parameters, is golden.

For dance audiences, who'll get one opportunity to witness a showing of these works at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on Saturday, it will be a fascinating snapshot of the early 21st century choreographic impulse – a dizzy moment when choreographers and dancers synthesize what had been vastly distinct and divided dance languages, from classical and neoclassical ballet to European-style dance-theater to contemporary techniques.

Now in its 11th year, NCI has earned a reputation for being both high-caliber and fruitful as well as a whole lot of fun. At UC Irvine's dance studios last weekend, NCI founder and director Molly Lynch, also a professor in the university's dance department, explained the independence that NCI grants these artists. "Here, they can create anything. It doesn't necessarily have to be a finished project. Generally choreographers will do something between 10 and 25 minutes. But it could be much less than that. It could be two pieces. They really have complete freedom with whatever they choose."

Competition for the three-week program has grown significantly; 60 choreographers applied this year for the four positions and 100 dancers auditioned for the 16 performance places. With the dancers, Lynch builds a group of one-half newbies and one-half previous-year attendees. That way there will be some unity and confidence coming out of the gate. This year's dancers hail from Sacramento Ballet, Ballet Austin and Los Angeles Ballet (home company of the terrific Dustin True), among others.

The choreographers' advance preparations for NCI were similar. Each brought a complete reading of their music, some sort of sketched concept and a few "emergency" dance phrases. Otherwise, they challenged themselves to create all their specific steps on and with the dancers.

Virtuosic retired New York City Ballet principal dancer Philip Neal, now a regular choreographer for Richmond Ballet, said he's using NCI to explore more contemporary movement. "I'm doing a lot of things I'd be reticent to try at a ballet company if I was commissioned and only had two weeks to work." Using Henryk Gorecki's "Concerto for Harpischord and String Orchestra," Neal wants his pointe-shoe ballet "to access visual things that I think are thrilling or terrifying. I want it to be this crazy amusement park ride where you're being turned upside down; I want to fill the stage geometrically with sharp diagonals and big huge circles."

Also working with pointe shoes, to a "minimalist electronic" score by Max Cooper, Barry Kerollis calls his work "still neo-classical ... but I'm trying to push myself more in the contemporary direction." Now a freelance dancer/choreographer, Kerollis cited his eight years of corps experience as a lynchpin for his richly patterned choreography. "Understanding how that group structure works and constantly having to work within that framework helps me move people around the stage. I love pattern work."

A friend advised Kerollis about NCI: "Make sure that your dancers are just as committed to what you're doing as you are. And I don't really know how to make that happen; I don't think it's always going to happen, but I feel that somehow, beautifully, my dancers are just as into it as I am ... maybe even helping to take me even further."

It's a thought shared by Garrett Smith, a frequent choreographer for Houston Ballet as well as a dancer with Norwegian National Ballet, who calls the dancers "phenomenal." A devotee of celebrated choreographer Jiri Kylian who creates quixotic Euro-style societies on stage, Smith is luxuriating in the opportunity to focus one whole movement of his new work on trio phrasings. "I love the idea of two men partnering one woman as if they're one body. I always do pieces where I put that concept in but I never get enough of it."

For choreographer and filmmaker Gabrielle Lamb, a former soloist at Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal, a collaborative process was already her staple. (And a winning one: she's trumped competitions, won numerous awards and has set works on Dance Theatre of Harlem, Milwaukee Ballet and more.) Generally she does not demonstrate moves in the studio. Instead, she throws out suggestions to the dancer as they work with her Erik Satie score. "Touch the floor now," she coos. "How about bouncing back a little?" "Try flossing!"

"Generating movement that doesn't rely on traditional vocabulary – that's very important to me," Lamb explained. She believes collaboration with dancers benefits both choreography and performance. "If the choreographer is sitting on the floor giving verbal directions and the dancers are upright and moving, it gives them, psychologically, a certain amount of power." And in performance, "Everyone has their own coordination and people usually look better doing their own coordination."

For Lamb, NCI is simply a chance to work more slowly, and not have to deliver solely her trademark humor. "I'm not pushing speed at all, I'm just going to see what happens. I'm letting it be a little darker than it sometimes is."

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