



# LEMON SPONGE CAKE

## BALLET

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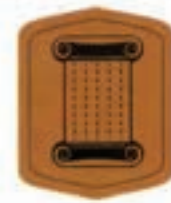
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# Culture



### CULTURAL CRUSADERS

Lemon Sponge Cake's ballets don't dance around the issues.

As you can probably surmise from its name, Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet doesn't dabble in the conventional. Choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl eschews traditional storytelling (such as the will-they, won't-they romance in *Swan Lake*) for avant-garde movements designed to wring emotions from the audience—a smart approach when your goal is advocacy. In October 2015, Lemon Sponge Cake performed a ballet commissioned by the Denver Public Arts Program called *White Mirror* at Babi Yar Park to call attention to the atrocity the park commemorates. (In 1941, Nazis murdered 33,771 Jews in a ravine named Babi Yar in Ukraine.) This year, on September 17 as part of Boulder's Public Art Project, the company addresses the issue of gun violence by debuting another site-specific ballet: *White Fields* at Holiday Park in Boulder. Using only two dancers (Sher-Machherndl and Bailey Harper, pictured), a pianist, and an actor, the show's simplicity and tranquility are designed to inspire people to respond to shootings with peaceful discourse rather than angry rhetoric, says Sher-Machherndl. We'll see if his theory pans out immediately following the show, when a panel featuring the performers will lead a discussion with the audience about gun violence. —SPENCER CAMPBELL

Photo: Frank M. Whelan

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### Lemon Sponge Cake's Winter Workshop

If you're looking to expand your definition of ballet while refining your technique, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's Winter Workshop may be for you. The one-week workshop, held January 2–6 at the company's Boulder, Colorado, studios, offers students through young professionals individualized contemporary ballet training. While choreography sessions are grounded in ballet (each day begins with a two-hour technique class), artistic director Robert Sher-Machherndl says that "there are absolutely no rules." Everything is created on the dancers, so when "I give them something, I let them do what suits their body or what they can make out of the movement."

Then there is UGGI dance, a half-instructive, half-improvisational movement class developed by Sher-Machherndl. In it, dancers are not reliant on mirrors to correct technique; rather, guided suggestions help spark imagination. The workshop also serves as an audition for upcoming company projects. For more information, go to [lemonspongecake.org](http://lemonspongecake.org). —*Caroline Seymour*



Sher-Machherndl with Vienna State Ballet Academy students

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## Events

### A Colorado Company Tackles Gun Violence through Dance

The Boulder, Colorado-based company Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet premieres a new site-specific work on September 17. Choreographed by artistic director Robert Sher-Machherndl, *White Fields* is a 55-minute work that aims to generate dialogue about gun violence. It will be performed at Holiday Park in Boulder at 8 pm. The performance is free and open to the public. [Lemonspongecake.org](http://Lemonspongecake.org)

Lemon Sponge Cake dancers in *Bach 260*



**Impressions of: Ballet in Boulder, Colorado / |  
Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet Confronts Gun Violence**

# THE DANCE ENTHUSIAST

October 13, 2016  
By Daniel Gesmer



Following its September 2015 *White Mirror*, which bravely confronted a Holocaust theme, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet presented *White Fields* on September 17. The outdoor public performance, at Holiday Park in Boulder, Colorado, took artistic aim at the issue of gun violence in America. In three sections, with the majestic Rocky Mountains in the background, *White Fields* interspersed poignant duets with spoken word that painfully recounted the tragic statistics and emotional wreckage of lives cut short by bullets.

Lemon Sponge Cake's founder and choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl was formerly a principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet and the Bavarian State Ballet. Based in Boulder with his British wife and co-director/producer Jenifer Sher since the late 1990s, his stated mission has been to integrate classical technique with contemporary movement sensibilities and stretch its limits as an instrument for enlightened commentary on modern life. His abstract creations typically plumb the tensions between hope and despair, longing and withdrawal, connection and alienation.

When the producer-directors undertook their first project in the U.S. in 2000, they thought it would be a one-off and so looked for a cool, funny name as opposed to branding the group after themselves. Lemon Sponge Cake was on the dessert menu of a Boulder restaurant called Trios, and they liked the sound of it.

Sher-Machherndl's movement style, reminiscent of William Forsythe, seems to deliberately accentuate his length and angularity, which becomes striking in combination with his clear center and precise technique. Bailey Harper, a statuesque Louisiana native with rare emotional depth and dramatic intensity, partnered Sher-Machherndl in *White Fields*. She was also part of the ensemble in *White Mirror*.

*White Fields* began with Sher-Machherndl anxiously circling Harper and periodically catching her as she fell alternately backwards and forwards - as if collapsing from shock, grief, or a bullet wound. Frank Mauceri's taped electronic score set a tone of psychological fog and disarray by combining the sounds of a gunshot in reverse slow-motion with falling shells, wind chimes, and a gong. On top of this, Mauceri layered live improvised scattershot saxophone while concert pianist George Lopez contributed comparable notes on the keyboard of a Steinway transported to the grassy middle of the park.

As the tense duet evolved, Harper's anxious, contorted movements evoked the pain and disassociation of both a disturbed shooter and the shooting victim. While she remained in a world of her own, Sher-Machherndl tracked her with a confused mix of support and avoidance. Each seemed to seek both escape and support, both with and from each other, though a tragic tangle was the only thing possible.

In the second section, Lopez offered a sensitive interpretation of Bach's "Chaconne" while the dancers partnered one another with a somewhat more classical vocabulary but ongoing ambiguity. The quicker pace and high drama of the music brought to mind the accelerating frenzy of a shooter preparing to act. The dancers made regular gestures that suggested desperate yet futile pleas for help. As if he were a newscaster, actor Denis Berkfeldt delivered descriptions of accidents, killings, and suicides, along with shooting statistics from around the world that highlighted the crisis in America.

# Daily Camera

## Dance piece staged as public art

### One-time Boulder show addresses gun violence

By Aimee Heckel  
Staff Writer

This is no ordinary piece of public art.

It's not a statue. It moves. It leaps and spins and seems to fly on the grass.

You can see it only for a short window of time Saturday evening in North Boulder's Holiday Park. It has never been seen before, and it will never again be presented in this form.

It is an artistic look at a heavy social issue: gun violence.

Boulder's newest piece of public art is called "White Fields," a dance perfor-

time. In movement, he can change the room."

Further adding to the experience will be professional lighting designs that will interplay with the night sky, as the sun sets. Choreography interweaves with the park's natural elements. The company is also setting up a sound system.

Designing choreography for a public park instead of stage has been an interesting challenge, Sher-Machherndl said.

"I don't have to do right or left," he said. "I can make the stage as big as I want. It's endless. I have complete freedom. The distance between the audience is different."

Sher-Machherndl, a native of Austria, says he chose the topic of gun violence to raise awareness about the lives lost from guns around the world.

"We should not get used to it. This should not be a daily thing," he said. "People should not think, 'This is ter-

### If you go

**What:** "White Fields" world premiere, a public arts performance that addresses gun violence

**Featuring:** Dancers Bailey Harper and Robert Sher-Machherndl, concert pianist George Lopez

**When:** 8 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Holiday Park, 4650 14th St., Boulder

**Cost:** Free

**Info:** [lemonspongecake.org](http://lemonspongecake.org)

mance on the grass at Holiday Park. It's free and open to the public.

The show is presented by Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet and choreographed by internationally renowned dancer Robert Sher-Machherndl, co-director of the company. He will take the stage — this one with the foothills as the

rible, but this is our lives. It is what it is.' Well, it's not what it is. We can change it."

That change starts with spreading a message of love and peace, and to encourage people to talk things out instead of react with violence, he said.

"We, as artists, it's our duty to send a message — not a message of entertainment, but to send a message about issues," Sher-Machherndl said.

The piece was inspired by a performance commissioned last year by the city of Denver. In the fall, Denver hired Lemon Sponge Cake to create "White Mirror," a dance exploring the Holocaust. Dancers performed it in the Babi Yar Park in the same way — as a one-time piece of living public art designed to spark discussion and thought about a complex social issue.

It was the first time Denver ever commissioned a dance project as public art, the company says.



Paul Alken / Staff Photographer  
Robert Sher-Machherndl, of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, rehearses his work "White Fields" in August with Bailey Harper at the Kinesis Dance Studio in Boulder. To see more photos, go to [dailycamera.com](http://dailycamera.com).

backdrop — with dancer Bailey Harper.

While the topic of gun violence can be painful, the company says the show is

Sher said the project in Denver was fulfilling and had such a positive response that the ballet decided to expand it into a trilogy of three public art performances. Boulder's is part two and mostly funded by private donations (the city contributed a small donation). The third part is in the works, although the ballet has not yet released the topic or more information.

"It's a really unique opportunity to see world-class dance in your neighborhood at no charge. It's few and far between nowadays," Sher said. "You'll be surprised. It's not what you think. There's a preconception about what contemporary ballet is and what dance is. We are truly unique. We don't fit anywhere."

Boulder's piece has a "completely different energy" than Denver's, Sher says. "White Mirror" featured five dancers, whereas "White Fields" is a collaboration between two dancers, an actor and a live concert pia-

family-friendly and ultimately spreads a positive message of peace.

"It's a peace offering to the world that should radiate into our communities and families," Jenifer Sher, executive director and co-director of the company, said. "There's nothing scary. It's the opposite. It's acceptance, love, community connection."

The show is also designed to express themes of alienation, connection, relationship and fragility.

Art provides a unique way to touch on complex and controversial topics, Sher said. This show is not about politics or designed as an intellectual process. It's not about opinions, she says. It's about heart.

"This is pure emotion," she said. "Robert says so much in a short amount of  
See DANCE, 2B

nist. George Lopez will play Bach piano concertos and improvisations on a Steinway grand piano that will be brought to the park.

"Robert is an absolute master of duets. It creates such a powerful conversation between the masculine and feminine, in this case. Very personal and very deep, an emotional opportunity," Sher says.

Although every live performance is unique in its own ways, offering a performance only one time injects it with an intense energy, Sher says.

"It keeps it very alive," she said.

## Green

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## arts &amp; culture

In these bleak times, it seems impossible to go a day without another shooting. Choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl is fed up and wants to awaken the desensitized.

"It shouldn't become, 'Oh, it happened again,' OK, 'Oh, it happened again,' OK," he says. "I want to put awareness on people to really think what it means to take a life. It's a huge deal taking one life. We shouldn't be [like] when it's one life we don't look anymore, or it has to be 80 lives or 200 lives, then we look. No, every life counts."

So the choreographer uses dance as the language to explore these topics.

"You can stir a lot of emotions with people," he says. "Through movement, when they see it, they can experience it."

Sher-Machherndl is raising awareness about gun violence in his new production, *White Fields*, with local dance company Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, on Saturday, Sept. 17 at Holiday Park in Boulder. The performance will feature music by concert pianist George Lopez, playing a mixture of Bach and his own improvisations, as well as a spoken word segment by Denis Berkefeldt. It is free and open to the public.

"When you have a heavy theme, I cannot charge you a ticket price. It would be ridiculous," he says. "And we feel really good giving it away."

*White Fields* is the follow up to last year's performance of *White Mirror*, and it is the second chapter of a three part series. Performed as a public art performance for Denver Arts & Venues, *White Mirror* was a living memorial for the thousands of Jews, Ukrainians, Gypsies and others who were murdered at the Babi Yar ravine in Kiev, Ukraine, during World War II. After its success, Sher-Machherndl decided to do a public dance piece in Boulder. And he doesn't want to reveal details for the third installment, but it should premiere in 2017.

His goal with *White Fields* is to start a conversation about gun violence, both here and abroad. Austrian-born, Sher-Machherndl says with the current political climate both in America and in Europe, leaders use too much aggression, which he doesn't see as the answer.

"Politicians have to talk, people have to talk," Sher-Machherndl says. "We cannot just scream at each other, pull a knife, pull a gun, stab each other, kill each other, send the military in, press the button."

Sher-Machherndl goes beyond the effects of the issue and looks deeper into the causes of gun violence, exploring themes like alienation, isolation and connection. He approaches the piece with empathy for all involved, each party touched by these tragedies. He feels it's his privilege to use his voice to bring about change for the better.

Courtesy of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet



*White Fields* will be a duet with choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl and Bailey Harper.

## A dance to push

### Lemon Sponge Cake Ballet tackles gun violence in new production

by Amanda Moutinho

"As an artist my job is to put awareness on heavy themes, and bring people together," he says. "As an artist, this is the voice I have. I have the chance to create things. My job is to bring people together and not pull them apart and put fingers on other people."

Before choreographing the piece, Sher-Machherndl researched various mass shootings. He didn't want to tell one specific story, but instead focused on the issue as a whole.

