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## Step Right Up! 10 Premieres in 3 Days



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK TOMASSON

By RACHEL HOWARD

**A**S a star of the New York City Ballet, Helgi Tomasson danced in that company's landmark 1972 Stravinsky Festival, which unveiled more than 20 ballets and a bonanza of masterpieces. He looked to his memories of that festival's energy as he searched for a way to crown the 75th anniversary of the troupe he now leads: the San Francisco Ballet, America's oldest professional company.

The resulting New Works Festival, opening here on Tuesday, will present 10 world premieres by 10 wildly different choreographers, from the modern-dance master Mark Morris to classical ballet's great hope, Christopher Wheeldon. It will do that over just three nights — a flash flood of what's happening in ballet now.

"People say now that there's a creative void," Mr. Tomasson said of the general perception of ballet since the deaths of giants like George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins and Frederick Ashton. "But these creative forces take time to recognize."

Surely any artistic director would contend that creativity in ballet is alive and well, but Mr. Tomasson is making his case with more gumption than most. His festival would be a staggering undertaking for any company, even San Francisco, the country's third-largest troupe and generally acknowledged to be among the top tier worldwide. And the pressure can be felt throughout the San Francisco Ballet Building, just opposite the gilt-trimmed War Memorial Opera House where the company performs.

On a recent Friday the choreographer Margaret Jenkins's lionlike voice sounded through the vast Christensen Studio. "We need to move on," she said, a phrase heard relentlessly here lately. "Did everybody get that?"

Before her the room presented a study in controlled chaos: 12 San Francisco Ballet dancers rehearsing her work in progress; 8 understudies behind; 3 members of her own Margaret Jenkins Dance Company on hand to divide and conquer with corrections; the ballet mistress Betsy Erickson jotting down notes on the music, finished just weeks earlier.

"We haven't worked on this since July," Ms. Jenkins said. "Thank God the muscle memory is amazing. But you lose the shape." She held up an arm in two poses. "Is it this or this?"

The dancers are happy for the extra coaching. In addition to the sheer volume of new works, they must tackle a spectrum of movement styles, from Ms. Jenkins's blinky physicality to Stanton Welch's grand classicism.

That variety speaks to Mr. Tomasson's desire for cross-pollination among styles

and genres — the company devotes about a third of its season to contemporary work pushing the limits of classical ballet vocabulary — as well as the breadth of his connections. Some of the choreographers, like Mr. Morris and Mr. Wheeldon, are international stars who favor working with San Francisco Ballet for its versatile, intelligent dancers. Others, like Mr. Welch and James Kudelka, are established talents

### *The San Francisco Ballet readies 10 new works by 10 wildly different choreographers.*

whom Mr. Tomasson helped catapult through commissions early in their dance-making careers.

Still others, like Yuri Possokhov and Julia Adam, are former San Francisco Ballet dancers he nurtured from their first efforts. Then there are the faces new to San Francisco Ballet's audience, like the much in-demand Jorma Elo, creating his first work for the company, and Ms. Jenkins, a respected fixture of West Coast postmodern dance for more than 30 years.

"In this time of change in the dance world in our whole culture, I'm thinking, 'Look ahead,'" Mr. Tomasson said. "Let's see how these 10 choreographers approach ballet differently. How can their different ways of working be transported and exchanged? How can they learn from one another?"

Each choreographer was granted total artistic freedom, resulting in a grab bag of subjects and sounds, from the modern-dance master Paul Taylor's hippie-flavored take on songs by the Mamas and the Papas to Val Caniparoli's anguished impressions of Ibsen plays, set to Dvorak. For Mr. Morris's "Joyride" the San Francisco Ballet commissioned, with Stanford Lively Arts and Carnegie Hall, a new score by the Minimalist composer John Adams. Ms. Jenkins's and Mr. Kudelka's works have new scores too.

But with the rush of creativity comes, inevitably, logistical madness. The ballet's management has worked hard to contain it, having planned the festival since 2005. The choreographers began creating their ballets in June, visiting in pairs; they have three weeks of studio time, rather than the standard four, and a week before the festival. Dancer injuries are a greater hazard than usual. So Mr. Tomasson handed down a new rule: No dancer may appear in more than three ballets.

Yet the most careful plans can't avoid the frenzy inherent in getting 10 works ready for the stage in one blast. And the New Works Festival follows five taxing regular-season programs with a sixth



Top, San Francisco Ballet dancers, from left: Courtney Wright and Garen Scribner; Yuan Yuan Tan and Pierre-François Vilanova; Sarah Van Patten and Gennadi Nedvigin. Above, Helgi Tomasson, artistic director of the San Francisco Ballet.

the dancers a breather. Each world premiere will have only one dress rehearsal with full orchestra. "It's flabbergasting," Mr. Taylor said.

But the adrenaline is part of the point, and so is the danger. "It's taking a huge chance," Mr. Tomasson acknowledged calmly. "What if it doesn't work? Well, it's better to try than not."

Even the stressed dance makers agree. Mr. Welch, the artistic director of Houston Ballet, said he had enjoyed the exchange of ideas in the choreographers' lounge, where the artists listen to their scores on headphones and generally try to remain calm. "San Francisco Ballet has become a tremendously creative place, and Helgi built that," Mr. Welch said.

Ms. Jenkins embodied that fearless spirit as she watched the day's final run of her ballet, "Thread," describing to rehearsal onlookers how the elaborate set, which she had not yet seen, would fit on the opera house stage, how the complex music by Paul Dresher might sound as played by the orchestra. Damian Smith, an elegant principal dancer, twirled through turns with his face raised to the ceiling as the rest of the cast dashed to avoid crashes, obscenities ringing out with every near miss.

"Good," Ms. Jenkins called, unruffled. "Fast and furious — that's the way it works around here. It's a wild ride."