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Theater & Dance

A balletic 'Hamlet' takes one giant leap from Texas to Washington

By **Rebecca Ritzel** March 19

Leave it to Austin, proud purveyor of indie rock and artsy ideas, to become the country's leading exporter of literary story ballets.

"Hamlet" is the third Shakespearean ballet that Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin, has brought to Washington in just over 10 years. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Taming of the Shrew" were performed by his company, but "Hamlet" will be danced by the Washington Ballet, the seventh troupe to perform his popular adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy. (The production will run March 23 through April 3 at the Kennedy Center.)

"It has had a very long shelf life, and I'm very happy about that," Mills said from Chicago last week. He was, conveniently, escaping the crowds at the annual South by Southwest festival in Austin to audition dancers in the Midwest. Mills created "Hamlet" for the Austin Ballet in 2000; the most recent company to remount it was Germany's Augsburg Ballet. He considers himself fortunate to lead a company that commissions so many full-length narrative ballets, as opposed to shorter abstract works, which are generally much less costly.

Adapting Shakespeare appeals to Mills because the stories are familiar to audiences yet are not the same old prince-meets-princess-in-peril plots. "I'm very interested in

narrative work,” he said. “I’ve built so many that we are able to send ‘Hamlet’ on the road.”

At the Washington Ballet, outgoing Artistic Director Septime Webre has turned to American literature for inspiration, adapting “The Great Gatsby,” “The Sun Also Rises” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” for the stage. Using Shakespeare as a source is a more global trend. The National Ballet of Canada brought Christopher Wheeldon’s adaptation of “The Winter’s Tale” to the Kennedy Center in January, and Arlington’s Synetic Theater is well known for its wordless movement versions of Shakespeare’s plays.

“Demographically, people’s need and interest in story is changing,” Mills said. “It might not be fairy-tale sort of things. People are always looking for relevance in the art that they consume, especially contemporary art.”

Granted, not many audience members can relate to all of Hamlet’s problems: murdered father, crazy ex-girlfriend, homicidal uncle-stepfather, turncoat college pals with similar names, etc. But the themes can resonate, especially if the ballet is set in the present day. Mills’s production puts Ophelia in a cute bridesmaid’s dress and opens with the wedding of Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude, to his uncle, Claudius. The ghost of Hamlet’s father appears later. From the moment Hamlet comes onstage, his allegiances are torn.

“ ‘Hamlet’ talks about those age-old problems of greed, politics and revenge that are still being solved today,” Mills said.

Bleeding for his art

Two-show days are never much fun for actors, especially if the production is more than three hours long, and you spend your break at the emergency room.

Oh, and it’s your birthday.

That about sums up a recent Saturday for Thaddeus McCants, one of four actors in

Signature Theatre's production of Annie Baker's play "The Flick." After cutting his chin badly in Act 1, McCants headed to the hospital during intermission, prompting Signature, in Arlington, to cancel the rest of the matinee.

"It was kind of just a really weird, freak mishap," McCants said. "I cut the edge of my chin on the edge of a chair."

There are lots of chairs in "The Flick." The set is a faux cinema strewn with popcorn. At the beginning of each show, McCants and fellow actor Evan Casey come onstage with brooms in hand, ready to sweep up the debris. But McCants's germophobe character, Avery, is not the ideal movie theater janitor. On his first day of work, he's disgusted to find a Subway sandwich wrapper under a chair.

"What do you do with all the pieces of lettuce?" he asks, just before reaching down to pick the green scraps. That's when, during Saturday's matinee, he cut himself.

"Evan and I work so well together," McCants said. "I just gave him a look and went offstage. He understood, and he just kept sweeping. There's a lot of sweeping and silence in this show."

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Crew members quickly bandaged McCants up backstage. But he was only five minutes into an act that's two hours long. Toward the end, he was still bleeding so badly that the stage manager decided to call off Act 2 and send McCants to Virginia Hospital Center, where he was given three stitches. (Patrons have been given the option of rebooking to see "The Flick" in full.) McCants was good to go by the 7 p.m. show.

"It was my birthday, so it was a weird, interesting experience," McCants said. "It's obviously not funny when you are bleeding onstage, but it is a pretty funny story."

Demand for play heats up

Arena Stage's artistic director, Molly Smith, has booked herself a snowbird trip to Florida next winter. Asolo Repertory Theatre, Sarasota's well-regarded regional theater, has announced that it will restage "The Originalist," John Strand's drama about the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, in January.

"The Originalist" premiered at Arena Stage last year, with local actor Edward Gero portraying Scalia. Gero will reprise the role in Florida. Strand, a playwright based in Frederick County, Md., wrote the script while in residence at Arena and will make a trip to the artsy beach town, as well.