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Ventura County Ballet Prepares to Stretch Its Boundaries



The Ventura County Ballet's Dance ART show will be performed this Sunday, April 19, 2:00 p.m. at the Historic Masonic Center, 482 East Santa Clara Street, in downtown Ventura. Dancers here are preparing to perform the South American influenced "Malambo" by Alberto Ginestera from an arrangement by Keith Emerson. The piece will be accompanied on piano by guest pianist Rachel Flowers.

By Tim Pompey

The Ventura County Ballet is planning to surprise some audience members with some special collaborations and some dance moves that aren't typically associated with ballet.

Featuring some elite young dancers and invited professionals, the VCB will

be staging a Dance ART show at the historic Masonic Center in downtown Ventura on April 19. On the dance docket will be some jazz and some tango, plus a special appearance by dancer Leila Drake from the State Street Ballet and local guest pianist Rachel Flowers.

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Drake, who has been dancing since she was three, has been featured in some notable performances, including the lead role in "Carmen," and Yolanda Vello in "An American Tango."

She will be performing with VCB during Flowers' original composition of "At the End of the Day" and Duke Ellington's "BAND."

Flowers will also accompany the ballet for the tango composition "Malambo" by Alberto Ginestera, from an arrangement by Keith Emerson.

21-year-old Flowers has been blind since infancy. She started playing piano at the age of two, when her mother Jeanie, also a musician, taught her to play "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." When she was four years old, she became a student at the Southern California Conservatory of Music. She is active in several jazz lineups in California including the Ottosen Flower Clark Trio, and is always composing original material.

For those involved in the performance, there are some special challenges and an air of excitement. First, according to VCB choreographer Marin

Florigina, they've only had three weeks to prepare for the show. This includes designing costumes, planning rehearsals, and handling publicity.

In addition, since Flowers cannot see what's going on around her, both pianist and dancers must learn to trust each other. "One of the things that's difficult for Rachel about this particular show," said her mother Jeanie, "is that she doesn't have a great understanding of what's going on while she's playing."

The dancers currently are working from a recording by Flowers herself. "They started working off a CD of Rachel's music," said Florigina. "So, that is the challenge. Since she cannot see the dancers, she's preparing her tempo in advance so they can move to it."

As classical ballet dancers, there is also the challenge of dealing with new styles of music such as the South American influenced "Malambo" which Florigina called "character driven" rather than built around classical ballet. "Most of these girls take on classical ballet, and 'Malambo' is a character dance, so basically that's the challenge, to make the girls move in a different kind of style," she said.

For 17-year-old dancer Rosey Newman, a senior at Nordhoff High School, it's about finding the right mental approach. She is one of two girls who will be dancing in "Malambo" as a gaucho. "I think it's getting into a mental set of being a guy," Newman stated, "and it's a mental thing to try and think like you're a guy, and you have to dance like you're a guy."

16-year-old Alexandra Roth, a junior at Rio Mesa High School, and the other gaucho featured in "Malambo," described this process as leaving her comfort zone. "Instead of the proper kinds of movement from ballet, I have to get out of it because I have to be a boy. I can't run like a girl. I have to be more manly."

Flowers is also being featured as part of a documentary titled "Hearing is Believing" by local director and founder of the Ventura Film Festival, Lorenzo Destefano. He is filming a year and a half in the life of Rachel and her family as she composes and performs her music.

Destefano will be on hand to film Flower's performance as part of that documentary. He hopes to have the completed project out on the film festival circuit some time in 2016.

VCB founder and executive director Kathleen Nohlin knows the risks of these types of performances, but feels that this helps prepares her dancers for the unexpected and broadens their dance horizons. "I love this kind of collaborative, smaller combination because our girls usually dance to live orchestras when we do our Nutcracker," Nohlin explained. "This is an opportunity as students and as young dancers where they can see that everything in dance is not perfect like on a CD."

She described this unique type of performance as a cooperative effort. "It's kind of a give and take, a cooperation between the two," she said. "I think it's terribly important for our dancers, and for us, and to have this with Rachel is extremely exciting, and then to be able to dance to an original piece which she has composed herself, it will be beautiful."

The event will be held on Sunday, April 19, at the Historic Masonic Center, 482 East Santa Clara Street, in downtown Ventura. A reception will start at 2:00 p.m. and the performance will start at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$25 and can be purchased by calling (805) 323-6620 or by visiting the VCB website at www.venturacountyballet.com.

For more information about the Flowers documentary, visit the film's website at www.hearingisbelievingfilm.com/main/about-support-the-film.