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Choreography Gives ‘An American in Paris’ Legs

By Emily Van Cleve
For the Journal

Jefferson Baum was breathing easy as he prepared more than two dozen student dancers to present “Preludes Plus One” during the National Dance Institute-New Mexico’s School for the Performing Arts’ upcoming show “An American in Paris.” Although his original choreography is challenging, he’s confident that the students will pull it off.

“Ninety percent of these kids have performed in front of an audience, so I know they won’t freeze up,” he said at NDI-NM’s Alto Street dance studio. “They may be young, but they’ve been exposed to a lot of movement and to dancing for other people.”

“Preludes Plus One” is one of the three new dance pieces featured in “An American in Paris,” which opens at the NDI-NM Dance Barns tonight. The choreography is set to music by American composer George Gershwin and performed on the piano by John Rangel. “I made it an ensemble work, but there are sections that focus on three couples dancing,” said Baum, the school’s dance director.

The focal point of the program is the piece “An American in Paris,” which was choreographed by NDI-NM’s artistic director Russell Baker to be a hybrid of ballet and jitterbug danced to music by Gershwin. When Baker was 24 years old, he danced a version of the 18-minute ballet that was part of the 1951 movie “An American in Paris” with the Kansas City Ballet. NDI-NM’s rendition, he says, is more similar to the one he presented in Kansas City than the one danced by Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron in the movie.

I made this dance about a day in the life of a young American man in Paris at the end of World War II,” Baker explained. “It’s his first day as a civilian, and he’s looking at the world with fresh eyes. The streets of Paris are bustling with lots of people and cars that are honking their horns. A local poster girl wandering on the street lures the young man into a nearby dance hall, much to the dismay of her boyfriend, the boxer. A fight scene breaks out.”

Since creating the right atmosphere is an important part of the piece, Baker has incorporated plenty of props and costumes into the show. A small model of the Eiffel Tower looms in the background.

The show’s opening dance is a short piece choreographed by NDI founder Jacques d’Amboise for Company Xcel, a group of NDI-NM’s most advanced dancers. “Tamara’s Dance” is an homage to a former NDI teacher who died a number of years ago in a tragic accident. The dance’s Balinese and hip-hop movements are performed to original sounds composed by jazz pianist Bert Dalton and played by his trio.

D'Amboise will host a 30-minute discussion of the evening's dances and a question and answer session before tonight's performance.