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JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN
SEEING THINGS

Ballet teams up with play, exhibit, more for message

Inevitably, when Stephen Mills introduces a discussion about "Light: The Holocaust & Humanity Project," his critically acclaimed ballet first presented in 2005, he says he's greeted by the same question: You made a ballet about the Holocaust?

"It's not a dance about the Holocaust, specifically," said Mills, the artistic director of Ballet Austin. "That would be so offensive of me to presume I can tell that story."

Ballet Austin is remounting "Light" at the Long Center for the Performing Arts March 23-25.

Along with it comes three months of community programming, a vast cooperative effort between Ballet Austin and more than 40 organizations to foster a citywide discussion on promoting human rights and raising awareness about hate, bigotry and bullying.

Last week, Mayor Lee Leffingwell, Police Chief Art Acevedo and representatives of Ballet Austin announced the project at a press conference at City Hall.

Leffingwell, Acevedo and Austin school district Superintendent Meria Carstarphen are serving as honorary chairs of the event. Anti-Defamation League Austin, the City of Austin, KLRU-TV, the Police Department and the school district are among the lead collaborators.

When "Light" debuted seven years ago, Mills and other Ballet Austin leaders never intended for the dance performance to exist on its own without a roster of adjunct opportunities for education and discussion about the importance of human rights.

"We always imagined it being used as a convener of conversation, and any artist hopes that what they create has a life beyond its creation," Mills said. "'Light' became a huge conversation. I don't think we understood at the time how large that conversation could be and still is."

This presentation of the "Light" project is deliberately framed by very symbolic holidays. It began Monday — Martin Luther King Jr. Day — and continues through April 19, which is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Among other events are an exhibit at St. Edward's University of paintings by Robert Shetterly, "Americans Who Tell the Truth." Zach Theatre is dovetailing its production "The Laramie Project," a two-part documentary play based on the events surrounding the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming. And on March 20, Holocaust survivor and Presidential Medal of Freedom winner Gerda Weissman Klein will be interviewed live by Dan

See **VAN RYZIN, F5**

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MUSIC

Craig Finn, frontman for the Hold Steady, took to Austin to record and promote an album that's unmistakably his



Jeremy Balderson

The Hold Steady's frontman, Craig Finn, recorded his solo album, 'Clear Heart Full Eyes,' in Austin.

STEADY SOLO

By Peter Mongillo

AMERICAN-STATESMAN MUSIC WRITER

In December, Craig Finn, frontman for well-known Brooklyn rock band the Hold Steady, took the stage at downtown hot dog joint Frank as a warm-up for a tour to promote his new solo album, "Clear Heart Full Eyes," which is out Tuesday and was recorded in Austin with producer Mike McCarthy and a group of Austin musicians.

Aside from the fairly small, unusual venue (though the restaurant has been offering a steady stream of live music), the setup wasn't all that different from a show by Finn's other band: Men outnumbered women by at least 2-to-1, and a healthy amount of beer and booze was consumed.

Finn has never been outspoken in his appearance, and that night was no different, as he led the band in a plain blue shirt and rectangular



SHORE FIRE MEDIA

Craig Finn's solo album, 'Clear Heart Full Eyes,' comes out Tuesday. Finn used Austin musicians in it.

glasses. As always, he gestured a lot as he sang, telling stories with his hands. He chatted between songs.

Though the songs were unmistakably Finn's — on the long side, full

of words and narrative, references to Jesus and Catholicism (though not nearly as many as usual), dead rock stars and self-destructive behavior (but, again, not quite as much) — they were different than the Hold Steady's material. Finn sang more first- and second-person pronouns. If the Hold Steady's songs unfold like novels, with recurring characters negotiating the ups and (mostly) downs of adolescence, these songs felt more like short stories.

The biggest difference, however, was the sound, a considerably more reined-in version of the raucous, over-the-top rock 'n' roll that made the Hold Steady pretty famous over the past eight or so years.

On an uncharacteristically freezing Austin day that same week, Finn joked about the weather as he talked about the new album outside

See **SOLO, F6**



The Hold Steady's Craig Finn sings at Fun Fun Fun Fest held at Waterloo Park in November 2010.

Rodolfo Gonzalez
2010 AMERICAN-STATESMAN



Amitava Sarkar

'Light: The Holocaust & Humanity Project' a ballet by Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin, Long Center for the Performing Arts from March 23-25.

VAN RYZIN: Main inspiration for ballet from Texas woman's story

Continued from F1

Rather at ACL Live as part of KLRU-TV's Engaging Speaker Series

"I wish that everyone loved dance," Mills said. "But I want to have as many opportunities as possible for people to engage in this topic. The important part is the learning."

Mills' 75-minute one-act ballet is set to the music of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Arvo Part and Evelyn Glennie.

Before creating "Light," Mills traveled to Eastern Europe to visit Holocaust sites, including several concentration camps. He also went to Israel to talk to members of the Israeli dance community. And he interviewed about a dozen Holocaust survivors in the United States, Europe and Israel.

One of those survivors was 93-year-old Polish-born Naomi Warren of Houston, who survived both the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen camps. Warren's story served as

More information

For a complete list of programs associated with 'Light: The Holocaust & Humanity Project,' see www.balletaustin.org/light.

Mills' main inspiration for "Light."

"After I met Naomi, I didn't think about anything in the same way," Mills said.

Warren's story as adapted into a ballet serves as leverage for Mills and others to urge a discussion about hate, intolerance and bigotry — topics Mills said need to be kept in the fore.

The tone of public and political discourse is at a particularly hateful level these days, Mills said. And the effects of bullying and bigotry have escalated with the rise of the Internet with particularly tragic consequences.

The rise of teen suicide — particularly among gay teens — is fueled by a kind

of hate familiar to Mills. Memories of being bullied in high school still cast a dark cloud in mind of the 51-year-old choreographer.

"My story isn't an unusual story," Mills said. "It happens to gay teens constantly."

In January, Mills took the Ballet Austin dancers to the Holocaust Museum Houston. Mills spent a considerable amount of time doing research at the institution when he created "Light," and many of the dancers who will be performing in March were not a part of the first production.

Despite health issues, Warren rallied to meet with Mills and the dancers at the museum and told her story of hope, survival and light.

"I think Holocaust education is really important," Mills said. "To me the past is present; it's always living, and we have to be mindful of it."

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