

'Light' ballet traces the journey of Holocaust victim

Dance preview

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By Sara Bauknecht, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

Erin Halloran and Alejandro Diaz rehearse "Light" at the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre studio.

The centerpiece of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's 40th anniversary season is no classic about kings, queens or sugarplum fairies.

Instead, PBT has selected "Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project" to mark the 71st anniversary of Kristallnacht, the "night of broken glass," considered by many to be the beginning of the Holocaust. The production runs tomorrow through Sunday at the Byham Theater, Downtown.

Is it possible to communicate the atrocities of the Holocaust through the elegance of ballet? Stephen Mills thinks it is.

"Body language says a lot if people are open to hearing it," said Mills, choreographer of "Light" and artistic director of Texas-based Ballet Austin.

Mills' company debuted "Light" in 2005, but the work traces its roots to the days after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"I was in the studio rehearsing with my company. ... I began to feel a real sense that perhaps what I was working on wasn't as significant as what I could be working on," he said. "I began a sort of personal search to try to find a way to make sense of it."

Mary Lee Webeck, a Ballet Austin patron and director of education at Holocaust Museum Houston, suggested creating a ballet about the Holocaust and introduced Mills to Naomi Warren, a Holocaust survivor for whom the museum's Warren

'Light/The Holocaust and Humanity Project'

- **Where:** Byham Theater, Downtown.
 - **When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.
 - **Tickets:** \$20.50-\$88.50; call 412-456-6666 or www.pgharts.org
 - **Information:** For a list of pre- and post-performance talks, visit www.pbt.org/
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Fellowship is named. Warren shared with Mills details of her time in three concentration camps, including Auschwitz in Poland, where her mother and younger sister died in the gas chambers.

"After two hours with Naomi, it was clear that I was going to do this piece," Mills said.

"Light" is a 75-minute reflection on Warren's path from normalcy to genocide to redemption. The ballet is divided into five sections that feature contemporary choreography and minimal scenery -- but no swastikas, boxcars or Nazis.

"I didn't want to put any focus on the aggressors. I wanted to put the focus on the victims," Mills said. "When the aggression starts, it is really just this light emanating from one side of the stage that becomes brighter and brighter."

Preparing for "Light" led Mills on a nearly two-year journey to learn about this period of history by speaking with a number of Holocaust survivors, touring seven camps and visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Israel.

"If I was going to take this on, I was going to have to come with as much information as humanly possible," he said.

PBT reignited this journey for Mills when it contacted him more than a year ago about becoming the second company to stage the ballet. PBT's interest in "Light" evolved from a conversation between Hal Waldman, PBT executive board member, and PBT executive director Harris Ferris after a board meeting.

PBT originally planned to stage "Light" as a one-time performance outside the company's regular season.

"The more we started getting into it, the more excited we got about the project," Waldman said.

This excitement caused the one-time engagement to spiral into the highlight of PBT's season and a month-long effort to educate the community about the Holocaust. PBT worked with the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh and other local institutions to organize events ranging from scholarly lectures to Hans Krasa's one-act children's opera "Brundibar (Bumblebee)."

"It's a cornucopia, if you will, of different explorations of the Holocaust in different artistic dimensions," said Edie Naveh, director of the UJF's Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh.

Mills, who worked with a number of Texas-based organizations in a similar way when his company performed "Light," considers the community outreach a vital component of the ballet.

Since late August, PBT's dancers also have participated in events to educate themselves about the Holocaust. A tour of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., a screening of Arnold Schwartzman's 1982 documentary "Genocide," and visits with Holocaust survivors in D.C. and Pittsburgh helped the dancers prepare to handle the ballet's subject matter.

"It definitely was eye-opening," said Eva Trapp, PBT soloist. "I had never been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, so it was a really great experience to be able to see that firsthand and to be able to put yourself in that situation -- not that you can ever completely grasp what these people went through."

Mills believes the Holocaust still has important lessons to teach.

"There are constantly situations where there is a victim, a perpetrator and a bystander, and sometimes there's a rescuer," he said. "We have to be brave enough to be a rescuer, and that's what I hope people take away from 'Light.' "

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