

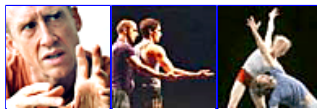
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End of one ballet company simply means a stretch into something new for director William Forsythe

- Elena Park, Special to The Chronicle
Tuesday, June 1, 2004



The breakup of a European dance troupe does not usually prompt outcries from the international arts community and the worldwide press. But William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt is no ordinary ensemble.

Two years ago, government officials in Frankfurt, Germany, notified the artistic director that his company would be dissolved because of budget cuts. It soon became clear that a more conventional ballet company might be funded in its place. Politicos were bombarded with indignant calls and e-mails from supporters protesting the loss of one of the dance world's most important and daring troupes -- and voicing support for an artist widely credited with revolutionizing contemporary notions of ballet.

Forsythe plans to form a new, smaller ensemble soon, and Ballett Frankfurt will cease to exist in August. Bay Area audiences have a final opportunity to see this groundbreaking company Thursday through Saturday in a Cal Performances production at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley. It will be the company's first U.S. appearance outside of Brooklyn in 15 years. The program features four works choreographed by Forsythe, each set to music by Dutch composer and longtime collaborator Thom Willems.

Ballett Frankfurt owes its prominence to the searching creative mind, voracious curiosity and compelling sense of stagecraft of its 54-year-old artistic director, who has led the troupe since 1984. Trained in ballet at the Joffrey School, Forsythe has lived in Europe since 1973. Over the years, the native New Yorker has created neoclassical works for the Stuttgart Ballet, Nederlands Dance Theater, Royal Swedish Ballet and the Royal Ballet, among many others. Local dance aficionados have seen some of what he calls his "ballet ballets" in the repertory of the San Francisco Ballet.

Forsythe's works for his own company tend to be more experimental, presented in highly theatrical environments. He creates not only the movement but also the stage design and lighting, and sometimes the costumes to boot. His wildly inventive choreography delights and bewilders, amuses and shocks, generating controversy in the process. Although classical lines are evident, the language is distinctly Forsythe's own. Whether with precarious tilts or eccentric pairings, he challenges and confounds expectations. The images can imprint themselves upon the memory of his audience, a haunting specter of lyrical swaying or frantic movement or arresting fragments that continue to play with the imagination months later.

Such is the case with the tour de force that closes the Berkeley program, "One Flat Thing, Reproduced" (2000). A dizzying assault on the senses, this high-decibel and high-impact ride involves 20 metal tables and 14 bodies hurtling through space. Despite its animalistic ferocity and exhilarating sense of chaos, it is of course quite the opposite: a series of chain reactions painstakingly choreographed. In talking about the process of building the work, Forsythe speaks of carefully constructed "sentences" layered upon sentences, shifted and realigned, cut and pasted. Not surprisingly, he describes it as being "mind-bogglingly tedious" to create, much less to teach to other dance companies. This densely constructed work relies heavily on a sequence of

visual cues. "Everyone is a conductor in some respect, giving the cues," Forsythe said. "Sometimes it can be one person, but can proliferate to 10 people giving cues simultaneously."

"One Flat Thing" was inspired by Robert Scott's ill-fated attempt to reach the South Pole, a failed expedition that has preoccupied Forsythe for 20 years. According to Forsythe, the piece is "like one of the storms they might have encountered, but also in a certain sense an ideal that they would have liked to accomplish, which was a paradigm of organization."

When Forsythe is asked about the impetus behind this or any of his works, intriguing ideas or elaborate concepts and complex theories spill forth. Although he has been labeled as intellectual or cerebral, he is the first to say the audience must not know or understand his intentions in crafting a piece.

"It has to work viscerally," Forsythe said. "It can't just work intellectually or it's not interesting. If you have to know (the background), great, but I think it's much better when people go out and make their own metaphors."

The simple image of a letter provides the title for "(N.N.N.N.)," a piece that Forsythe developed in 2002 with four male dancers. In program notes, Dana Caspersen, an American company member who is married to Forsythe, describes "(N.N.N.N.)" as appearing "as a mind in four parts. ... Men write out a text of the voice of the body, slowly, then more and more rapidly, coalescing over and over in a linked entity of flinging arms, folding joints and a sharp, high sense of time."

"The Room as It Was" (2002) opens the program and features eight dancers who are, according to Caspersen, "all possessed by a particular group of movements." It is at once awkward and graceful, with unpredictable sequences and the pronounced use of sharp exhalations to signal timing. Both "Room" and "Duo" (1996), in which two women represent a clock, rely heavily on the breath. According to Forsythe, "Duo" is "completely acoustically cued. It's a breath score, so the breathing is constructed in that score." From the audible sounds to the stark costumes to the harsh lighting, it is an intense and uncompromising work.

Forsythe's works call for dancers who, while classically trained, have considerable stylistic ranges and expressive abilities. They seem fearless and open to breaking boundaries, throwing themselves into new worlds with a no-holds-barred sense of abandon. In "One Flat Thing," for instance, they hurl themselves around in what Forsythe calls "kind of a hostile environment," and have suffered bruises and injuries in that setting.

Forsythe says many of his dancers have their own artistic careers as photographers, choreographers, singers and sculptors. "It's not a very passive group," yet despite their individual creative projects, he says, together they form a unified ensemble in which each member is integral to the whole.