*White Fields* will be a duet between him and dancer Bailey Harper. Sher-Machherndl says he loves choreographing two-part pieces because the chemistry is built-in, creating a story right away.

"Two people on stage, immediately there's a relationship," he says. "Things happen instantly, just looking at each other, touching each other, looking away, walking away, approaching each other."

As a contemporary ballet choreographer, his main focus is movement of the whole body while also embracing traditional ballet technique.

"I like to move the spine, the arms, everything is very liquid, but infused with ballet technique and ballet dancers. ..." he says. "It's not like just ballet hoppity boppity boom — you know how they do. I don't like it. I don't like men in tights. That's over. I really can't stand it, that's just personally."

Sher-Machherndl wants to take dance further, away from just telling stories and fairy tales, but actually using the medium to tell real life narratives that challenge contemporary issues.

"Pushing, pushing, pushing, I will never stop pushing. ..." he says. "It can't sit where it is, it always needs to be pushed forward and brought into the time now. I want to keep it alive, that's why I keep pushing." ☺

**ON THE BILL:** *White Fields* — presented by Lemon Sponge Cake Ballet. 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 17, Holiday Park, 4650 14th St., Boulder, 720-352-2903.

## Why Denver Commissioned A Piece Of Public Art You'll Only See Once

Corey H. Jones BY COREY H. JONES  
OCT 1, 2015



You know the big blue bear that peers into the Colorado Convention Center? The newest piece of public art commissioned by the City of Denver is nothing like that. On Sunday, you'll see why: It's a dance called "White Mirror" and will take place only once, at 6:30 p.m. in Babi Yar Park in southeast Denver.

The title is a nod to ideas of hope and reflection and the performance explores the Holocaust.

"It's a very intense, emotional energy," choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl said. "And I'm really pleased to bring dance out of the theater, to not have the walls or be constricted."

Founded as a Holocaust memorial in 1971, the park was expanded 11 years later. An aerial view shows the Star of David formed by paths that take you through trees, over bridges and to other monuments.

"It's a beautiful park that most people aren't really aware of, and we really wanted to showcase it," Denver public art administrator Rudi Cerri said.

The name Babi Yar refers to a ravine in Ukraine where more than 33,000 Jews were killed during one week in 1941. The park honors those who died during this massacre and the ones that followed.

"It's a very quiet, contemplative space, and I think we wanted a piece of artwork that reflected that," Cerri, who oversees public art projects commissioned by the city, said.

The city renovated part of Babi Yar Park in 2006, and money from that effort went to fund "White Mirror." That's how Denver's public art program works. When the city completes a capital improvement project that's more than \$1 million, 1 percent of the construction budget goes toward art for the site.

The cost of projects ranges from around \$10,000 to more than \$1 million, Cerri said. The budget for this public artwork was \$15,000.

"It isn't a lot of money," Cerri said. "A physical piece wasn't quite right because we didn't have the budget to do it and the park is so well curated that for us to put another element into the park didn't make any sense."



This is the third time Denver has commissioned a performance piece instead of permanent visual art. In 2012, Morton Waller composed "Virga Sound Performance." The musical event took place on the Delgany Pedestrian Bridge over Cherry Creek, which hoists Patrick Marold's "Virga" public art sculpture.

In 2011, the city commissioned "Playing Apart" by John Rubin and Lee Walton. The performance featured 90 members of the Bear Creek High School marching band following individual routes throughout downtown Denver. The musicians played Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It" together, but they did so while scattering throughout the city.

While there are more performances happening in public spaces across the country, it's still rare for cities to commission them, Minnesota's Public Art St. Paul executive director Colleen Sheehy said.

But Sheehy expects that to change as more cities emphasize "creative placemaking," a strategy that aims to get people excited about where they live.

"The event-based work where people are having interactions can be so important to activate a space and to get people to discover a space or even to look at their city in a new way," she said.

At Babi Yar Park in Denver, even the physical space plays a role. Kimberly Chmielewski's dance shoes took a beating during dress rehearsal on the stone and concrete surface.

But dancing on the rough, uneven ground also makes her move with a rawness and a tension that suits this performance, Chmielewski said.

"Your foot kind of gets stuck in weird ways and you have to maneuver around the different curvatures," she said. "It just brought a new element and a new level of humanity and realism to what we were doing."

"White Mirror" marks the second time choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl has explored the Holocaust through dance. He's the artistic director of the Lemon Sponge Cake dance company in Boulder.

Sher-Machherndl's proposal for "White Mirror" beat out eight other submissions the city received. And he said he hopes the public performance inspires people to consider how these past tragedies still resonate today.

"Obviously we can't go back in time and fix it, but we have to always remember," Sher-Machherndl said. "We should also not forget what's happening now, like the refugee crisis in Europe and Syria. It's just to remind people it's not over yet."

The dance may only happen once, but a documentary will capture the story of how the performance came about. The film will also allow this piece of public art to live on into the future, organizers say.





Babi Yar Park is surprisingly quiet on a Monday morning. The traffic noise from nearby South Havana Street seems to dissipate through the leaves of 100 linden trees in the grove sheltering this 27-acre sanctuary. As a little girl and her father walk along a pathway, they happen upon five dancers in the central People's Place amphitheater. The child sits down, enthralled. What she sees is beauty and harmony in movement. What she doesn't know is the reason these dancers are in the park in the first place.

The Denver park was founded in 1971 as a living memorial to thousands of Jews, Gypsies, Ukrainians and others who were murdered by Nazis between 1941 and 1943 at the Babi Yar ravine in Kiev, Ukraine. Recent renovations to the park's own ravine kicked into motion a city ordinance for the Denver Arts & Venues Public Art Program. The gist: Any capital improvement project done by the city that costs over \$1 million requires that one percent of the project cost be set aside for the inclusion of some form of art in the construction. Oftentimes, that has meant a public art sculpture. In this case, the city sought to do something a bit different. "For us to go in and put another element—specifically another piece of artwork—wasn't quite right. It would not continue the story of Babi Yar or get people into the park," says Rudi Cerri, the city's public art administrator. So, instead, his department commissioned its first piece of dance as public art.

Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, led by internationally recognized choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl, was chosen to perform in this initiative. White Mirror is Sher-Machherndl's 50-minute original "comment" on the tragic history of Babi Yar. Four female dancers—all from the Denver metro area—flow through the circular "stage," and Sher-Machherndl, a dancer himself, drifts in and out of the scene. A diverse composition by Viennese musician Wolfgang Mitterer sets the foundation for the dancers' heartrending portrayal of tension, longing, uncertainty, fear, and hope. Sher-Machherndl's hyperfocus on details is evident in every lift of a finger and tilt of the neck.

"It's so extraordinary that a human being could do this," Sher-Machherndl says of what happened in Ukraine's Babi Yar. "There was no respect of human life whatsoever." He grew up in the 2nd municipal district in Vienna. Before World War II, it was a Jewish area and home to the largest synagogue in Europe; then 60,000 Jews were deported and the synagogue was destroyed. "It was the center of Jewish life in Vienna," says Jenifer Sher, his wife. "And he grew up in it and didn't know."

"As humans, we always wait. How many have to be killed?" Sher-Machherndl says. "This [White Mirror] is a lesson in tolerance."

Watching dance outside the walls of a studio or theater is a singular, visceral experience. Couple that with the overlooked beauty and important history of Babi Yar Park, and this is certain to be a special evening.

See White Mirror's premiere (and only) performance on Sunday, October 4, at 6:30 p.m. at Babi Yar Park's People's Place amphitheater (South Havana Street and East Yale Avenue). It's lawn seating, and guests are encouraged to bring a picnic and a blanket or seating pad. (Note that there is no intermission.)

# WENDY PERRON

Another stunner, RUSH, I had figured was the work of a Forsythe disciple, like maybe Helen Pickett, who loves to ricochet between deconstructed épaulement and the ballet vocabulary itself. Wrong again. It was made by Robert Sher-Macherndl for the Dominican University LINES Ballet BFA program. How did I feel? Like I discovered a new program and a new choreographer.



*tanz.at*

## **ROBERT SHER-MACHHERNDL - EIN PROPHET WILL NACH HAUSE**

Magazin  
11. April 2014

Nach 19 Jahren in den USA möchte der Wiener Tänzer und Choreograf Robert Sher Machherndl wieder mit der Heimat Kontakt aufnehmen. Mit einem Showing im Raum „Imersten“ stellte er das von ihm gegründete Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet vor und erzählte von seinen Plänen. In den USA ist Sher-Machherndl für seine einfallsreiche, emotionale Tanzsprache bekannt und mehrfach ausgezeichnet geworden.

Nach dem Studium an der ehemaligen Wiener „Schönbrunn Akademie“, tanzte Robert Machherndl mit dem Bayerischen Staatsballett und in den Niederlanden sowohl mit dem Nederlands Dance Theatre als auch beim Dutch National Ballet, wie mit dem in Rotterdam angesiedelten Scapino Ballet. Mit Peter Breuer hat er in Salzburg die ersten choreografischen Schritte gemacht.

Mit seiner englischen Lebensgefährtin und Managerin, Jenifer Sher, ist er dann in Boulder /Colorado gelandet, wo er 2004 seine eigene Company, Lemonspongecake contemporary ballet, gegründet hat. Das Besondere an dieser offenen Truppe ist die Mitwirkung der Ballettinnen und Solotänzer berühmter Ensembles, wie etwa Principal Dancers des ABT, New York. Sher-Machherndl hat eine eigene Tanzsprache entwickelt, die zwar auf dem klassischen Vokabular beruht, jedoch dieses weit hinter sich lässt. „Ich mache keine Neoklassik, sondern zeitgenössisches Ballett.“ Dieser Begriff „contemporary ballet“ ist in Europa kaum als Bezeichnung für eine neue choreographische Ausdrucksweise üblich. Den Spitzenschuh aber hat Sher-Machherndl keineswegs gänzlich aus seinen Choreografien verbannt, alles ist möglich, ohne oder mit Schuhen. Sein spezielles Vokabular überrascht durch neue, risikoreiche Bewegungsabläufe, die Senkrechte wird ebenso betont wie das waagrechte Schweben. Um die TänzerInnen mit dem Unvorhergesehenen vertraut zu machen, hat Sher-Machherndl auch ein spezielles Trainingsprogramm entwickelt. lemon3

Als Choreograf hat Robert Sher-Machherndl mit internationalen Truppen in USA und Europa gearbeitet. Von der Denver Post wurde er 2010 zum Tänzer des Jahres gewählt; vier Mal hat er den „New York Ballet Builders Choreography Award“ gewonnen. Mit „Uggi“ hat er überdies eine partizipative Form der „Bewegung für alle“ entwickelt, an der er ebenso viel Freude hat wie die mitwirkenden Laien.

DANCE  
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intraining

## Choose Your Next Move

The twofold benefits of choreographic workshops for dancers **BY CANDICE THOMPSON**

Christoph von Riedemann remembers feeling anxious when he walked into a studio with Jorma Elo. Then a student, it was his first Ballet BC Choreographic Workshop, and he was nervous about working with an artist of Elo's stature. But many workshops later, von Riedemann—now a Ballet BC company member and an aspiring choreographer—found diving in headfirst with each new artist made him more open-minded. "I learned as much about how to be a dancer in the choreographic process as I did about the choreographic process itself."

Choreography workshops can help you play with the tools of dance-making and try out new ways of moving in a supportive environment. Whether you're looking to work with new choreographers, learn a different style or take the first step towards movement creation, they allow dancers to tap their creativity and deepen their artistic development.

### INSIDE THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

For Emily Molnar, artistic director of Ballet BC, the idea of hosting a series of workshops sprung from the need to provide young, classically-trained advanced dancers with a way to network and gain exposure to choreographers. The goal of Ballet BC's Choreographic Workshop, held about five times a year, is twofold: to help young dancers not only learn how to approach and get a diverse perspective of choreography, but to also "build the confidence to experiment, trust and take the risks

### Get Your Work Onstage

"You're making dances in the studio... now what? Samuel Asher Kuzman, a student at the Alroy/Fordham BFA program, applied to the Young Choreographer's Festival in New York City as he became more serious about his choreography. The festival's selection committee chooses approximately 10 young artists to present their work each June. YCF also provides them with mentoring, video and photo samples, private classes, and talk-backs on funding, press kits and approaching presenters. Two months of mentoring and at least one hour of free rehearsal space are made available prior to the show, and choreographers may use their own dancers or seek YCF's resources. Alumni have gone on to be commissioned by bigger festivals and dance companies.

Kuzman cites his mentor, Pascal Rekoert, and the many contacts he made during the festival, as his biggest takeaway. "I now have so many wonderful people rooting for me and willing to help me succeed," says Kuzman.



