

In Balanchine's dancing shoes

A STAGER HELPS BALLET SAN JOSE ADHERE TO INFLUENTIAL CHOREOGRAPHER'S STANDARDS

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If you have followed today's home-selling process as shown on Home & Garden Television, you know it often involves the use of a "stager," a specialist who will de-clutter your property, highlight its most salable features and maybe even bring in new furniture and accessories to show it off to best advantage.

In real estate, the profession is relatively new. In ballet, it is not.

Meet Victoria Simon, a stager of dance and a former dancer herself. She has been in the staging business for more than 30 years, ever since she returned to her first love after raising a family.

For the past month, the petite Simon, who looks like a dancer despite the gray that generously flecks her pulled-back hair, has been working with Ballet San Jose.

The hometown company's "Just Balanchine" program, at the Center for the Performing Arts tonight through Sunday, features three favorites by the 20th-century, Russian-born master choreographer George Balanchine: "Serenade" (1934), his first ballet in America; the modernistic "Four Temperaments" (1946); and "Theme and Variations" (1960), a tribute to his mentor Marius Petipa and Russia's Grand Imperial dance tradition.

Simon works for the George Balanchine Trust, set up after the choreographer's death in 1984 to ensure that the high-quality performances of his works given during his lifetime continue unadulterated. Her repertoire includes 25 of his ballets, which she has taken to more than 80 countries.

A conductor who programs a musical work will closely study the score; a theater director will pore over his annotated version of the playwright's work. Dance, however, lacks that kind of a solid foundation for reference. Despite videotapes, it is still passed on from dancer to dancer.

In the case of Balanchine, some of his former dancers like Simon have become specialists in teaching his work to a company licensed to perform it. The license is good for two years, during which a company "can perform a piece as many times as they want," Simon explains during a break in the preparation in San Jose. "After that period, the Trust may look at it again to see whether it is still in good condition."

The three pieces being presented by Ballet San Jose are stylistically quite different from one another, and, Simon notes, "Few of these dancers, if any, have actually danced them." So she spent her first three weeks in San Jose teaching

the steps, the bare bones of the choreography.

Ten days before opening night, she had begun working on the details, making sure the ballets will "sing" in a way that "Mr. B," as he is affectionately known, would want.

Balanchine's own ideas, flexible as they were, are Simon's yardstick. She knows that ballet technique has evolved since he was on the scene. Legs may want to go higher, pirouettes whirl faster.

"It all depends on whether it's done within the music," Simon explains of her approach to preserving the master's art.

First on the rehearsal schedule during the sunny March morning of my visit to company's main studio - a large, airy space held up by faux Greek columns - comes "Serenade." Balanchine created it for his mostly female students and incorporated many basic classroom steps. It has become one of his most beloved works, light, mysterious and romantic.

In this run-through, the dancers look like the hardworking professionals they are. Brows flex in concentration, perspiration loosens locks of hair and leg warmers protrude from beneath light blue practice tutus held together by safety pins. With her back to the ever-present mirror, Simon watches intently, whispering to Raymond Rodriguez, Ballet San Jose's *régisseur*, or director responsible for staging, who makes notes.

After the music has faded away, she gives the exhausted dancers a few minutes to catch their breath. Calmly and precisely, like an Olympics coach, she then focuses on the crucial particulars, such as the relationship of the inclined head to the raised arms or the way to deploy fingers so they look alive, rather than like a painting.

"Serenade" begins with one of the most iconic gestures in all of ballet: The curtain opens on a group of women standing motionless, equidistant from one another. Their right arms are lifted high on a diagonal. For a second, nothing happens. Then the performers drop their wrists and open their feet from parallel to first position.

That drop of the wrist is tiny in itself, but Simon transforms it into something much bigger, showing the women that, by taking a small breath, they can transform what was a passive, letting-go motion into an act of giving life. It changes "statues" into dancers.

"Arms," Simon later explains, "are very particular to Balanchine, because he used them in so many different ways. His *port de bras*, for instance, is close to the body; it helps the speed in turning."

For "Theme and Variations," an ensemble piece set to the final movement of Tchaikovsky's Suite No. 3 for Orchestra in G minor, the women of the corps trade their billowing, calf-length "Serenade" tutus for stiff classical ones. The choreography similarly morphs from soft exactitude to geometry in motion. Its interlacing encounters are complex, fast and precisely calibrated. Yet to the

audience, the dancers must look as if they are gently supporting someone's hand, graciously acknowledging a new partner or stepping lightly under an arch of upraised arms.

Simon paces back and forth, keeping an eye on the fast-changing patterns and their split-second timing. At one point she starts calling out the counts. At another, she laughs and tells the men they look terrible. This is a tough ballet, and at the end the ensemble collapses to the floor, panting while curling up weary limbs.

But Simon is encouraged. Ballet San Jose's dancers come from Argentina, Australia, China, Cuba, Denmark, Japan, Venezuela and Vietnam, as well as many parts of the United States. They bring their training with them. "If dancers are technically well trained, they can learn Balanchine," Simon observes. "These dancers *are* well trained."

What does Simon consider the essence of Balanchine's ballets? Without a moment of hesitation, she replies, "It is musicality. His ballets are an extension of the music, in part because he was a musician himself."

Ballet San Jose
Presenting 'Just Balanchine'
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