

A BEAUTIFUL BODY OF WORK: CHRIS STOWELL ON COLLABORATION, CREATIVITY, AND CHINA

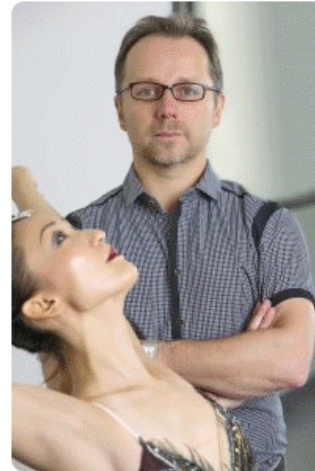
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This October, the Oregon Ballet Theatre is opening their season with a first-time-ever collaboration with the Portland Art Museum. Artistic Director Chris Stowell has crafted a program inspired by the Greek aesthetic that arcs between the classical ballet of Balanchine, the contemporary deconstruction of Forsythe, and the vision of a new work he's creating right now. We sat down and talked about the importance of collaboration amongst the arts, the process of creating a new ballet piece, and his recent trip to China.

Tell me about the *Body Beautiful* program happening this October.

The name of the whole program is *Body Beautiful*, so it's the same title as the one at the Portland Art Museum. The program is inspired by the statuary of the art exhibit, and includes four different works that all have literal or tangential connections to the Greek aesthetic. The first work is a ballet by George Balanchine called *Apollo*, a ballet about the young god and his introduction to the arts by the three muses, Poetry, Mime and Dance. That ballet is from 1928, so it's the oldest work on the program. The second work is a distilling of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend into a duet choreographed by my father, and that is from the 1980s. The third work on the program is the work I'm creating with contemporary visual artist John Grade (GRA-DAY). The fourth work on the program is by William Forsythe, one of the most important creators of dance currently living, and his work is generally very athletic and very physical. While Forsythe's piece has the least literal connection to the Greek aesthetic, I see him trying to create the superhuman, both literally and figuratively, out of the dancers in his work, which is related to the Greek ideal of physical prowess. I wanted there to be a thematic connection to the program, but I'm also looking at creating a satisfying evening in the theatre. If everything were too similar, that would leave us without a full experience. Balanchine talked a lot about the evening at the theatre, that it needs to have an appetizer, main course, and dessert. I think I am less traditional in my servings.



Well, it's Portland.

(laughs) I think our taste buds need variety, but certainly having a through line and a theme gives the audience something to connect with. In the piece I'm creating, for example, I'm using a Greek myth as inspiration, but I'm not going to concern myself with telling a literal story, but rather exposing the myriad ways in which bodies can move and making people focus on how we express ourselves physically.

What's the relationship between the Portland Art Museum's *The Body Beautiful* exhibit and this piece?

The Art Museum is hosting an exhibit of Greek and Roman statuary that's making its debut outside of London, where it was curated by the British Art Museum in conjunction with the Olympics. It's first stop after London is Portland. Even in the most rudimentary sense, there's a relationship between an exhibit about bodies and what we do. As the ballet's artistic director, I enjoyed using the exhibit as a guide, because there are so many thousands of things we could do that parameters are sometimes helpful and inspiring. I like being boxed in a little bit and making sure that I'm still being creative within some parameters.

Balanchine, the choreographer of one of the pieces in the program, was famous for collaborating with contemporary artists at the turn of century—Pablo Picasso for sets, Coco Chanel for costumes. What's the importance of collaborating across the arts?

There's a German word, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which means that if you put many art genres together, you'll get something greater than the sum of all the parts. The early 20th century was very fertile in the arts and ballet in general, and people are still talking about what an important time that was and how that set an example for what we should continue to strive for—not in the replica, but in the idea. We can do things that are going to be popular instantly with certain current trends, but they can be out of fashion in two seconds. The real question is how to connect with the population now and make it last. That was the key element of early 20th century collaboration, and it's the life force that keeps ballet alive.

How does the program balance the importance of being relevant to contemporary society, yet being timeless enough for the ballet?

The way in which it definitely is going to last is that three of the works have already proven themselves over time. To mix that up I'm going out on a limb—and the great thing about dance is we make new stuff up all the time. While of course we want everything we make to be fantastic, we also believe that the experiment is more important than the result—just do it. Hopefully you've discovered and created something of lasting value, but if you haven't, you've exercised new muscles and used your brain in a different way. That's the element I'm providing to the program. So we have a contemporary visual artist, a classical tradition from a long time ago, and then Greek myth even further back. One element is the use of baroque music. I didn't pick music that has clear ties to the Greek aesthetic, or a contemporary composer since we're creating a new piece. I wanted each element to come from a different period and a different way of thinking, a different aesthetic, and see what the combination provides.

What were you inspired by as you put together the *Body Beautiful* program?

I get inspired by providing the best dance for this community. I feel like I have very good access to dance all over the world, so I have to make difficult decisions about what's right and what we can afford, what audiences here might be hungry for, and of course the artists I work with. In terms of this show, the aesthetic of physical beauty, perfect proportion, and beautiful lines that is present in the Greek and Roman statuary, is so much a part of ballet. So that tie was inspiring. People will go see the statuary and they'll go see the dance work, and there will be common aesthetic elements in both places and that will be really fun for audience members. And then for us to just be able to cross-communicate with the people who go to the Art Museum and the people who go to the ballet—we're inspired and excited by the chance to draw people to new places because of the crossover with what we both do.