Jorma Elo with Ballet BC dancer Darren Devaney

"I learned as much about being a dancer in the choreographic process as I did about the choreographic process itself."

—CHRISTOPH VON RIEDEMANN

needed to get their own ideas out," says Molnar.

The one-and-a-half- to two-hour workshops are led by a variety of international artists such as Elo and Molnar herself. For von Riedemann, the short format forced him to pick things up quickly and absorb as much as possible. In addition, the workshops provided a "window into the beginning," he says, "because the start of a dance is always a challenge for me when I'm making movement." The participants, advanced professional students and dancers, experience the various stages of a choreographer's process: improvisation, collaboration, composition and learning repertoire or new phrase work.

During Helen Pickett's Choreographic Essentials workshops, held intermittently in Atlanta and New York City, participants construct a dance in a collaborative environment and have a showing on the sixth day. In addition to daily ballet class, Pickett, Atlanta Ballet's choreographer in residence and a former Ballet Frankfurt dancer, teaches a Forsythe Improvisation Technologies class, which offers hands-on tools for creating movements through an improv practice. The workshop includes three-hour guided choreography sessions and empowerment lectures about ethics in the field. "How do you find success?" Pickett asks on the workshop's first day. "If you want to become a realized artist, you have to look for inspiration."

In addition to teaching choreographic building blocks, these workshops develop skills dancers can use in the rehearsal studio. "Today's choreographers do not always say exactly what they want something to look like," says Molnar. "You need the most fluent facility to be able to express those big ideas." Indeed, today's dancers can now expect improvisation and collaboration to be the rule when a new work is being created on their company.

Robert Sher-Machherndl, artistic director of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, says he leads weeklong choreographic workshops around the globe to help advanced students and young professionals find "new ways to move and break down barriers." During the workshop, students collaborate with Sher-Machherndl on new choreography and take his own form of composition class called "the uggi class," in which dancers move nonstop and improvise with his guidance. While it's based in ballet technique, he says, "really anything goes."

Alexandra Hutt, a BFA candidate at The Juilliard School, signed up for Sher-Machherndl's workshop not only to stay in shape over the winter break, but to challenge herself both physically and mentally. "To me, that meant working in depth with a choreographer who would bring new ideas, images, suggestions, movement quality and energy into the studio." She found her experience to be both practical and inspirational, learning skills that she now uses to survive and thrive during long days in the studio. But more importantly, she says, "I have a new way of thinking about dance as an art form."

Yasmine Mahmoudi, a freelance dancer in New York City, took Pickett's workshop twice. Interested in meeting the demands of the choreographers who employ her and expanding her creativity, she gained tools to think, and therefore dance, more efficiently. While Pickett stresses the importance of not shying away from technique, Mahmoudi also believes the Choreographic Essentials workshop helped her learn something very important about herself as an artist. "I discovered that I was someone creative, able to work with other dancer-choreographers to create something beautiful, meaningful and very powerful." ■

BEST OF FALL  
10 MUST-SEE  
PERFORMANCES  
THIS SEASON

UPGRADE  
YOUR  
CREATIVITY  
CHOREOGRAPHY  
WORKSHOPS FOR  
DANCERS

JUST  
PEOPLE

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

The best of 2010

The folks who made it a year to remember

## Robert Sher-Machherndl

An international voice finds his home on a local stage

**A**ustrian-born dancer and choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl is everything an artist should be: A fiercely creative, self-confident individual who exploits familiar forms for his own devices, a visionary who forces us to look at the human body in strangely appealing new ways, and a dancer who makes the rigorous and punishing seem at once effortless and alien.

His 6-year-old Boulder company, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, pushes aside the clichés of modern dance (aversion to narrative, exuberant athleticism) without discounting what makes it so appealing: the freedom to experiment.

The company (really just Sher-Machherndl and his partner Jenifer, plus a rotating cast of high-level guests) is aptly named. It's tart yet rich — and can be an acquired taste for some. It doesn't do the lucrative, crowd-pleasing "Nutcracker." It doesn't emulate the cheesy spectacle of "So You Think You Can Dance."

It's a considered, highly at-



mospheric enterprise that fares better in places like New York and Europe than in Colorado — though a recent performance of Sher-Machherndl's "Vertical Migration" at the University of Denver's Newman Center was packed to the gills.

A former principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet and Bavarian State Ballet, Sher-Machherndl had his first European premiere in February (with the Finnish National Ballet) and is already planning a return date with the Finnish National Opera in 2011. With his teaching at Cleo Parker Robinson Dance and enjoying kudos from the larger dance world, Sher-Machherndl had a very, very good year.

John Wenzel

The best of 2010

The eight who made 2010 great

BY BRIAN MELTON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC PISCOTTY

# let him eat cake

Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's Robert Sher-Machherndl is turning ballet on its head. It may just be the best thing you've never seen.

**In the beginning, Boulder-based** Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet artistic director Robert Sher-Machherndl's style of choreography felt a little like the hidden thoughts of a schizophrenic. Dancers paced the stage, performing repetitive movements to the blurps and bleeps of composers such as Estonian Arvo Pärt and German electronic musician Pöle. Arms twitched and flailed, performers dropped to the floor without a moment's notice, and there, orchestrating it all on stage, was the spectacle of Sher-Machherndl himself, a lanky and almost otherworldly Austrian without a hair on his head. First-time audience members expecting lacy tutus left scratching their heads, unsure of what they'd seen. It looks like ballet, feels like ballet, but it's far removed from *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*, which is exactly Sher-Machherndl's intention.

During rehearsal in his Boulder studio on a November morning last year, it seemed as though Sher-Machherndl had calmed those mental demons. His imagination and movements seem more unified and more

fluid than his previous work. A 20-minute *pas de deux* is some of the artistic director's most inspired work to date. Forceful, powerful, cohesive, and breathtaking, Sher-Machherndl moves American Ballet Theater's Simone Messmer through his Dairy Center for the Arts rehearsal space in preparation of *Liquid-Space*, set to debut at DU's Newman Center for the Performing Arts within the week. On this particular body, in this particular moment, Boulder's "alien of extraordinary ability" is finding his voice. It is explosive. It is assertive, beautiful, and in control. It's the voice he's been developing for some 40 years. The only problem is very few people get to see it.



On this particular body, in this particular moment, Boulder's "alien of extraordinary ability" is finding his voice. It is explosive. It is assertive, beautiful, and in control. It's the voice he's been developing for some 40 years. The only problem is very few people get to see it.



#### A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Sher-Machherndl's story begins like any Austrian ballet phenomenon turned

Boulder, Colorado, artistic director's would. Born in mid-September of 1961 in Vienna, this skinny little kid began ballet school at the age of seven with aspirations of being Fred Astaire. He danced and performed in musicals at the 200-year-old Theater an der Wien with men and women twice his age; auditioned for the prestigious Bavarian State Ballet in Munich at age 18; then landed the ultimate ballet gig as principal dancer for the Dutch National Ballet, an experience Sher-Machherndl calls "the highlight of my career."

Under the direction of Dutch National's Rudi van Dantzig, Sher-Machherndl flourished, spending the next several years binging on traditional ballets and garnering national acclaim for his work. But after a decade of dancing through the ballet canon, the then 31-year-old began to get antsy. "I wanted a change," he says. "I could still dance, but I wanted to learn a different side to the business."

Change came in the form of choreographing contemporary dance. He cut his chops with the Salzburg International Ballet, codirecting with the well-known Peter Breuer before returning to Holland to work with Scapino Ballet Rotterdam. "After four years there, I made another decision to do something different," says the choreographer. "So I went to London."

It was his decision to move to the UK that changed Sher-Machherndl's life. In 1997, he met Jennifer Sher, who was visiting family but was living a world away in Boulder. "I thought, what the hell, just go for it," he says.

"That's how I got here, it's gorgeous, you know, but it's a pretty small town."

"Our first challenge was getting Robert a green card," says Sher, who handles publicity for Lemon Sponge Cake. "We went to an immigration lawyer who told us that he basically needed to marry an American, but I'm not American. Then she asked if he'd done anything significant with his life,

and he had his career as a ballet dancer. She wrote a petition for Robert to become an alien of extraordinary ability."

Sher-Machherndl's alien of extraordinary ability visa — a specific immigration status that applies to men and women who have a recognized ability in arts, sciences, business, or athletics — took a short three weeks to process. A year later, the two were married in Boulder, and Sher-Machherndl got to work.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet began with a handful of small projects in and around Boulder, the choreographer taking in a

few local dancers and writing short pieces while teaching classes. Prior to the company's first full-length performance, 2000's *UnCut*, Sher and Sher-Machherndl were having dinner at Trios Enoteca in Boulder. "We were just fooling around, thinking we had to call the company something," says Sher-Machherndl. "We took it off the menu and thought, 'Lemon Sponge Cake. Well, this looks good.'"

Since that first performance, Sher-Machherndl and his unusually named company have become a staple in the relatively small world of professional dance. His sparse use of female dancers (anywhere from one to three accompany him on stage), his broken ballet positions, and his eclectic choice of music have become his calling card.

"It's very in vogue right now to use a handful of people," he says. "The practice has just come on in the past couple of years. Recently, there was some iconic small-group choreography in London, and it's funny that people in different places are doing what I'm doing, too. So I'm right on with it" — "it" being his inspiration, which comes from a variety of post-modern sources such as film, music, and live theater.

His biggest artistic influence comes from the dancers themselves, the way in which each individual body adapts to his challenging movements. "When I work with someone new, I'm inspired by her movements to the music," he says. "Sometimes Jenifer and I think of a title, and suddenly that can give me ideas. Some people say *Liquid-Space* has nothing to do with the title. But in my head, it does."

"Robert's choreography is exciting and fun to learn," says Rebekah Arth, a 22-year-old dancer who has been with the company since August. "Sometimes it can be a little awkward. He likes a specific look, and it's


hard to get there sometimes, but I'm constantly learning and exploring new depths."

#### IT'S UP TO YOU, NEW YORK

Lemon Sponge Cake typically performs three to four original ballets a year (totaling 22 since 2000), has four prestigious New York Ballet Builders performances under its belt, and has performed with countless nationally known ballet dancers: the legendary Susan Jaffe, Valene Madonia of the Joffrey Ballet, and Messmer, to name a few. Next month, Sher-Machherndl takes *Liquid-Space* with him to New York, where he and Minna Tervamäki, principal dancer with the Finnish National Ballet, will perform together at the Alvin Ailey Citigroup Theater, the world-renowned ballerina's first performance in the Big Apple. Lemon Sponge Cake has been building towards these two evenings (April 28 and 29) since it began.

The goal of the New York performances is to catch the eyes of talent agents and producers who can help Sher-Machherndl sell his original work to other companies and who will book Lemon Sponge Cake at festivals across the country. Despite the attention the choreographer's work has attracted since 2000, the problem with settling down in a remote area of the country is the lack of national exposure.

"A lot of agents and presenters in New York are interested in us from our short Ballet Builders performances but won't hire us until they see a full evening," says Sher. "They won't fly to Denver to see one either. They tell me, 'When you perform in New York, we'll come.' But I need them to perform there. So we decided to take the risk and produce the show ourselves. We have a reputation for doing the work Robert's doing, but people aren't seeing it outside of Boulder and Denver."

"When I got here, I didn't know the American system, I had only heard of ABT and the New York City Ballet. I had never heard of nonprofit," Sher-Machherndl says. "Denver and Boulder have been good to us. It's great to perform here, but I've learned that you have to travel and show off what you can do. We have to get out there and do it ourselves." 

#### LIQUID-SPACE

Tuesday, April 28, and  
Wednesday, April 29, 8 pm  
The Ailey Citigroup Theater  
405 W. 55th St. (and 9th  
Ave.), New York  
For more information or to  
help support the company,  
visit [lemonspongecake.org](http://lemonspongecake.org)  
or [smarttix.com](http://smarttix.com)

# Life & Arts

RETURN OF HAO JIANG TIAN | CLASSICAL, 7D

NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT | 5D

## 'Alien of Extraordinary Ability'

Local choreographer returns to Europe for encore performance

Dale Bridges  
For the Camera

When the Austrian-born ballet dancer and choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl applied for a U.S. visa more than a decade ago, the government approved his application with uncharacteristic efficiency and assigned him the designation of "Alien of Extraordinary Ability." It is a strange title but one that seems to fit Sher-Machherndl. He is a tall, lean man with a shaved head and a look of such intense focus in his dark eyes that he sometimes appears to be otherworldly. His body is composed of a series of geometric improbabilities — the angular nose and cheek bones fading into the perfectly round cranium positioned on top of a little frame with a series of graceful right angles. It's difficult to imagine a human more perfectly constructed for the dance stage.

