



Ballet Austin brings out the beast in 'Beauty'

ARTS & THEATER By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - American-Statesman Staff



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Highlights

Ballet Austin received a \$125,000 commission from 3M to create "Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast."

Ballet Austin's Stephen Mills premieres his original version of "Beauty and the Beast."

The film noir-inspired ballet features an electro-acoustic score by Graham Reynolds

Belle is not in pointe shoes.

Stephen Mills' latest ballet may be based on one of the most romanticized fairy tales all times, "Beauty and the Beast." But the Ballet Austin artistic director has opted not to have his Belle (the role is shared by Michelle Thompson and Aara Krumpke) in ballet's most quintessential symbol of female elegance and beauty. Rather, Belle dances in ballet slippers.

It's all part of Mills' creative strategy of reimagining a romantic fairy tale along contemporary — and very adult — lines.

Opening Friday at the Long Center for the Performing Arts, "Belle Redux: A

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About the Author



JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin is the arts critic for the Austin American-Statesman



Tale of Beauty and the Beast” is not a child’s fairy tale.

There’s no scary, hairy-faced beast transformed, no perfect happily-ever-after.



Ballet Austin dancers rehearse Stephen Mills’ new work “Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast.” Michelle Thompson is carried ... [Read More](#)

Mills’ version is dark, passionate and psychologically complicated, with choreography rooted in modern classical ballet but with gestures and movements that at times feel almost feral.

“(This) Belle has animalistic qualities just like the Beast,” Mills says during a recent rehearsal. “We all have animalistic qualities. And we all know to some extent what

it is to feel marked as an outsider like the Beast is.

“After all, who gets to defines beauty in the contemporary world? It’s a troublesome question.”



Costume design by Michael Raiford for the character of “Evil” in Ballet Austin’s “Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty & the ... [Read More](#)

“Belle Redux” is one of Mills’ most ambitious projects and comes as a result of a rare occurrence on the Austin arts landscape: a corporate commission.

And it started with another original production of his: Mills’ ingenious 2011 production of “The Magic Flute,” a balletic re-interpretation of Mozart’s opera that used Cambodian shadow puppetry techniques and eccentric costumes.

At the time, 3M executive Joaquin Delgado was a Ballet Austin board member. (Delgado has since relocated to 3M headquarters in St. Paul, Minn). Intrigued by creation — particularly how

Mills modernized Mozart’s traditional tale — Delgado proposed a challenge to the dancemaker: Create a new ballet that illuminated the concept of

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innovation.



Stephen Mills rehearses Ballet Austin dancers for his latest work "Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast."

And 3M offered something else: A \$125,000 donation to support the creation of a new ballet, a rare artistic commission from an Austin corporation.

Mills tapped the story of "Beauty and the Beast" as his artistic fodder.

"Innovation isn't the same as invention," Mills says.
 "Innovation is taking something that already exists

to make a newer, updated version."

Variants of the fairy tale exist in many cultures, but the one known by most today has its origins in a novella, "La Belle et la Bête," penned in 1740 by French writer Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve. Intended for an adult audience, Villeneuve's version contains more of the backstory of the Beast and of Belle and is less a morality tale than a story of romantic love.

Many subsequent versions, however, retold it as a children's story. And of course, in 1991, Walt Disney Pictures released its family-friendly animated musical version complete with dancing teapots. Disney's Broadway musical version of the film further cemented the story as a benign entertainment.

But Mills found inspiration in a decidedly darker variation — French artist Jean Cocteau's 1946 film, also titled "La Belle et la Bête." With a score by Georges Auric, the black-and-white silent movie is rich with film noir style, psychological complexities and surrealist episodes filmed with then-adventurous special effects.

Mills considered Philip Glass' 1991 opera version of Cocteau's film as a model, too. The American composer — whose music Mills frequently sets many of his ballets to — wrote an operatic score for the film, replacing Auric's wordless version and giving voice to the characters but retaining the unsettling psychological tensions so crucial to Cocteau's vision.

"Originally the lessons in 'Belle' are really more adult," Mills says. "It's not a story that happens to children or even involves children.

"The symbolism of the beast is simply someone who is marked as different in some way. And so the question is, can someone really come along and love you so much that that love can take the mark away?"

Mills tapped two Austin-based artistic collaborators with whom he had worked before: composer Graham Reynolds and designer Michael Raiford.

Reynolds, who counts dozens of theatrical scores to his credit, collaborated with Mills on several productions, most notably 2008's "Cult of Color (A Call to Color)," the wildly original and critically successful ballet that used the vivid, mythological art of Trenton Doyle Hancock. And the composer's work with filmmaker Richard Linklater — Reynolds wrote the scores for "Bernie," "A Scanner Darkly" and "Before Midnight" — have brought national attention to Reynolds.

"Graham knows film music, and I wanted music that was very filmic sounding," says Mills. "And I gave him one word to start with: Hitchcock."

Reynolds' 80-minute score combines two different musical palettes: one inspired by a traditional string orchestra-heavy movie soundtrack sound, the other using sounds created in digital composing software, including electronic noises and effects, looping sequences, and heavily distorted electric guitar tracks.

Reynolds spent months in the studio tweaking the many sonic layers of the percussive yet lyric electro-acoustic score.

For his part, designer Raiford — who created the sets for "The Magic Flute" production that ignited 3M's interest — channeled the shadow-filled surreal visuals of Cocteau's film when conceiving the sets, which have an entirely black-and-white palette.

Two LED screens will be used for film segments that will augment the stark stage, which is framed by graffiti-covered scrim.

And for costumes, Mills and Raiford drew inspiration from the fantastical forms and urban edginess of the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen, with a neutral color scheme offset by splashes of red.

Again, it's all part of a strategy to create a "Beauty and the Beast" that diverges from popular, benign interpretations and returns to the shadowy ambiguities of the original fable.

"I'm not really intent on telling a direct narrative," says Mills. "I'm more interested in leaving the audience with a series of metaphors that they'll piece together for themselves."

"Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast"

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: Long Center, 701 W. Riverside Drive

Cost: \$15-\$84

Information: 512-476-2163. www.balletaustin.org

To listen to tracks from Graham Reynolds' score, go to www.austin360.com/arts

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