What's the process like of coming up with a new piece?

I'll have four weeks to do it, beginning in September. All I have so far is the beginnings of a score of music. I have to work with my music director on shaping it into the exact structure that I want. John Grade and I have developed a concept for the scenic elements, and we still have to narrow down exactly where the set is going to go up and down and move so I can understand the floor patterns I have to work with. Then I get in a room with someone I'm comfortable with, and I start moving around and tossing around ideas. That's when I start to develop parameters. I narrow down what kind of movement is going to be particular to this work, and the structure. That's the first thing. Then really, it's the dancers and I working together. I often start by doing a step, and I ask the dancer to do it, and I usually find immediately that there are other ways of doing it and they're often better because they suit their bodies. Sometimes they do a step and they fall out of it in a way that I hadn't expected, and that's the answer to the next question, "Where should we go?" I don't have to have a whole ballet in my head. I have to have a few germs of ideas, I give those to them, they start moving, and my brain starts moving—unless your brain doesn't open that day, and then it's not so fun.

And that's when you're banging it against a wall, over and over.

Yeah.

Why should iPhone-addicted, instant gratification-oriented, 21st century Portlanders go to the ballet?

The movement vocabulary that is classic ballet is never dead; there are always new things to find it in. It's not like it's an aesthetic stuck in amber, to gaze at like in a museum. So we're always finding new things, and exploring new ways of using it. That's relevant. Watching people move is never going to go out of style or fashion, and I think the experience of being in a theatre is a profound experience. While you're with a bunch of people, it's really a solitary experience, and that experience is fundamental to the human psyche. I think dance is one of the most inclusive forms of theatre because it's not telling you whether you're right or wrong about how you feel, since we're not using a language with definitions. Whatever you feel about how you're experiencing dance you're right. I think people expressing themselves through movement and using their bodies is always going to be relevant.

The works you've pulled together in this program push boundaries. As the artist director of a contemporary and yet traditional ballet, what does it mean to push forms in today's terms?

My goal is not just for our audience to have one great evening in the theatre, but to have increasingly deeper experiences. To do this, I think it's important for them to see something that relates to the core values of ballet from the past, as well as taking those core values and deconstructing them and mixing them up. They start to get it. They understand deconstruction if they see the original form, and both are satisfying in different ways. What's really satisfying is getting to see both, either in an evening, or in a season over three years of getting to know your local arts organization. The end result is a sense of ballet's history, as well as where it might be going.

How would you describe what we're going to see? What are people going to be exposed to while sitting in the theatre watching?

Something John and I are really striving for is to create a world for this to happen in that doesn't look like anything else. His job is to create the physical world, my job is to create the human and the movement vocabulary world. He has definitely taken the locations of the myth as inspiration, but he's translating a forest or a brook into completely contemporary terms. What I like about his work is that he takes one idea and explores it fully and narrows it down to the essence of the thought he had. In this case, he's not about a riot of colors at all. It's very monochromatic, and full of big, beautiful, clear shapes.

It seems that Portland is becoming more of an international hub for art. The *Body Beautiful* exhibit is landing here as its first international stop after London, and you just got back from China. What's the relationship between our local ballet and the international arts community?

We're international all the time. We work with choreographers and dancers from around the world all the time. The relationship with China is one way in which we are constantly connecting with the international dance world. We have several Chinese dancers here and they connected me with a company and school they trained with in China. They are always looking for ways that they can cross-pollinate, so the ballet company invited me to come over and teach their company for several weeks. We're now in discussion about them possibly doing a work of mine, and maybe some dancers of theirs coming over here... that kind of thing.

What did you notice about the dance world in China?

It's so different. They take care of their dancers incredibly well, for instance, because of the money they receive from the government. On the other hand, their dancers are not exposed to a lot. When I was teaching them, even though we all speak the language of classical ballet, the way I was asking them to do things was very different from what they were used to. So it was eye opening and mind and body expanding.

There's an initiative on the ballet this November that would increase arts funding in Oregon. In your opinion, why do we need arts funding?

This state in particular is behind in how it funds the arts. It's ironic that we would not be towards the top, because the city of Portland and the state in general prides itself on being culturally deep and adventurous. The cultural life of Portland is part of its vibrancy and part of its general character and makeup, and in order for us to fulfill the potential of the city we're becoming we need to recognize that. It's important to recognize that the people that are coming here and making it vibrant and interesting are of a creative nature, and it's not going to serve our community well if they don't feel like this is a city where they thrive.

Why is art important for our society?

The soul needs food just as much as the body needs food. Art is food for the soul. You really measure the quality of a culture by whether or not it includes the arts in its basic components. This exhibit is carrying the Greek and Roman cultures' artwork, from centuries ago, across continents for this whole year. That says something. A culture's creative outputs are really the only connection we have to the people of the past. We don't go to the banks—nobody cares. What if no art comes out of this time? What is this period going to be remembered for?

How can dance remain relevant and alive in these changing times?

Dance is one of the performing arts that is still great enough to try new things all the time. It's our job to be brave. It's our lifeblood. It's our force. It's how we work. The kind of people that are involved in this art form would not be interested in recreating the past over and over again. Even when we recreate work that's already been done, we do it through 21st century eyes. Like I said, we just don't do this in amber.