Most foreign citizens wait months or  
**SEE CHOREOGRAPHER, 10D**

## Dance



Mark Laffingwell/Camera

Robert Sher-Machherndl, foreground, founder of the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, sits working in Boulder, away from the dance scene, allowing him to be true to his creative vision.

## Choreographer returns to Europe for encore

*Continued from 1D*

even years for their visas to be processed, but Sher-Machherndl received his in just three weeks. That's the "Extraordinary Ability" part.

Sher-Machherndl began dancing at a young age in his hometown of Vienna and has continued to perfect his art over the decades, earning accolades and titles from the most renowned ballet companies in the world. He met his current partner, Jennifer Sher, at a ballet class in London and then followed her to the United States. After teaching dance at Colorado State University for a number of years, he founded a Boulder dance company called Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet in 2003.

"I never planned for it to happen this way," said Sher-Machherndl. "We just kept working hard and moving forward and now here we are in Boulder. It is a strange place for a ballet company."

Strange, indeed. Modern ballet is an extremely competitive, traditional art form that tends to survive almost exclusively in metropolitan areas: Moscow, Paris, New York City.

"People in the world of ballet have never heard of Boulder," said Sher-Machherndl. "I could not get them

to come here and see my work, so I had to bring my work to them."

Over the years, Sher-Machherndl has choreographed numerous performances with Lemon Sponge Cake, and he has taken several of them to New York City. The reception has been overwhelmingly positive. Sher-Machherndl is a four-time winner of the New York Ballet Builders choreography award, and the *New York Times* called him "a choreographer to watch for."

Part of the reason that Lemon Sponge Cake has been so well-received is that Sher-Machherndl continues to experiment and push the boundaries of the art form. Unlike most choreographers who refuse to break with tradition, Sher-Machherndl is aggressively taking ballet into the postmodern era. His choreography tends to emphasize minimalism and economy of motion instead of those flamboyant performances of the traditionalists, and his musical choices are often surprising. For a performance called "Liquid Space," he uses electronic music from three different Berlin DJs, which has surprised and delighted many critics.

"Traditional ballet is fine, but it is outdated in many ways," said Sher-Machherndl. "Ballet is about human motion and emotion. We should not be stuck in the past. Dance should

be timeless, and it should move forward. I always want to move forward."

But sometimes in order to move forward, you have to go back.

In February, Sher-Machherndl is returning to Europe, but this time he is adding his original creation with him. Lemon Sponge Cake will be performing "Liquid Space" in Helsinki with the world-renowned ballet dancer Minna Teravahä. It is a great honor to be recognized by the Finnish National Ballet, and it seldom happens to choreographers who live in a small town in Colorado.

After performing and choreographing ballet all over the world for so many years, Sher-Machherndl has earned a reputation for excellence and innovation. Dancers and companies in Europe are starting to seek him out for projects, and they have invited him to present his artistic vision on the international stage. But Sher-Machherndl still appreciates the isolation and freedom that the Rocky Mountains have given him.

"I think it has been a good thing for me to be in Boulder in some ways," said Sher-Machherndl. "In many ways, I have been out of town from the dance community, and I think that has been good. I am not influenced by other choreographers and critics. I have been able to pursue my vision far away from the city. I am allowed to be myself here."



Marty Calvano/Camera

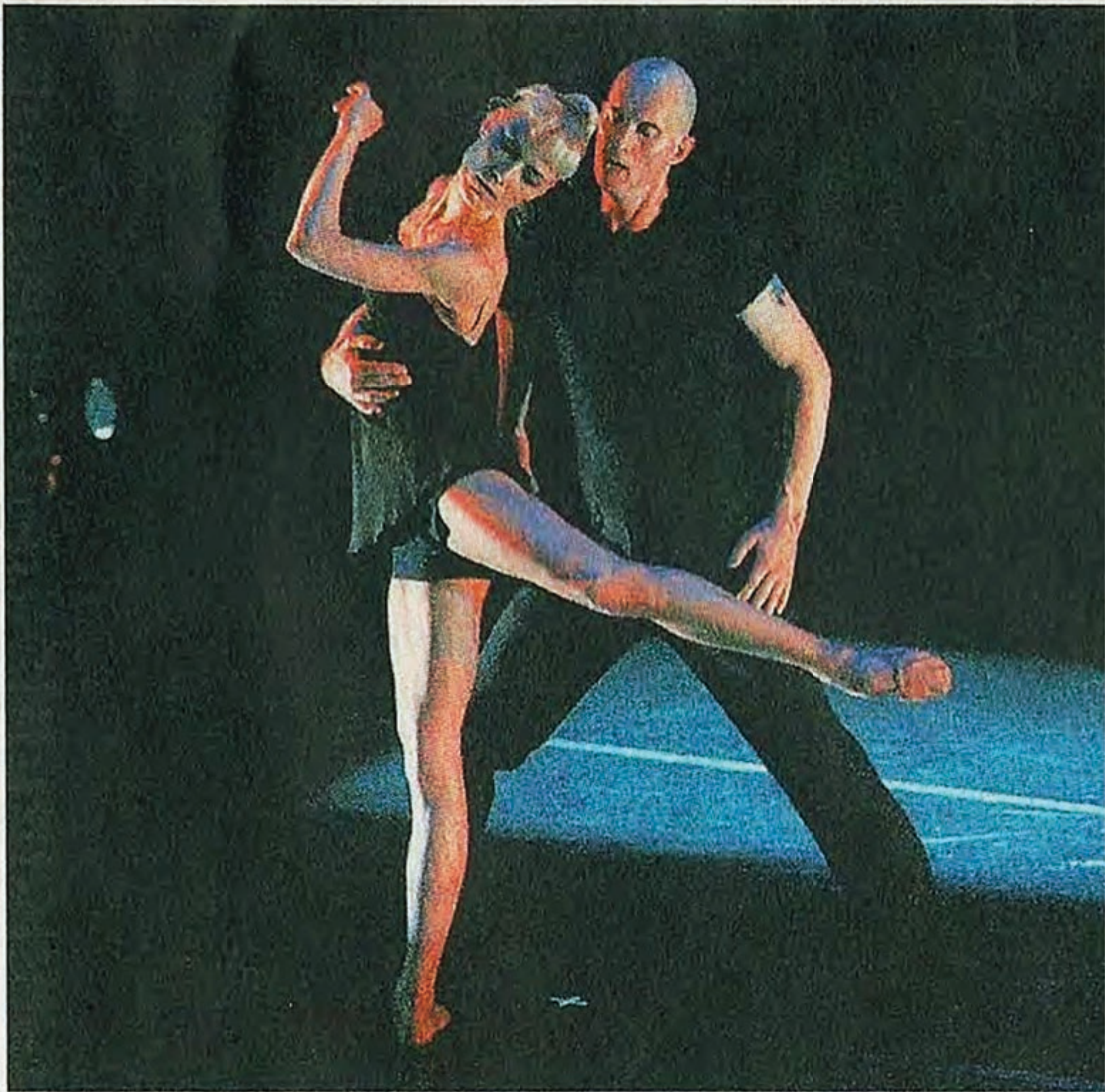
Robert Sher-Machherndl and Rebekah Arth of the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet rehearse "Vertical Migration." To see a video of the rehearsal, visit [www.dailycamera.com](http://www.dailycamera.com).

# The New York Times

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RUBY WASHINGTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Liquid-Space** Minna Tervamaki and Robert Sher-Machherndl at the New York premiere of this piece at the Ailey Citigroup Theater.

*Restless Feet on the Road,  
Trying Out a New Vehicle*

## Review: Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet

### "Vertical Migration", Sher-Machherndl's choreography

December 02, 2010

Written by Leanne Goebel



*Vertical Migration* opens with dancer Robert Sher-Machherndl dragging ballerina Rebekah Shoaf across the stage, her feet dug so deeply into the floor that one almost believes she is leaving a mark as he tugs her by her hands, arms fully extended, legs straight and pressing, body folded low to the ground. This is followed by more tension and flexion as she stands, forms a tunnel, and he slides beneath her legs, gets up and does it again and again as she straddles the obstacle of his body and crosses the stage. The movements are stark, yet beautiful. The dancers seem almost passive, yet intensely present. At one point early on in the production, Shoaf leaps and Sher-Machherndl grabs her by the waist stopping her in mid air, her body curving around his hands, arms and legs still outstretched in the direction she was going. *Vertical Migration*, like other works by choreographer and dancer Sher-Machherndl, is a dance about human life where momentum shifts, plans change, the simplest moments spawn great things, the biggest ideas collapse into nothing and there are ups and downs, fluid joy and crippling pain. All of this compressed into a mere hour on stage set to music equally diverse compiled by musician and composer Zoe Keating, a contemporary cellist. It's a classical pas de deux reinvented by a native of Vienna now living in Boulder Colorado whose contemporary ballet company is named after a dessert from a restaurant menu--Lemon Sponge Cake.

Framed with the traditional entrée, adagio, two variations for each dancer, and a coda, Sher-Machherndl's pas de deux is rooted in classical ballet, but inspired by everything from the daily news, African dance, and all types of music, to what is seen on the street, or from the window of an auto. The influence of Pina Bausch is also present. The revolutionary Bausch, who died suddenly in June 2009, a mere five days after being diagnosed with cancer, became famous in her later years for asking her dancers to mine their own memories and experiences as their source of inspiration. Sher-Machherndl has adopted Bausch's technique when choreographing and although he doesn't admit it, he seems equally inspired by the male-female interaction that was often found in Bausch's choreography.

"It always starts with movement," Sher-Machherndl said when asked how he choreographs a dance. "In the beginning I don't have a story in my head, then while I do it, a theme comes up, but I never discuss the details with my collaborator. The main thing is moving together and how it feels. In my head things come up, some things are very tragic, or very strong and powerful, but not a whole story. I leave it open to the person I'm working with to do the same. Anything they want to bring from their private life they can. It comes out strong in a natural way then and the viewer makes up their own story."

Sher-Machherndl is a lithe presence on stage in black tank, black pants, clean shaven head. He's a mystery. His dance movements are natural, almost effortless in contrast to his partner Shoaf who is muscular, tall, technically superb and filled with emotion, her face and eyes expressive. Her simple black silk sheath features a twig pattern in gold. And while the audience may interpret the life expressed and explored through dance to have significant ups and downs, there are few highs and lows in this production, its not bipolar, but more even-tempered. Yet there's an odd tension as if at any moment something could snap and the appearance of control would be shattered. It's a dichotomy.

I spoke with Sher-Machherndl via telephone a week after seeing the performance. I asked him what inspired him? What his mission and purpose was as a choreographer and dancer? "I want to be the best. I want to achieve the best, give the best, give it all," he said, then added that the day to day routine of working in the studio and developing a new idea was a struggle. "It's very depressing when you're in it and you don't know what you're doing, but then you look at it from the outside... I want to be different than everybody else. Try to achieve something different. I wanted to make something with two people for an evening, but no matter where I perform or what venue I am very eager to give my best."

Trained in classical ballet, Sher-Machherndl was a principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet and Bavarian State Ballet, he was also a member of the Nederlands Dance Theater, Salzburg Ballet and Scapino Ballet. He expressed a desire to explore classical ballet technique and "play around with it."

"I try not to make any restrictions. It took me a long time to break loose. It's so engrained in me ... classical ballet ... you can do what you want, but its always in my head," Sher-Machherndl said.

That tension between perfection and chaos, between the engrained traditions and freedom to express with the body in ways that aren't classifiable, to have a dancers toes be the focus of movement as they creep across a floor, or to hold a pose for what seems like a long time, to hop, to slide, to pull, and push, and walk, and run combined with arabesque, glissade, relevé and plié is evident in Vertical Migration. The desire to be the best and the moments of insecurity when one feels less than good and the facade that one utilizes to hold it all together, keep it all-contained seem to be thematic. One of my favorite parts of the pas de deux is when the pair appear to be vibrated across the stage. In the performance I saw at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts on the campus of the University of Denver, the theatre was a smaller black box space, where the audience was elevated above the stage and the dancers were so close you could almost reach out and touch them. The lighting during this particular section of the dance, formed grids across the floor. It was as if the music and lights were palpating through the dancers' bodies, which shook with tremors and pulsing arm gestures while a bluesy voice sang "Take my hand Lord all along this tear's journey won't you take my hand."



Not long after this, the dance ended as it began, with Sher-Machherndl dragging Shoaf across the floor, her standing, attempting to climb over the obstacle of his body as he slips along the floor beneath her legs. This is repeated three times and then he drags her once more. He slips along the floor beneath her legs again, only this time he remained curled in a fetal position as she continued climbing, migrating to the back corner of the stage into the darkness. I left the theater feeling at once moved and perplexed. What had I just witnessed? What did it mean? Everything? Nothing? It pushed buttons. I felt uncomfortable, as if Sher-Macherndl had played puppet master pulling my strings, just as he lowered the outstretched arm of Shoaf during the dance, she would reach up he would walk in circles around her and lower her arm, this too was repeated over and over and at one point he even appears to pull her foot out from under her causing her to collapse. I had been manipulated, but I had been a willing party to that manipulation. It was sublime.

