

Ballet San Jose Scores a Coup

Excerpted from an article by Andrew Gilbert for the Mercury News

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Ballet San Jose kicks off its 2008-09 season with the fall's biggest coup Nov. 20-23, restaging August Bournonville's two-act comic opera set in Spain, "The Toreador," featuring Symphony Silicon Valley performing the score live. Originally conceived for the Royal Danish Ballet in 1840 after two Spanish dancers performing in Copenhagen entranced Bournonville, the ballet was one of the company's more popular productions through 1929, when it dropped out of the repertoire.

As director of the Royal Danish Ballet in the late 1970s, Flemming Flindt created a modern, expanded version of "The Toreador" with his wife, Danish ballerina Vivi Flindt. Deeply conversant with Bournonville's elegant style, he interviewed surviving dancers who had performed the original work, and choreographed a ballet based on Bournonville's scenario, which draws continual contrasts between classical ballet and Bournonville's fascination with "exotic" Spanish dances (like jota, jaleo, flamenco and fandango).

Flindt's production featured new designs by Hans Christian Molbech and a full-length score by Danish composer Erling Bjerno, based on Edvard Helsted's original music. But for some reason, the Royal Danish Ballet never performed "The Toreador," which ended up being sold to the Dallas Ballet when Flindt was its artistic director.

That's when Ballet San Jose Artistic and Executive Director Dennis Nahat found out about the long-neglected dance. He discovered that the Dallas Ballet was in the process of selling off "Toreador" scenery and costumes, which had been made by Denmark's Royal Opera House. So he leapt into action. "It was in a heap of garbage in the warehouse," Nahat says. "I said, 'Let's salvage this production. This is a treasure.' I sent a truck to Dallas to pick up all the pieces, and I found out where the other pieces had been sold and bought them back. We're the only company in the world that has it. Now the Royal Danish Ballet is calling and wondering if they should bring it back into their repertoire."

Flindt's "Toreador" had been fully staged only once before, in an acclaimed 1990 production when Ballet San Jose was known as the San Jose Cleveland Ballet. Both Flindts will be on hand to help restage the work, highlighting the company's Danish ties. (Copenhagen native Lise la Cour, Ballet San Jose's school director and principal teacher, was connected with the Royal Danish Ballet for four decades as a dancer and associate ballet director.)