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PBT dancers begin ‘unprecedented’ preparation for Shoa-themed ballet

by Toby Tabachnick

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A playbill for “Light” the Holocaust-themed ballet to be performed by the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre. (Editor’s note: This is the first in an ongoing series of stories about “Light” leading up to its opening on Nov. 12 at the Byham Theater.)

An extraordinary ballet requires extraordinary preparation.

For “Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project,” that preparation began last Monday. Dancers with the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre became an audience, viewing “Genocide,” the 1982 Academy Award winner for best documentary, produced by the Simon Wisenthal Center, and listening to Holocaust survivor Sam

Weinreb recount his horrific experiences in Nazi-occupied Europe.

On Tuesday, all of the dancers, as well as the artistic and administrative staff of the PBT, boarded a plane to Washington, D.C., to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Rehearsals for “Light,” which portrays one survivor’s journey through imprisonment, marginalization, discrimination and survival, won’t begin until mid-October. But, PBT’s artistic director, Terrence Orr, knows that his dancers need to understand and feel the enormity of the human tragedy of the Holocaust in order to deliver meaningful performances.

“I felt this was an extremely important project,” Orr said. “Art is responsible for the education of humanity. ... Because of the education that’s going to happen in the audience, I wanted to make sure that the dancers had the proper background.”

The five performances of “Light,” the centerpiece of PBT’s 40th anniversary season, are scheduled for the week of Kristallnacht, Nov. 12 to 15, at the Byham Theater. But with a wide range of community events scheduled to begin in early October, the project is far more than just a ballet.

“Light” was created by Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin, in response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Contemplating the individual’s responsibility to promote social justice, Mills turned his focus to creating a ballet that explored the Holocaust.

To research the piece, Mills spoke with survivors and spent time in Eastern Europe, visiting seven concentration camps. The resulting ballet premiered in Austin in 2005, along with a slate of community-wide educational and artistic programs.

Likewise, PBT is partnering with The Holocaust Center of the United Jewish Federation, along with a host of other local organizations, to open up a community dialogue about the impact of the Holocaust, and of genocide, according to Orr, who was instrumental in bringing the project to Pittsburgh.

“Cookie Ruiz, the executive director of the Austin Ballet, told me how this was one of the most captivating ballets, and how it pulled the whole community together,” Orr said. “But I didn’t know if we could really do this.”

But Hal Waldman, a PBT board member who also chairs Holocaust Center Commission, thought it was a terrific idea.

“He took it on,” Orr said. “He did a bit of fundraising to get it done.”

Eddie Naveh, director of the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh, said that ballet teaches tolerance and respect.

“I believe as an educator, one of the finest ways to teach a subject is through the arts,” Naveh told the dancers and PBT staff prior to introducing the “Genocide” documentary. “Using the arts to teach about the Holocaust touches us in a way that the historical record cannot do.”

All eyes were glued to the screen as the 83-minute film depicted images of Nazi brutality, and the narration portrayed first-hand accounts of individuals’ stories. For some of the PBT dancers, it was one of their first exposures to this period of human history, Orr said.

Following the film, Holocaust survivor Weinreb told his own story.

Weinreb remembered how, just two weeks shy of his bar mitzva, he returned to his home in a Czech town one evening to find that his parents and three siblings had all been taken away.

“That was the last time I ever saw or spoke to any member of my family,” Weinreb said. He recalled in detail of the events that followed: living on the streets alone in Hungary, imprisonment, regular beatings by Hungarian police, and, finally, deportation on a cattle car to Auschwitz.

“It is extremely difficult to describe to you the difficult conditions on that trip,” Weinreb told the dancers. “We had no food, no water, no bathrooms. There were people who didn’t stop crying, and people who didn’t stop praying. There were other people who were silent the entire time.”

Weinreb spoke about the degradation and the starvation at Auschwitz, and witnessing the murders of innocents “for no reason at all.”

But telling of his ultimate escape during a Death March in 1944, as well as his subsequent immigration to America and marriage to his wife of 59 years, Weinreb left the audience with a sense of optimism.

Several dancers were visibly moved by his story.

“I’ve seen the [Holocaust] movies. I’ve cried at the movies,” PBT ballet master Steven Annegarn said to Weinreb. “But I just want to say that hearing you speak is completely different. It’s just amazing to have you in the room.”

Principal dancer Julia Erickson, who is in her ninth season at PBT, said that this type of educational preparation for a ballet is “totally unprecedented.”

“It’s important to me to learn about the Holocaust as much as I can before we embark on this performance project,” she said. “There is suffering everywhere, and we can all identify with that.”

“Hearing Sam speak was so moving,” she continued. “Just hearing about what he had to go through at such a young age. And he was just one of millions. But it ultimately gives you hope for the human spirit.”

(Toby Tabachnick can be reached at tobytabachnick@thejewishchronicle.net)

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