To catch a performance of Vertical Migration book a flight to Europe where Sher-Machherndl and Shoaf will perform in Helsinki and Vienna in 2011. or watch for possible dance festival appearances of **Limon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet**. It promises to be sweet, yet tangy.

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VOS-teatterit  
 Festarikesä  
 Jorma Uolinen  
 Jokinen

## Minna Tervamäen onnistunut Amerikan-vierailu

Hollantilaissyntyisen, Yhdysvalloissa asuvan Robert Sher-Machherndlin uusi koreografia *BACH 260* otettiin hyvin vastaan Coloradossa. Teoksessa vierailee Kansallisbaletin tähtitanssija Minna Tervamäki. Tämä on Tervamäen ja Sher-Machherndlin toinen yhteistyö. Edellinen oli Helsingissäkin nähty *Liquid Space*. Sher-Machherndlin johtaman Lemon Sponge Caken kantaesittämä teos sai kiitosta mm. *New York Timesin* kriitikolta ekspressiivisestä, uutta suuntaa näyttävästä koreografiasta. ●



# HELSINGIN SANOMAT

Sunday, February 14, 2010

Robert Sher-Machherndl dancer/choreographer has returned to the United States after the first Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet European tour with three performances of Liquid-Space, in collaboration with acclaimed étoile dancer Minna Tervamäki, at the Alexander Theater, Helsinki Finland.

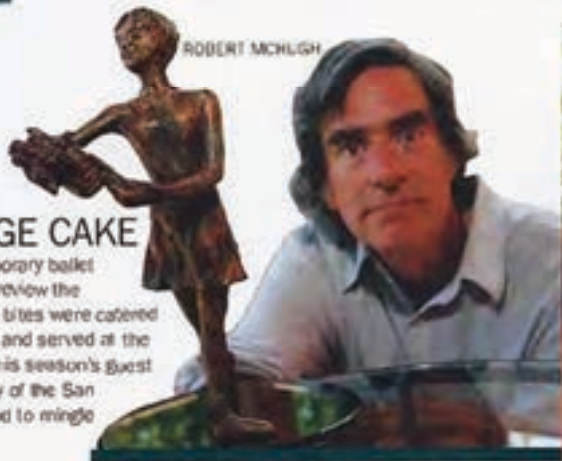
"Minna Tervamäki, étoile for Finnish National Ballet and an Austrian born dancer choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl are powerful and technically strong performers enabling them to fill the theater with their stage presence and charisma. The flow of Liquid Space is intriguing. Body parts segmented into smallest detail are as unpredictable as they are captivating in their motion. In various scenes, Tervamäki's solo performed en pointe as well as the segments performed by Sher-Machherndl were brilliant..." Mika Saarelainen, Helsingin Sanomat

FOR LIFE IN THE HIGH CITY

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## SOCIETY & REVELRY



ROBERT MCHUGH

### LEMON SPONGE CAKE

This Boulder-based contemporary ballet company held a brunch to preview the 2010 season. The delicious bites were catered by Sunflower Organic Dining and served at the peaceful Hakubai Temple. This season's guest artist Rachel Viselli, formerly of the San Francisco Ballet, was on hand to mingle with the guests.



MARGARET BALL, MATT GECHER, ANNA ROSTALUK



MAJA DURFEE, VIRGINIA GURLEY



JENIFER SHER AND ROBERT SHERMAN-MACHETROL



TESSA VICTORIA DIMES, RACHEL VISELLI, JANE MURDOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE PETERSON

# MAGAZINE DANCE

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

MAY 2009



Minna  
Tervamäki

Jonas Lundqvist, Courtesy LISCCB

## Europe + Europe @ Citigroup

Former Dutch National principal Robert Sherman Machemdl brings his company, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, from Colorado to Ailey Citigroup Theater April 28 and 29. With a new muse, the fiercely intelligent and statuesque Finnish prima ballerina Minna Tervamäki, he will unveil his latest work, *Liquid Space*. In it, a man and a woman explore the points where classical technique can intersect with isolation, communication, silence, and deep musicality. See [www.lemonspongecake.org](http://www.lemonspongecake.org).

—Elizabeth Kendall



EUROPE

**ROBERT SHER-MACHHERNDL****Liquid-Space****Ailey Citigroup Theater, New York**

Robert Sher-Machherndl doesn't make it easy for you.

*Liquid-Space* is challenging—though not without its rewards.

This piece is performed by himself and the stunning Minna Tervamäki, a principal with the Finnish National Ballet. As a pair, they simultaneously match and contrast. She: blond, sleekly muscled, a technically solid grasp of the steps. He: cleanly-shaven head, lanky, taking a natural approach to the steps. Both dance cleanly, but it's not sterile - there's a lot going on under the surface. In Tervamäki, you see it in her eyes and in how she holds those extensions. In Machherndl, there's a latent mischievousness, some devilry lurking within. It seemed he might break out of the planned choreography and start doing I-don't-know-what: something impromptu, radical, maybe even dangerous. I don't know which makes better theatre - to see him actually cut loose like that or, for an entire evening, to be held in suspense that he might.

What's not easy about this work is that he's getting at something but it's hard to tell what. The work has its high points - particularly in the partnering - yet I felt this collection of solos and duets lacked a sense of culmination. This may have been by design but I felt the work laboured under this canvas of evenness - only the vivid presence of the performers, like tent poles, kept the whole thing up and gave us space to breathe.

Sher-Machherndl, Austrian by birth, is now settled in Boulder, Colorado. He's been connected to a number of illustrious names throughout his career: Jirí Kylián, Hans van Manen, Maurice Béjart, Dutch National Ballet, Nederlands Dans Theater, Scapino Ballet - just a tiny sampling of the field's giants with which he's been affiliated. I find the arc of his life an interesting one, like a meteorite which, after blazing a fiery path through the sky, has now landed in a relatively unknown place and, somewhere in that crater, something alien and new is evolving, not yet fully formed, but definitely something to keep an eye on.

# FRIDAY DANCE

Lemon Sponge  
Cake debuts show  
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## DANCE

# Ballet celebrates Bach through dance

Lemon Sponge  
Cake debuts new  
show in Boulder

By Mikala Altner  
For the Camera

Boulder-based contemporary ballet Lemon Sponge Cake's new performance, "Bach 260," commemorates the 260th anniversary of the death of Johann Sebastian Bach this summer. The ballet will feature compositions by Bach as well as modern music from Gernot Klis.

The piece, choreographed by Robert Sher-Machberndl, artistic director and choreographer for Lemon Sponge Cake, was inspired by the rhythm of Bach's music.

"It has very cool rhythms, it suits my work and inspires me. With the use of the electronic music the contrast is just great," says Sher-Machberndl.

The piece will feature three female dancers who each dance with Sher-Machberndl but never meet on stage. They all have different specialties, one of the women will perform a piece with modern dance influence, and another will be en Pointe. Representing different ages, there is about a 20-year age span between the women.

"All of the dancers move differently, and they have different feels. They represent a wide range of completely different human beings," says Sher-Machberndl.

One of the principles in the performance will be Minna Tervaniemi, etouille dancer with the Finnish National Ballet. Tervaniemi has performed all major ballet roles.



Robert Sher-Machberndl and Minna Tervaniemi perform in Helsinki.

Courtesy photo

Sher-Machberndl and Tervaniemi began working together three years ago. Since then, they have continued to collaborate, Sher-Machberndl says. "We have a good working relationship. When I collaborate, what kind of people they are is important. It is about the whole package, with Minna, the package fit. We don't have to force anything. She likes the choreography."

After premiering "Bach 260"

in Boulder, Lemon Sponge Cake will tour the show in Europe, including Helsinki, and Sher-Machberndl's native Vienna.

"I am happy to share this evening with people in Denver and Boulder. I like to show what I am going to do and it is cool because it is something that has never been seen before. We will be going to all these other cities and people here will have seen it first."

### IF YOU GO

What | World Premier of Lemon Sponge Cake's "Bach 260"

When | 8 p.m., Saturday, July 31

Where | Chautauq Auditorium

Tickets | \$22-\$75

Info | 303-440-7656 or [chautauq.org/tickets](http://chautauq.org/tickets).com

# Life & Arts

**Robert Sher-Machherndl, left, and Tessa Victoria-Daines, dancers with Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, practice for an upcoming performance at the Dairy Center for the Arts. Lemon Sponge Cake is part of the Mile High Movement Dance Showcase at next week's National Performing Arts Convention in Denver. The event features 13 dance companies from the U.S. and Australia, including local groups Morapovida Contemporary Dance, 3rd Law Dance/Theater, Cloo Parker Robinson Dance and the Colorado Ballet. Below right, a detail from the practice.**

Photos by Stephanie Davis  
For the Camera



Continued from 1D

international community the level of talent in Colorado.

"For Denver and for the whole area I think it's a great opportunity for the arts," he says. "It's exciting and important at the same time."

The Austrian-born Sher-Machherndl — deemed "a choreographer to watch for" by the New York Times — will be performing along with Tessa Victoria-Daines in a 12-minute, two-person dance titled "I Trust You to Kill Me." (The title is taken from a poem by the Sufi poet Rumi.) The performance will take place on Thursday as part of the Mile High Movement Dance Showcase at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts on the University of Denver campus.



Artists and arts organizations from around the world converge in Denver for the National Performing Arts Convention

## Mixed MEDIA

**Robert Orth (Richard Nixon), Chen-Ye Yuan (Chou En-lai) and Mark T. Panzic (Mao Tse-tung) in Cincinnati Opera's 2007 production of Adams' 'Nixon in China.' Opera Colorado performs its version of the opera next week in Denver. Philip Grothens, Cincinnati Opera/Courtesy photo**



By Vince D'Angelino | For the Camera

**S**tarting Tuesday, the eyes of the international arts community will be turned a mile high as the National Performing Arts Convention (NPAC), a five-day convention and festival celebrating multiple arts disciplines, such as dance, opera, music and theater, takes place at various locations in Denver.

Merging the annual conferences of five of the country's largest arts service organizations — Dance USA, OPERA America, League of American Orchestras, Theatre Communications Group and Chorus America — NPAC is bringing more than 150 performing arts organizations and upward of 5,000 people to Denver for the convention, which is open to artists and the general public.

For local dancer and choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl, of Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet Company, it's a chance to show the

See ARTISTS, 5D



## Fresh, Inventive Partnering, Spinning Full Throttle

Ballet Builders was established in 1990 by Ruth Chester and Michael Kraus to present dances by choreographers interested in working with the classical ballet canon. Of the six choreographers presented by Ballet Builders on Saturday night at Kaye Playhouse, Emery LeCrone was the only one to make something fresh of that idiom.

**JENNIFER DUNNING**

**DANCE REVIEW**

Her new "Pulling to Break," set to Philip Glass's Violin Concerto No. 1 and performed by six members of North Carolina Dance Theater Two, looks as if it might one day expand. But the ballet is already a delightful whole, exploring inventive partnering as well as the ways spinning, full-throttle movement can echo and incorporate the planes of the space around it. Mr. LeCrone's subtle use of strong lighting effects by Ted Sullivan was impressively savvy. (She trained at the GreenBoco Ballet and has performed with the North Carolina Dance Theater and Christopher Wheeldon's Morphoses. Her sister, Megan, performs with the New York City Ballet.)

Robert Sher-Machherndl's new "I Trust You to Kill Me" is set to a wittily murky, clunky score, "Jutgs," by Polè (Sefan Bötke), the post-techno German. Like the music, Mr. Sher-

### Ballet Builders 2008

Kaye Playhouse

Machherndl's duet, which he performed with Tessa Victoria, pushes along, only to short-circuit briefly but repeatedly. The dancers stride, tangle and go suddenly and oddly awry like fizzling automatons. But the two are all too human: he an overtly bullying Svengali, she his sneakily bullying mate. Funny, dark and provocative, "Trust" was a highlight of the program, though it had little to do with classical ballet.

Rick McCullough's "With Inmate Formality," to string music by Philip Glass, has clearly been influenced by Sir Kylian, for whom Mr. McCullough performed in the Netherlands Dance Theater, lyrical and gracious, "Formality" quietly establishes a group of grown-up men and women — no ballet babies here — who fold in and out in space and into one another's elegant arms.

The program's first three dances — Robert Dekkers's "Toccare," Avichai Scher's "Tribulations" and Kate Thomas's "Measurement and Caution" — were intelligent and packed with technical challenges for their skillful performers. But except for a few fleeting allusions to unrealized narratives or emotions, none suggested that dance was an expressive art.





