

# 'Rite of Spring' returns

By Jasmina Wellinhoff, For the Express-News

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Not many ballets induce the audience to riot, but that's what happened at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris when “The Rite of Spring” premiered in 1913. With music and choreography radically different from anything seen before, the work managed to hang on for only a handful of performances. Today, it is considered a pivotal, revolutionary work that heralded the birth of modern dance.

This year, some 30 dance companies in North America are planning to mark the 100th anniversary of the piece, but only the Joffrey Ballet is staging it with the carefully reconstructed choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky that so provoked ballet fans a century ago.

Arts San Antonio is presenting the company's performance at Lila Cockrell Theatre on Friday.

This will be “Rite's” second visit to the Alamo City. San Antonio has had a special relationship with the Joffrey Ballet since 1976, when the revered company first appeared here under the auspices of the Arts Council of San Antonio. Over the next decade, another now defunct organization, the San Antonio Performing Arts Association, brought it back several times, culminating in the first local performance of “Rite of Spring” in 1988.

During that time, three new Joffrey ballets premiered in San Antonio. A fourth, “Jamboree,” was commissioned by the city and the San Antonio Savings and Loans. Local philanthropist A.W. “Lonnie” Gates funded the other three debuts.

In addition, company founder Robert Joffrey reportedly loved San Antonio so much that he started the San Antonio Joffrey Workshop in 1978. Now called Joffrey Workshop Texas, it continues to bring to town former and current Joffrey members to teach in the pre-professional program.

John Toohey, executive director of Arts San Antonio, is proud to contribute to such a long-standing tradition.

“We can't compete with all that history, but this is an opportunity to remember and celebrate this special connection,” Toohey said. “No other professional ballet company has had this kind of connection to San Antonio.”

“The Rite of Spring” (“Le Sacre du Printemps”) first took shape in the imaginations of composer Igor Stravinsky; impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who founded the famed Ballets Russes; and artist and archeologist Nikolai Roerich, who was interested in pagan spirituality and the pre-historic Slavs. According to Jennifer Homans, author of the comprehensive history of ballet “Apollo's Angels,” Stravinsky and Roerich drew heavily on the work of folklorists and musicologists when they conceived “Rite” as “a ritual re-enactment of an imagined pagan sacrifice of a young maiden to the god of fertility and the sun.”

Stravinsky broke with the musical traditions of his time by creating a dissonant polyrhythmic score that he felt conjured up the frenzy and power of a primitive tribe anticipating the spring rebirth of the Earth. Roerich designed the sets and costumes with folk patterns in mind, and Nijinsky translated the driving percussive force of the score into movement that he described as “a crime against grace.” His dancers stamped the ground in flat shoes, moved around hunched over with feet turned-in, jumped “like goats,” and generally moved in sharp, angular movements rather than following smooth balletic lines.

While Stravinsky's score eventually entered the repertoire of many orchestras, Nijinsky's choreography was considered lost until it was painstakingly reconstructed in the 1980s by choreographer and dance historian Millicent Hodson and her art historian husband Kenneth Archer.

“Nijinsky called what he did 'new dance,'” Hodson said in an email from Europe, where she was overseeing yet another production of the piece. “For classically trained dancers, it is still difficult to maintain the discipline of the turned-in feet, clenched fists and hunched torsos.

“Also, no matter how musical the dancers may be, Nijinsky's complex counting is still a challenge, counterpoint of multiple rhythms on the body, the feet following one rhythm, the arms another. It takes great concentration. And that, in part, is what makes the ritual work. The focus required by the postures and counts creates the intensity of an archaic tribe desperately trying to guide their destiny through ritual actions.”

Hodson and Archer have supervised the current Joffrey revival as well, said artistic director Ashley Wheater, who was part of the ensemble back in 1987-1988 and also performed in “Jamboree.”

For Hodson, Nijinsky was the Picasso of dance.

“‘The Rite of Spring’ is more than a historical curiosity,” she said in her email. “It established ‘the shock of the new’ as the task of all contemporary art ever since, challenging artists and audiences to question all our codes, conventions and certainties.”

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