



McIntyre watches Anne Mueller and Jon Drake rehearse *Just* at Oregon Ballet Theatre.

McIntyre is close-mouthed about his sixth and newest work for OBT, which premieres as part of the company's *Winter Program*. He explains that if the piece doesn't speak for itself, he hasn't done his job.

That said, McIntyre does offer a few pre-curtain hints. The new piece is called *Just*, and it is an intense work, he says.

"It's pretty physical. Challenging. His work is always challenging," confirms Anne Mueller, one of the four dancers in the piece.

Just is set to music that McIntyre chose from the repertoire of innovative U.S. composer Henry Cowell. The dancers' movements are entirely centered on the compositions, which McIntyre describes as contemporary, melodic and rhythmic.

"There is no narrative," he says. "It's just about the music."

Mueller urges audience members to listen carefully while watching the performance, because she believes McIntyre's sensitivity to musicality is an essential part of what makes him special as a choreographer.

She would know. Mueller has danced in nearly all of McIntyre's pieces for OBT, beginning with *White Noise* in 1998. She has become familiar with his trademark style, which involves significant collaboration with the dancers.

Typically, says Mueller, McIntyre will start by telling a dancer what moves to make, working from his mental vision for a piece. The choreography evolves from there.

"It's within the process of watching you do that that he really finds what he's looking for," says Mueller. "You start with a looser description, and it becomes more and more detailed."

McIntyre elaborates: "A big part is what the dancers bring to it...I riff a lot off their own personality. Not just dancing, but in our exchanges in the studio."

Mueller adds, "It's fascinating, because you develop a language, a vocabulary with him."

Mueller must be fluent in McIntyre's choreographic language, because when he formed his own company last summer, he invited her to act as managing director. For the first season of the Trey McIntyre Project, McIntyre handpicked a group of dancers with whom he had worked at various ballet companies. Including Mueller, there were two dancers from OBT and others from companies such as the Washington Ballet, Alonzo King's *LINES* Ballet and Ballet Memphis.

"There was lots of continuity in that we'd all worked with him," Mueller says. "It was a group of like-minded people, in a good way."

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McIntyre took his company on the road for two weeks, hitting three major dance festivals: Jacob's Pillow, Vail International Dance Festival and Aspen Dance Festival. It was a smashing debut season.

"It exceeded even my wildest expectations," says McIntyre. "We were really embraced in every city we went to."

Festival organizers for Jacob's Pillow and Vail were so impressed that they both invited the group back for 2006. The company's 2006 season also includes a performance in Boise, Idaho, and an appearance at Wolf Trap in Virginia—known as America's National Park for the Performing Arts.

"It's a really great feather in our cap to have [Wolf Trap] booked in our second year already," says McIntyre.

For McIntyre, forming his own company gives him a chance to build more substantial connections with individual dancers. "When I go from company to company, I have this really intense relationship with dancers and companies—and then it's over with," he says.

He sees the Trey McIntyre Project as an experiment, a foray into "new models and new ways of imagining a ballet company." He might choose to delve into dance film, for instance, or other avenues of integrating dance into the larger cultural fabric. "We very much take the 'project' in our title seriously," he says.

For the dancers, the company provides a new outlet for their energies. Because a typical dance season runs about the same length as a school year, dancers are usually unemployed for the summer. Most teach and take classes, but summer can still be a frustrating time—financially, artistically, mentally and physically.

"As much as you intellectually try to remember where you were [at the end of the season] and grow from there, it's not entirely possible when you've had a significant break in work," Mueller says.

Dancing during the summer eliminates that concern, especially when a dancer is working with a choreographer as challenging as McIntyre.

"I'm really interested in what stops the dancer from being their best self. The process of getting through those things improves the choreography in the end," says McIntyre.

When asked how he determines just how hard to push a dancer, McIntyre replies: "I guess I have yet to find too far. It's a difficult process, but everyone in the end wants to be in a better place. It's a great feeling to achieve things you didn't know were possible."

Mueller, for one, wholeheartedly enjoys the challenges McIntyre sets before her.

"It enables me artistically to reach new grounds," she says. "I'm 30. I've been dancing a long time. It's incredibly satisfying to feel like I'm on an upward slope." 10

Trey McIntyre's *JUST* premieres as part of Oregon Ballet Theatre's *Winter Program* 7:30 p.m. Feb. 18, 24 and 25 and 2 p.m. Feb. 19 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets are \$13-\$66 from 503-222-5538.

Portland free-lance writer REBECCA RAGAN covers topics ranging from the national organic fiber industry to tattoo artists. She regularly contributes dance articles to *Just Out*.

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