David Andrews

The pas de deux features Tessa Victoria and Robert Sher-Machherndl in "Allen Nation."

By John Wenzel Denver Post Staff Writer

## Boulder ballet goes for flat shoes | Robert Sher-Machherndl has never shied from confronting thorny issues through his work,

whether modern or historical.

As founder of Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, Sher-Machherndl has choreographed 15 full-length pieces in his company's seven-year history. He explores contemporary pointe technique with energy and style, elegantly commenting on everything from spiritual alienation to the Holocaust.

But when his latest piece, "Leopoldstadt 22," world premieres at Boulder's Dairy Center on Saturday, Sher-Machherndl's pointe-centric, all-female choreography will take a gingerly step back.

"This show is on flat shoes. It has sort of a ballet technique background but it's more new movement," Sher-Machherndl said. "It's contemporary modern but still has something of ballet in there."

Indeed, the spare "Leopoldstadt 22" opens with a naked light bulb dangling over an unadorned stage as two dancers respond to the strains of Arvo Pärt's "Für Alina," one watching and the other reacting. Eventually the pair bleeds into a duet as Uz's "Wake Up Dead Man" chimes in, the object-subject dichotomy becoming less pronounced.

It's a way for Sher-Machherndl to comment on the horrors of the Holocaust and the emotional detachment of modern warfare.

"I'm Austrian and my family are Austrians, and I feel like I have responsibility to do it," he said. "Events like that still reverberate heavily through international culture. People still suffer everywhere under oppression."

The piece is both impressionistic and full of bold statements, especially when the electronic music of LCD Soundsystem enters the picture. The clash of gentle, haunting sounds and modern industrial ambience is typical Sher-Machherndl.

"Allen Nation" will accompany "Leopoldstadt 22" this weekend and during its Denver premiere March 17-18. The piece, while more in line with

much of Sher-Machherndl's work, still mixes the modern and classical in its music and movement.

Sher-Machherndl drew on his outsider-looking-in status to choreograph the alternately calm and fast-paced piece. He is the first person in Colorado history to receive an "Alien of Extraordinary Ability" visa, granting him permanent residence.

"There's a definite European touch to what I do, but I'm sure I'm influenced by America," said Sher-Machherndl, who has lived here nine years. "I've traveled a lot in the U.S. to see other things. I'm influenced by my surroundings as a citizen in everyday life, not just an artist who flies around in the clouds."

"TigerLilly," which premiered locally in 2005, opens in New York later this month as part of the special-invitation BalletBuilders program. Sher-Machherndl, a former principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet and Bavarian State Ballet, has won that program's emerging choreographer award twice.

This will be his third visit to the Florence Gould Hall stage.

"TigerLilly" is yet another work that employs the music of Arvo Pärt — unsurprising considering he's one of Sher-Machherndl's favorite composers.

"It's really cool music," he said. "It's classic but when you put headphones on you can sit there and blast it."

"Leopoldstadt 22" and "Allen Nation" world premiere, March 10-11, Dairy Center for the Arts, 822-832, [thedairy.org](http://thedairy.org); Denver premiere, March 17-18, Newman Center for the Performing Arts, 826-831, [Ticketmaster](http://Ticketmaster).

Staff writer John Wenzel can be reached at 303-954-1642 or [jwenzel@denverpost.com](mailto:jwenzel@denverpost.com).

spring 2005

themindefulife.com

# elephant

## old guard, avante garde

Lemon sponge cake is particularly delicious when served by seven leggy women sporting pointe shoes.

Lemon Sponge Cake—a Boulder, Colorado-based dance company—takes a hip approach to this most traditional of Western dance forms. Austrian born choreographer and artistic director Robert Sher-Machherndl takes ballet out of the museum, working to translate this well-loved tradition into a vital, living medium that can express contemporary triumphs, struggles, concepts and realities. Lemon Sponge Cake's home, a sunny, lovely ballet studio at the Dairy Center for the Arts, hosts a range of classes, sessions and workshops for dancers of varying ages and abilities.

Mr. Sher-Machherndl has designed an inventive, thoroughly contemporary style—danced entirely *en pointe* by an all-female company. "To begin a new choreography, I just try things out, play with different movements and see what happens...For me, choreography is

noticing life, seeing life as it is today. It is a reflection of personal experiences that are influenced by our times." He draws from an acclaimed dancing career with some of Europe's most prestigious ballet companies: Dutch National Ballet, Bavarian State Ballet and Nederlands Dance Theater. While a master of classical technique, his work is

### WE'LL SEE YOU THERE

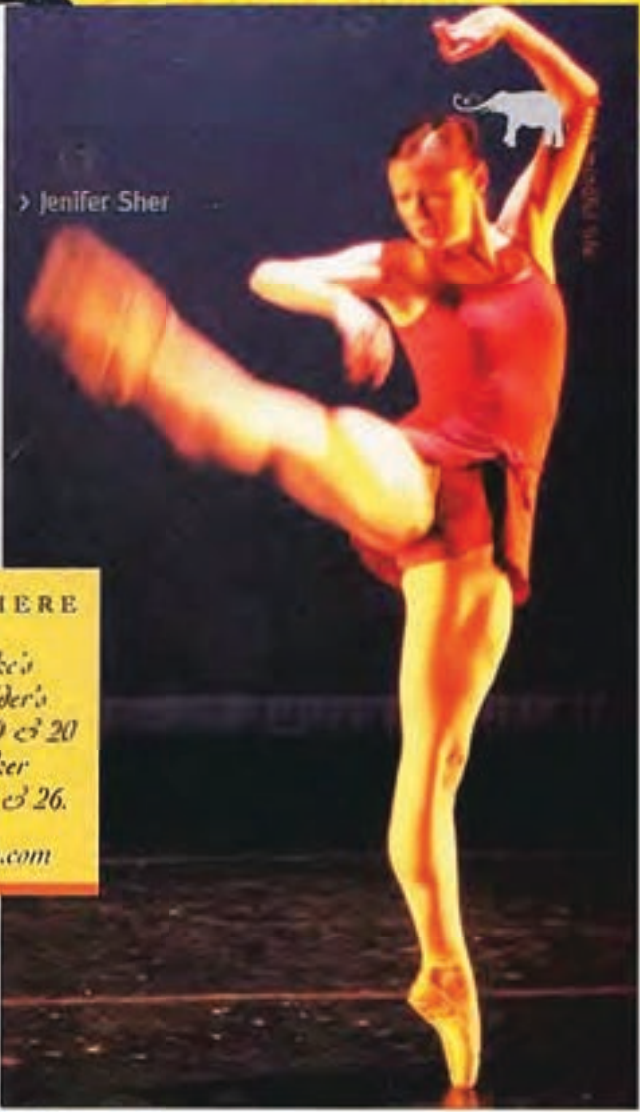
Catch Lemon Sponge Cake's upcoming 'Vertigo' at Boulder's Dairy Center—March 18, 19 & 20 or in Denver at Cleo Parker Robinson Theater March 25 & 26.

For more: [lemonspongecake.com](http://lemonspongecake.com)

influenced by life on the street, fashion, TV, music and the media.

But perhaps most importantly, to Mr. Sher-Machherndl, he's been able to communicate his passion for ballet to a new generation—of dancers and fans.

→ Jenifer Sher



## Dancing On

How boutique dance troupes are weathering the downturn.

By Lisa Jo Sagolla  
June 25, 2009



For any state of ill health—be it physical or financial—the best medicine is usually preventative. So as might be expected, the dance artists who are continuing to move forward in these times of economic distress are those who've been managing their finances carefully all along and heeded early warning signs of the downturn.

### A Piece of Cake

"When the times were good, we didn't get crazy and decide to add this and this and this. We kept our focus on doing quality work on a scale that we could afford," says Robert Sher-Machherndl, choreographer and artistic director of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, based in Boulder, Colo. Sher-Machherndl, a Viennese native, co-founded the company in 2000, when he moved to the U.S. after

teaching in England for Ballet Rambert and Matthew Bourne's production of *Swan Lake* and dancing with the Dutch National Ballet, Bavarian State Ballet, and Netherlands Dance Theater.

Lemon Sponge Cake's other founder is its executive director, Jennifer Sher, who is Sher-Machherndl's wife and the person he credits for the company's fiscal responsibility. "She has always been very careful about how we use our money," he says. "We want the company to survive and to grow, so we never want to throw everything away in one year and then have no money left. And we also operate a school, which helps us financially."

Sher-Machherndl believes the troupe's modest size is another reason it has been able to continue thriving in a difficult economy: "We keep the company very small, and not just in terms of dancers but in terms of office workers as well. Yet we produce very high-level work. For example, I often use dancers from American Ballet Theatre. There's something about working small that forces you to really focus your priorities. And I like that."

For the company's appearance in April at the Ailey Citigroup Theater in New York, Sher-Machherndl presented just one piece: a full-evening duet, which he performed with Minna Tervamaki, principal dancer with the Finnish National Ballet. Though the dance was small in scale and choreographed by Sher-Machherndl, incorporating Tervamaki, in her New York debut, proved to be a cunning, cost-effective way to elevate the event's excitement factor for critics and audiences.

Lemon Sponge Cake's size changes from project to project, and Sher-Machherndl is always open to discovering new dancers with whom to work. He encourages interested dancers to contact him directly at [www.lemonspongecake.org](http://www.lemonspongecake.org).

# Choreographer plus Mozart keeps audience challenged

By Marc Shulgold

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

**BOULDER** — Interesting things can happen when predictability goes head-to-head against unpredictability. In this case, the "combatants" were Mozart and Boulder choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl.

On Saturday (and again Sunday) in Chautauqua Auditorium, the dancemaker and three women from his Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet presented an hourlong journey that kept a rapt audience guessing as to what unexpected things would happen next.

*Mozart 250* made brilliant use of the composer's symmetrical purity as a foil against a series of solos and duets mixing classical elegance with purposeful asymmetry.

In lesser hands, it could have come unraveled and turned frustratingly disjointed.

But the Viennese-born choreographer is a master of controlling his unending flow of ideas, organizing them into something not quite understandable or obvious — allowing his audiences to draw their own scenario and their own conclusions.

There's no point in trying to describe all the lovely and not-so-lovely moments, wonderfully danced by Sher-Machherndl, Valerie Madonia, Tessa Victoria and Holly Norton. Classical ballet steps and combinations alternated almost casually with quirky modern and postmodern poses, collapses

and bends.

*Mozart 250* (named in honor of the anniversary year of the composer's birth) drew on chamber pieces that soothed the ears, as the choreography fired the imagination.

There were plenty of effective segments — one had Victoria and Sher-Machherndl performing an intriguing duet against a set of hand-held lights. But the centerpiece proved to be a remarkable, magical pas de deux for the choreographer and Madonia.

Danced to the exquisitely understated B-minor Adagio for piano, it unfolded with tenderness and trust — Madonia clinging to her partner, falling backward into his waiting arms, being gently caressed.

One final surprise: Though the music had been mainly Mozart — apart from a segment of ambient techno scratchings — the evening ended with a lush string-orchestra work by Arvo Pärt, *Silouans Song*.

While the harmonies unfolded, the choreographer quickly carted off those hand-held lights one by one — as Victoria repeated a series of gestures that suggested longing and loneliness.

A striking conclusion to an evocative piece. Exactly what *Mozart 250* intended to evoke is open to discussion. Which, of course, is a quality in the best of contemporary art.

Marc Shulgold is the music and dance writer. [Shulgoldm@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:Shulgoldm@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-5296.

## Mozart 250

- **Grade:** A-
- **When and where:** Saturday in Chautauqua Auditorium, Boulder
- **Of note:** Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet performed.



### Lemon Cake

dancemaker Robert Sher-Machherndl turned to his Viennese roots for inspiration for the troupe's weekend performances at Chautauqua Auditorium.

MAY AUGUST 10, 2006

# HISTORY IN DENVER

# 5280



## A Strange Ballet

Robert Sher-Machherndl is not your typical ballet choreographer. The founder of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, and an acclaimed European dancer, Sher-Machherndl is known for inventing moves mid-practice and changing choreography between productions. What holds true between each Sher-Machherndl dance is a blend of pointe technique and contemporary movement. In this month's world premiere of **A Strange Land**, Sher-Machherndl maintains this style but guides his production with one idea—every time you move to a new place you enter a strange land. **A Strange Land: August 16, Chautauqua Auditorium, Boulder.**

\$4.99 | 5280.com | August 2008



## Mozart: An interpretation

Continued from 20D  
 children's song, the above-noted Adagio and Fugue in C minor, the heart-breaking B-minor Adagio and D-minor Fantasia, a movement from the popular C-major sonata (which he dances as a solo) and a prelude and fugue in F.