This fierce and adventurous company will be disbanded in a few months, but there is perhaps a happy ending for Forsythe, who has the opportunity to collaborate further with many of his dancers. After a period of uncertainty, he announced two months ago that he plans to form a new troupe, the Forsythe Company. This ensemble of 16 to 18 members, in addition to receiving corporate support, will be funded by the German states of Hesse and Saxony as well as by Frankfurt and Dresden, the two cities where it will be based. Not surprisingly, given Forsythe's commitment to education, he is mulling over the idea of establishing a dance academy.

Ballett Frankfurt: Thursday-Saturday at Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley. Tickets: \$38-\$64. (510) 642-9988, www.calperfs.berkeley.edu.

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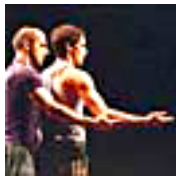
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William Forsythe brings his Ballett Frankfurt to Berkeley, one of its final appearances before the troupe is dissolved in August. Photo by Robin Lea



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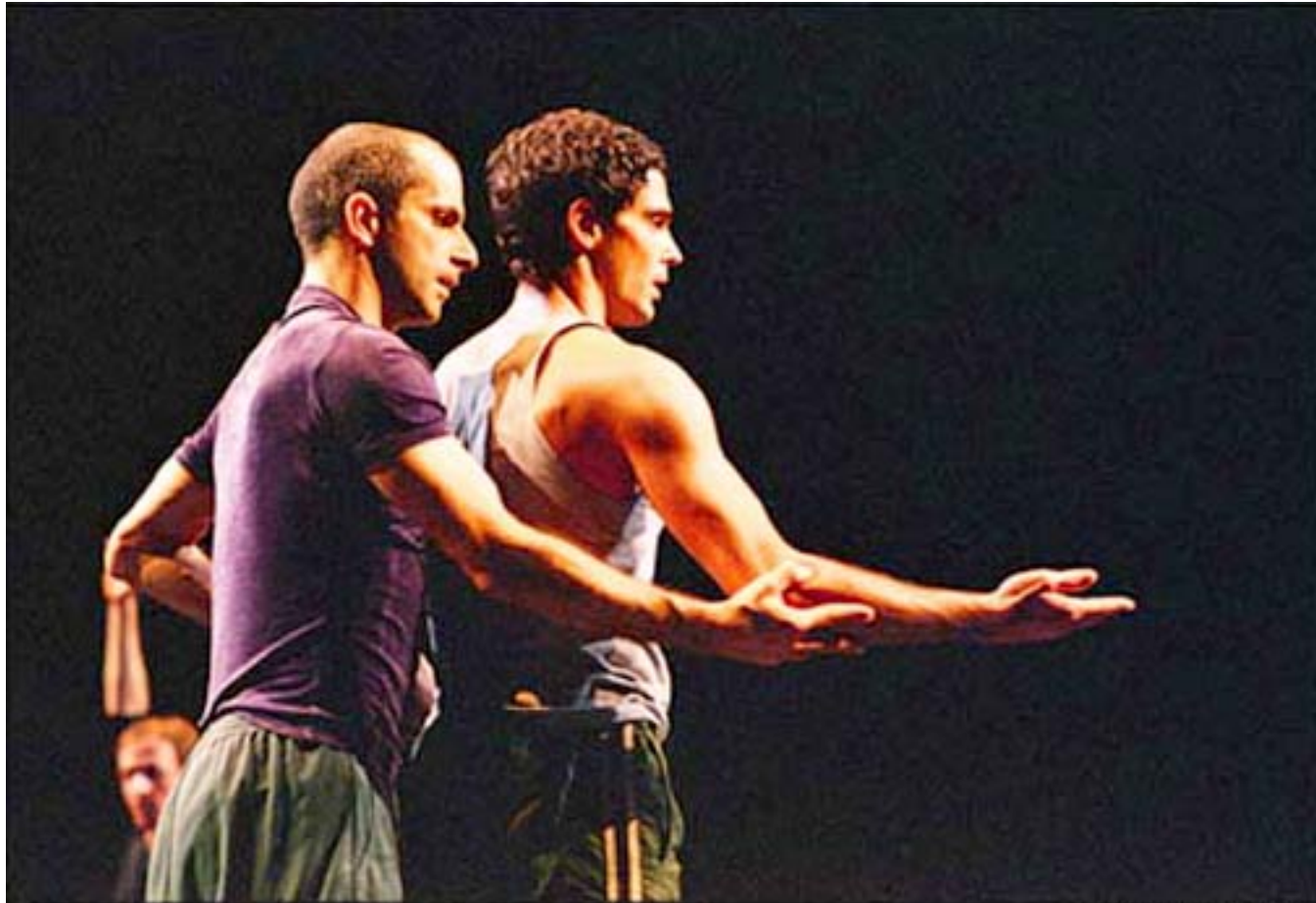
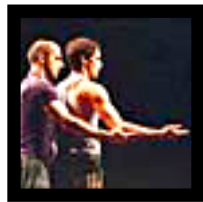
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Amancio Gonzalez and Ander Zabala perform in "(N.N.N.N.)." Photo by Joris-Jan Bos

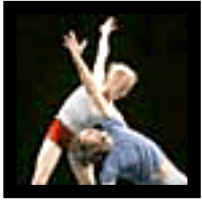
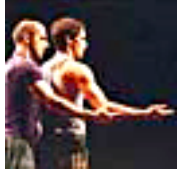


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Dana Caspersen and Ander Zabala perform "The Room as It Was." Photo by Joris-Jan Bos



Joris-Jan Bos