

The New York Times

Choreography Inspired by Coltrane

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Published: February 19, 2010

THE choreographer [Lar Lubovitch](#) is nothing if not aware of his own predilections. “I do this very old-fashioned thing,” he said, as the lines around his eyes crinkled affably over breakfast in Chelsea. “I design the music visually. And at my age and after all the years I’ve spent doing it, I’m not embarrassed to lay claim to it.”



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Mr. Lubovitch, below, will present an all-jazz program at the Joyce Theater.

Mr. Lubovitch, 66, has always been drawn to music; during his teenage years in Chicago he managed to sneak into clubs like Birdhouse and the Sutherland Lounge with friends to listen to jazz. “Even though we were under age, we would somehow pass a \$20 to the guy at the door and get smuggled in and stand at the back,” he said. “I’m embarrassed

to admit we really didn't know who we were hearing. We just snuck in and listened, and it was amazing."

In honor of his company's two-week engagement at the Joyce Theater, beginning on Tuesday night, Mr. Lubovitch has returned to his roots with a premiere, "Coltrane's Favorite Things," the final dance in an all-jazz program that also includes "Elemental Brubeck" and "Nature Boy: Kurt Elling." (Another program will feature a new male duet, "Dogs of War," set to Prokofiev.)

For the Coltrane piece Mr. Lubovitch found inspiration in a 1963 live recording from a Copenhagen performance of the saxophonist's effervescent interpretation of [Richard Rodgers's](#) "My Favorite Things."

"I've known the piece of music for a long time," he said. "It was only recently that I felt I could manage it. I like to imagine that I am not doing anything that's exactly to the music. I'm trying to write the visual line of the score that capitulates to everything but doesn't copy it."

Mr. Lubovitch never studied jazz dance, but jazz is where he feels at home; the sound, as he put it, "assaults my solar plexus and causes a response in the rest of my body." But he also sees how choreographing or dancing to jazz has become a bit of a lost language. "It's not the way people feel right now physically in the dance world," he said. "It's not what their bodies seem to want to express."

But there could be something of a resurgence brewing. On March 24, as part of [PBS's](#) "Great Performances" presentation of "Dance in America," two [New York City Ballet](#) soloists, Ellen Bar and Sean Suozzi, will present "NY Export: Opus Jazz," a modernized film version of [Jerome Robbins's](#) 1958 ballet. The need to express oneself, as [Audrey Hepburn's](#) character did in a Parisian beatnik club in the 1957 film "Funny Face" — that number remains one of Mr. Lubovitch's favorites — never really goes out of style.

"It was a Eugene Loring dance, highly memorable," he said, "and I think it's one of the best moments in film as a response to avant-garde jazz."

Mr. Lubovitch's own artistic awakenings were born as much from the Abstract Expressionist movement as jazz; until he was 19, he only stepped out on the dance floor on social occasions. While an art major at the [University of Iowa](#) he discovered modern dance and made the decision to transfer his mode of expression from paint and canvas to music and bodies.

In “Favorite Things” he traces a connection between “sheets of sound,” as Coltrane’s improvisational style was often described, and [Jackson Pollock](#)’s method of action painting. The dance will feature a backdrop reproduction of Pollock’s 1950 work “Autumn Rhythm (Number 30).”

“In Pollock’s paintings action was happening everywhere,” Mr. Lubovitch said. “There wasn’t a vase in the middle or a nude on the couch. Coltrane’s sheets of sound and Pollack’s field of action were very much the same thing, one expressed aurally and the other visually.”

Choreographically Mr. Lubovitch ties the concepts together by creating what he calls “ribbons of movement,” in which the steps aren’t as crucial as the energetic way motion flows and undulates. Katarzyna Skarpetowska, a dancer in Mr. Lubovitch’s company, characterized the motion as wavy and almost lazy — with just a hint of bite.

“There are certain moments when there’s a cymbal, and I have to turn quickly,” she said. “But other than that it’s very smooth, like I’m riding on top of a wave.”

Jonathan E. Alsberry, who performs a duet with Ms. Skarpetowska in “Favorite Things,” said that Mr. Lubovitch is able to penetrate the physicality of dancer’s essence.

“I think that resonates throughout all of his work, but specifically in the Coltrane because of the live recording,” he said. “There’s one point when Kate and I are jumping like crazy rag dolls, and in the music they’re going at it too. The drummer is going wild, and you can hear a musician in the background just singing along as if to try to keep the beat. It really puts me there. You can feel the musicians through time and space.”

For Mr. Lubovitch working with such a carefully chosen recording provides a sense of freedom. “I caution the dancers to not respond to the music until they hear it, even when they know what’s coming,” he said. “But I love to not work with live music.”

Realizing that this isn’t the usual reaction from a choreographer, he laughed. “When we work with live music it’s wonderful,” he said. “But while my work is about music to a great degree, when you come right down to it it’s about dancing. So to say, ‘Oh, but live music is the thing’ — no. Live dance is the thing. The music has to be a little bit subjugated, and the subject is dance.”