"I used only chamber music — no orchestral or opera music," he said. "I wanted an intimate piece."

Once he'd made his selections, he pasted together an hour-long soundtrack, following his usual non-storytelling approach. "Mozart is not a character in the piece," he stressed. "I'm just interpreting the music."

At first, he found himself responding to every twist and turn in the score, creating steps that literally mirrored the mood. "But I quickly stopped myself," he noted.

Ambiguity is part of the package with Lemon Sponge Cake, along with its mostly-female lineup. That will soon change, the choreographer revealed.

"I'm finally getting another male dancer," he said, referring to Adam McKinney, a New York-based dancer who'd worked with such important contemporary choreographers as Alonzo King and Maurice Bejart.

Adding a new member to such a small, tight-knit company is a challenge, Sher-Machherndl said — but so is the task of constantly pushing his veteran dancers into unfamiliar territory.

"It's fun," he said. "A good challenge for them, and for me. I always try to surprise them. Each time, I play to their strengths. And they do have a lot of them."

"For me, the quality of the dancers is more important than the quantity."

More Shulgold is the music and dance writer, Shulgold@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-6296



Choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl shines a spotlight on the foot of dancer Tessa Victoria while rehearsing *BluePrints/Mozart 250* for performances this weekend in Boulder.

## Mozart flavors Sponge Cake

Far from usual fare, Boulder troupe dances to a classic

By Marc Shulgold  
 ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

In a rehearsal room at Boulder's Dairy Center for the Arts, Robert Sher-Machherndl pushes the play button, and the grim drama of Mozart's C-minor Fugue propels two dancers into nonstop motion.

The Austrian-born dance maker is not the first to be inspired by Mozart — and he's certainly not the only one drawn to the composer in this year marking the 250th anniversary of his birth. Still, this is something new and unexpected.

On Saturday and Sunday in Chautauqua Auditorium, Sher-Machherndl and three women from his Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet will dance the premiere of *BluePrints/Mozart 250* — his first use of music by his countryman.

In the past, Sher-Machherndl's company has danced to heavy-beat techno pulsations, the dreamy neo-romanticism of Arvo Part, or a series of unrelated sound collages or oldies or what-have-you.

Mozart, then, is quite a departure. It was time, he suggested.

"Sure, the (250th) anniversary inspired me," he said after the rehearsal. "But I created this piece mainly because of my Viennese roots. I was born there and I grew up with this

### BluePrints/Mozart 250

- **When and where:** 8 p.m. Saturday-Sunday in Chautauqua Auditorium, Ninth Street and Baseline Road, Boulder
- **Costs:** \$34 to \$32
- **Information:** 303-442-3282
- **Of Note:** Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet presents a new work by Robert Sher-Machherndl.

The all-female troupe (joined by Sher-Machherndl on occasion) has established itself as one of the region's most intriguing companies, offering full-length works that push the boundaries of post-modern and contemporary ballet. Watching a rehearsal of *BluePrints* reveals a number of the choreographer's quirky touches, along with a few surprises.

In a pas de deux for Victoria and Holly Norton (to the C-minor Fugue), the two women dance purely balletic segments on point and in unison. But then, everything changes in a heartbeat, something Lemon Sponge Cake fans have grown used to over the years.

As the music continues to gain in complexity, Victoria begins maneuvering around on her heels — about as anti-balletic as it gets. Suddenly, she crumples to the floor, while Norton blithely continues her pure, lovely steps.

Such oddly contrasting manu-

Sponge Cake, but Sher-Machherndl always manages to throw in something new and bizarre.

Sure enough, longtime company member Tessa Victoria begins a solo to the Adagio preceding the C-minor Fugue — and is closely shadowed by Sher-Machherndl, who shines a hand-held spotlight on the dancer. Occasionally, he aims the instrument on a leg or foot, leaving the rest of Victoria in near-darkness.

"I saw (the spotlights) on sale at Costco," he later reported, adding with a laugh, "I have no idea what their original purpose is. But I wanted to show how some people can see the whole dancer clearly, and how sometimes that clarity is misleading."

The hand-held light seemed a gimmick at first, he said, "but the concept just stayed with me."

Similarly, the title *BluePrints* popped into his head early, and wouldn't go away. "It was the working title — but I stuck with it, because it sounded really cool."

It's the way he operates, the choreographer confessed. Making dances is almost instinctive, a process that begins with only the accompaniment and, usually, a title.

"I don't know where it all comes from. I'll start with my favorite piece of music, just to inspire me. And I'll think in ballet terms and in moves that are un-balletic."

He recalled that he had toyed with using Mozart's beloved *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, but rejected it because of its super-familiarity.

Instead, he settled on a charming

# On point LIVING & ARTS

## Lemon Sponge Cake's Robert Sher-Machherndl gives ballet a contemporary flare

Story by Jennie Dorriss  
For the Camera  
Photos by Paul Aiken  
Daily Camera

### IF YOU GO

**WHAT** • Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's "Alien Nation"  
**WHEN** • 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Dec. 3  
**WHERE** • Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder  
**TICKETS** • \$22-\$32  
**INFO** • (303) 545-2298 or [www.lemonspongecake.com](http://www.lemonspongecake.com)

### THE FLEET FEET BEHIND LEMON SPONGE CAKE

> LIVING & ARTS, 10

### WORLD VIEW 1B



**R**obert Sher-Machherndl is a world-class dancer and choreographer; when he watches his dancers perform the steps he's created, his feet tap along and his eyes are at once on fire and calm, watching.

But there's one thing that really sets him off. "Don't say that word," he barks at one of his dancers during a recent rehearsal of the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet at Boulder's Dairy Center for the Arts.

His wife, Jennifer Sher, the ballet's executive director, shakes her head, having heard this without more than a few times.

"You know better than that," Sher tells the dancer.

Both husband and wife bristle at the word "Nutcracker," mentioned by one of their dancers as she talks about her history.

"Ugh, 'Nutcracker,' don't say that word. It's a *divot* word," Sher-Machherndl says. "The old audience is getting older, and after a certain age, they can't see any more men in tights."

Sher-Machherndl, 45, was born in Vienna, and, as a dancer, is a veteran of the Dutch National Ballet and the Bavarian State Ballet. He also served as co-director of the Salzburg Ballet. Six years ago, Sher-Machherndl founded Lemon Sponge Cake with his wife, after the two arrived in Boulder from London.

Dreaming more hip-hop than ballet, Sher-Machherndl has produced 15 full-length dance works since arriving in Colorado. The company does outside-the-box works rooted in ballet that employ contemporary techniques, and its success is rooted in Sher-Machherndl's passionate voice and commitment to introducing contemporary dance to a genre still best known for "The Nutcracker" and "Sleeping Beauty."

"Nobody is trying to take a risk, and by not taking risks they also don't sell," Sher-Machherndl says. "I can do whatever I want. Other great choreographers have not compromised, otherwise they don't keep the artform alive."

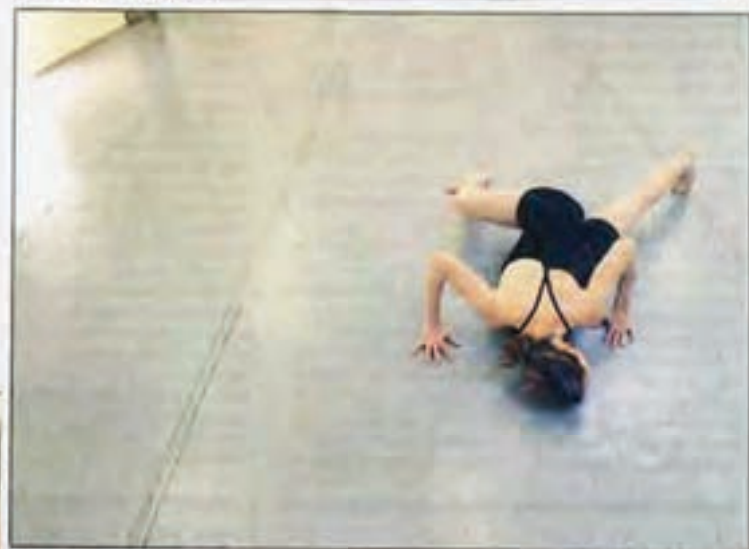
Sher-Machherndl's sharp vision has carried



Robert Sher-Machherndl, choreographer and artistic director of Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, works with one of his dancers, Tessa Victoria, in the Dairy Center for the Arts during a rehearsal for the company's upcoming show "Alien Nation."

DAILY CAMERA

SECTION



Tessa Victoria, a dancer with Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, rehearses "Alien Nation," which premieres Friday at the Dairy Center for the Arts.



Tessa Victoria rehearses Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's "Alien Nation" as her choreographer, Robert Sher-Machherndl, watches.

# Attitude

THE DANCERS' MAGAZINE

In another display of steadfastness and pluck, New Choreographers On Pointe, the organization founded in 1991 by Michael Kraus and Ruth Chester, showcased seven choreographers at Florence Gould Hall April 8 and 9 in its 16th season. Twenty-four dancers, most residing in New York according to their biographies, participated. Robert Sher-Machherndl of the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet in Boulder, Colorado and Joseph Jeffries from Ballet Memphis were the out-of-towners on this bill, but many of the dancers have also traveled long circuitous distances to get to this opportunity. There are so many small regional and global companies to practice with that the performers, overall, demonstrated a high level of experience and professionalism. Besides dancers from the Metropolitan and New York City Opera companies, Complexions, Ballet NY, Boston Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Santa Barbara Dance Theater, Miami City Ballet, and even the Nevada Dance Theatre were represented as training grounds. Still, New York is, well, New York and this year the organizers featured some New York regulars.

Helen Heineman, schooled at the School of American Ballet before dancing with Harkness Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens among others has quietly created a chamber dance company, Viewpointe. She premiered *Badlands Suite* to David Chesworth's piece of the same name. As a top-notch crew of eight ambled on, the music was gently Western. The outdoor feel was helped by the soft lighting of Ted Sullivan who serves as designer for all. The men in jeans and t-shirts and the women in breezy dresses with flower motifs, seem disconnected. Gradually through intricate slow motion lifts, promenades and entwined swayings their intimacy is revealed though the drama is subdued. Mabel Modrono and Tyler Ingram are featured in a duet. In this circular love song they waded forward and ebbed with unique 360° spiral lifts. The lithe, taut dancing of Modrono and enveloping partnering of Ingram were a pleasure to watch. A third section with a driving pulse continued to feature duos in simple phrases performed with a jazzy ease. With an overall meditative dynamic, Heineman used intermittent moments of tension to counterpoint the space between the couples.

Another successful piece, *Passing Through*, by Debra Jo Hughes featured musician Peter Lewis on stage with dancers Natia Kezevadze and Royce Zackery. Though the narrative was unclear, Kezevadze, whose biography was missing from the program, demonstrated a pristine long line that contrasted well with Zackery's muscularity. A brief explosive solo by Zackery didn't give him enough of a chance to shine but his strong partnering and the multi-faceted musical score by Primeaux & Mike and Níóirín Ní Ríain gave the dance a delicious layered feel.

Salim Gauwloos, who like Hughes has training and experience in theatre, dance and film, presented a likeable and theatrical piece where perhaps the narrative was too clear. In *Two Steps Ahead* Janelle Abbott and Vanessa Hylande articulated the flowing syncopation of the choreography to the tango inspired music of Astor Piazzolla. Trying to modernize the image of the macho man, Gauwloos had a playful scowl as he appeared angry even though both girls were under his spell. In the end they both walk away from him, perhaps tired from his blazing energy and continuous turning, pulling, and demanding look.

Love was the theme of three of the remaining pieces as well. *Where is the Love* used Arvo Pärt's *Summa* along with airport announcement sounds ascribed to Global Communication. Sher-Machherndl and Tessa Victoria barely danced with each other at all in this alienated landscape. They were busy in their own worlds of movement, she in a playful bronze bodice with bell like tutu by Jennifer Sher, he in serious black. She often started from a tight fifth position facing sideways. He moved angularly through space on diagonals of sharp delineations. While it was dry, I liked his exploration of the space. With a voiceover cutting into the Pärt score we got the point of these two people not communicating or on different wave lengths. In the end while they shared a spotlight they remained isolated. Disturbing in its expression of loneliness, the gestures borrowed from modern dance, performance art and theatre with simple relevés and exaggerated port de bras as a link to ballet. I was definitely interested in seeing more of this choreographer's work.

Less successful for me was *In The Arms of Three* by co-choreographers Ted Thomas and Frances Ortiz. The Spanish influenced score using music by Francisco Tarrega and Enrique Granados played a parallel but not interactive role in the choreography. Elyssa Dole was the lone woman entangled by Marlon Altoe, Brian Brooks and Zackery. The piece started out well enough with the men dancing in unison with strong energy. Dole, a beautiful, strong technician shown-off later in the piece, is at first given an oddly disjointed solo where she appears to be out-of-sorts and ends up manhandled by the group. I have to admit that this type of scene has become somewhat generic and has lost its power for me since its unclear why its all happening. With its mixture of difficult, pure ballet movements and throw away looseness the drama loses its punch. It was a dark piece that was preceded by *Cupid Revealed* an overtly happy romp by Jeffereies to music by Handel. With its fast foot work, exits and entrances and clear narrative Crystal Brothers and Travis Bradley sank their technique into it and didn't stop until the plucky Brothers gets dragged off.

The evening ended with *What is Hip?* by the popular New York teacher Lonné Moreton who gave his young students an opportunity to try their hand at dancing to the Tower of Power's funkadelic 1973 hit. As they may have discovered, it's not that easy to get down en pointe.



Valeria Madonia, Robert Sher-Machherndl and Tessa Victoria in *AnDie*

# Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet

By Daniel Gesmer

A European-style small company on the rise in the Rocky Mountains

## Twenty-eight-year-old Tessa

Victoria had quit ballet and made plans to focus on college in Colorado, but her passion for dance revived in 2000, when she began taking classes in Boulder with Austrian native Robert Sher-Machherndl.

Sher-Machherndl, a choreographer, teacher and former principal dancer with Dutch National Ballet, Netherlands Dance Theater and other groups, quickly invited Victoria to perform with his new company, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet. After 17 productions, the two have evolved a special creative chemistry, with Victoria serving as both principal dancer

and choreographic muse.

Sher-Machherndl's abstract creations explore the contemporary edge within classicism and typically plumb the tensions between hope and despair, longing and withdrawal, connection and alienation. He aims to integrate pointe technique with contemporary movement to comment on modern life.

"He doesn't have to tell me what to feel—his movement evokes emotion. It's rare that choreography can do that without a story or a plot," says Victoria. "With each new work, something new emerges and evolves. I always feel like I'm growing. It also pushes my strength and endurance."

"Robert respects me as a dancer and really values my experience," says former American Ballet Theatre and Joffrey Ballet dancer Valeria Madonia, who has evolved from frequent LSCCB guest artist to full company member.

"He takes care of every detail—from the studio to the costumes to the rosin backstage," she adds. "He's very particular about his choreography, too. But within that, he allows his dancers expression as artists. He wants individual voices, and he wants our artistry and experience to translate on the stage."

LSCCB has focused on experimental work in a region without a strong dance presence. Sher-Machherndl says, "Many companies play it safe after they get settled. I don't want to make any compromises. I want to follow the European model of taking risks instead of trying to please everyone."

LSCCB's next production, *Blueprints—Mozart 250*, a celebration of Mozart's 250th birthday, will premiere in late August at Boulder's Chautauqua Summer Festival. In three sections, the ballet will feature Victoria, Madonia and the choreographer in abstract impressions of the famous composer, his wife and his sister.

Sher-Machherndl plans to experiment with multimedia effects in *Mozart*, but for him, "movement and lighting are the most important things. I try to remove all frills and make the movement as pure as possible."

The group has already performed several times in New York, including two appearances at the Ballet Builders showcase. But after Chautauqua, says Executive Director Jenifer Sher, "We're entertaining touring possibilities and contemplating opening a second studio in Denver. We want to get the work out to the world even more." □

*Skateboard artist/entrepreneur Daniel Gesmer has written extensively about Nijinsky for publications around the world*

## at a glance

- Number of dancers:** 7, including apprentices and trainees
- Contract length:** Per project
- Associated school:** Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet School
- Performances per year:** 25
- Auditions:** Contact the artistic director
- Website:** [www.lemonspongecake.com](http://www.lemonspongecake.com)



## ele: CONTEMPLATIVE ARTIST OF THE YEAR



### PLIÉ AND PRESENCE » VIA DANIEL GESMER

My first love was a ballerina, so I got to watch an awful lot of the stuff. What was going on? Who knew. Still, there was something peaceful, elegant, contemplative about it. Like jazz, I wanted to like it, but couldn't connect with most of it. With its cousins, classical music and opera, ballet has ceded its place as entertainment for the masses. It's now "high culture," and attempts to modernize it have largely failed. If most of us attend a ballet, it's probably a crowd favorite... like the *Nutcracker*, which I attended at the U. of Colorado's historic Mackey Auditorium as a child, with my mother.

And so it is that a company like *Lemon Sponge Cake* is a rarity. For they've composed ballets relevant to modern life—to current events such as the Iraq War—while preserving the raw yet calculated beauty that a ballet. And so it's our honor to, well, honor Robert Sher-Machherndl as *elephant's Contemplative Artist, 2007*. —ed.

For Robert Sher-Machherndl, dance is a meditative practice. "Professionally, ballet is a lifestyle—a daily practice, like yoga for serious yogis," said the Austrian native. "If I don't dance every day, I start to feel uncentered and even upset. When I return to the studio, I work, sweat and go home at peace with myself. Sometimes you have to overcome resistance to get yourself into the studio. But that only makes you even stronger."

In 1996, Sher-Machherndl brought ballet to Boulder, Colorado (of all places), following a career as a principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet, Nederlands Dance Theater and other companies. He was also a choreographer, artistic director and teacher throughout Europe. In America, his *Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet* has challenged audiences with cutting-edge performances that plumb the tensions between tradition and modernism, hope and despair, passion and alienation. After 18 original productions, Sher-Machherndl's group has established a growing international reputation, with acclaim in *The New York Times* and leading dance magazines.

Onstage, drawing a contemporary line within the classical idiom is one of Sher-Machherndl's trademarks, underscored by head-on collisions between classical music, ambient industrial sounds (arranged by Sher-Machherndl) and simple, modern costumes (designed by his wife, Jenifer Sher). His abstract creations integrate *psittu* technique with contemporary movement sensibilities to stretch ballet's limits as an instrument for commentary on modern life. His recent *Allen Nation* premiered at Boulder's *Dairy Center for the Arts*, and continued his kinetic exploration of the complex tensions among light and shadow within the human psyche and between the genders.

The performance-orientation of ballet separates it from personal practices like yoga and meditation—although at least one dance company, London-based *Tripodose Yoga Theatre*, is focused on evolving yoga postures into a performing art.

But the element of mindfulness is ever present. Twenty-eight-year-old Tessa Victoria, the group's principal dancer and Sher-Machherndl's choreographic muse, is a performer of startling emotional intensity, dancing each step as if it might be her last. A nuanced artist, combining expressiveness with solid technique and graceful phrasing, the petite Houston native has a surprising harmony with the much taller Sher-Machherndl—who seems to deliberately accentuate his angularity, setting them in striking combination. In many of her solos, Victoria seems a wounded heart groping for something transcendent yet just out of reach: balance, belonging, healing, a soulful harmony—some of the primary aims of mindfulness practices.

This spring, the group will make its third appearance at the prestigious Ballet Builders showcase in New York, with performances of *Tiger Lilly*, which premiered in Boulder, in 2005. 🐘

Daniel Gesmer writes for *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and national arts publications. A pro skateboarder, Daniel is Senior Editor of *Naples Longboard Magazine*. His *Seismic Skate System* engineers and manufactures high-performance skateboard equipment. [seismic skate.com](http://seismic skate.com)



## reality check the highs and lows of reality shows

# Teen makes leap from brainiac to ballerina

The MTV reality series *Made* sets out to convert teenage ugly ducklings into swans — from a shy trombonist to a rapper, tomboy to figure skater, class clown to ballroom dancer. Or, in the case of Denver teen Sarah Zapiler, bookworm to ballerina.

For six weeks, the bubbly George Washington High over-achiever (editor of the school paper, co-captain of the mock-trial

**Rocky:** How and why did you get into this?

**Robert:** The SCFD (the arts-supporting Scientific and Cultural Facilities District) alerted a number of local dance studios that MTV was looking for a ballet coach. They wanted someone with a great personality. I thought, this is cool. Sure, it's impossible to turn a student who knows nothing into a dancer in just six weeks — but I figured it could be great exposure for me. And I always wanted to be on a reality show.

**Sarah:** "I knew about *Made*, and I pride myself on recognizing an opportunity. The show is about transformation, so at the casting call at George (Washington), I told them why I wanted to do this — that a ballerina was very different from what I am. I had taken a few ballet classes when I was 6 or 7, but I forgot everything. I'm the sort of person who has unrealistic expectations. I want to do more."

**Rocky:** Were you concerned about getting involved in this?

**Robert:** "Well, I kept thinking, how am I going to do this? I'd taught dance for years, and had worked privately with young people, but this was different. Here was a 17-year-old girl who knew nothing (about ballet). But then, I sort of liked that. Here's someone who wanted to put herself on the line, to challenge herself."

**Sarah:** "My biggest worry was who the teacher would be. I was expecting the classic Russian bitch — that it would be no fun. But, thank goodness, Robert wasn't like that. We really enjoyed each other, and he's a great teacher. I also knew this would be exhausting. I didn't just take classes with him. (As part of the program) I took a ballroom dance class, I worked on a trampoline, I took a couple of classes at Colorado Ballet. I had a personal trainer and nutritionist and I took a mime class. I was a mime on the 16th Street

team and part-time foreign language student at the University of Denver) worked with Boulder-based choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl, director of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet. All the while, a camera crew recorded her every move — graceful or otherwise. After the apprenticeship ended, Rocky dance writer Marc Shulgoid spoke with wary teacher and eager student in separate interviews.

**Mali:** (Filming) was seven days a week — the (MTV) crew even followed me into class at GW."

**Rocky:** Was it a grueling experience?

**Robert:** "It was a blast, really. We became good friends. In fact, she's going to be an intern with (Lemon Sponge Cake) this summer. She worked really hard. She's very smart, so she picked things up quickly. I was very impressed with how she (remembered) the corrections I gave her. What she learned would normally take three or four months."

**Sarah:** "The one thing I didn't expect was that some of the things we did or said had to be done over. It wasn't like an (uncut) reality show. The producer, Yessica Garcia, was pretty much with me 24/7. But I was myself all the way through."

**Rocky:** There must have been negatives.

**Robert:** "Well, the producers wanted to show a wide range of emotions in Sarah. They thought that at some point she would break down. Sarah and I understood how the show works — that there have to be some ups and downs. And, in fact, she did break down. I made a comment about her weight, and she started crying. I felt really sorry."

**Sarah:** "Yeah, I broke down. It all just piled together, and I was so exhausted. Robert made a comment about my weight. I've struggled with it — I have something called Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, which affects my thyroid and my weight. When we started filming, I did feel some self-consciousness, but it didn't last long. I was more concerned about enjoying the experience. And I really did."

Marc Shulgoid is the music and dance writer. Shulgoidm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5296



PHOTOS BY MTV

Denver's Sarah Zapiler, top with Boulder-based choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl, lived her dream on MTV's *Made*. Other teens featured in previous episodes include Ashley, who learned how to race motocross; Jeremy, who wants to be a rock star; and Josh, whose dream is to be a fashion reporter.

# A moving transformation

Boulder choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl part of MTV's latest 'Made'

By Aimee Heckel  
Camera Staff Writer

**A** Boulder man will bring ballet to MTV, as he transforms a self-proclaimed clumsy bookworm into a classical dancer.

It's a new episode in MTV's "Made" series, which chronicles young people attempting life-changing transformations. Couch potato to model. Sci-fi geek to rapper. With intense training, some meet their goals. Others — not so much.

On Saturday, "Made" hits Colorado to follow 17-year-old

Sarah Zapiler, a student at Denver's George Washington High School, who had dreams of becoming a ballerina.

The catch: "I drop things, not having grace in everyday movements," she says. "I'm definitely not physical or involved in dance."

But on her side was dedication, high expectations for herself and a lifelong admiration of ballet dancers' beauty, grace, poise and skill, she says.

To guide her transformation, MTV solicited Robert Sher-Machherndl, 46, an Austrian-born dancer who moved to Boulder 10 years ago. He lives here on an "Alien of Extraordinary Ability" visa type, and founded the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet Company in Boulder.

Before coming to Colorado, he was a principal dancer with the Bavarian State Ballet in Munich, Germany, and the Dutch National Ballet in

Amsterdam. His list of awards and experience is lengthy.

Now he can add a reality show to his resume.

For about six weeks, he trained Sarah daily, not only as her coach and choreographer, but also as a life coach. She also worked with a nutritionist. The show was filmed in November at his studio in the Dairy Center for the Arts.

Sher-Machherndl says what he taught Sarah in six weeks would normally have taken about four months.

"We pushed through it," he says. "She was a really clever girl and picked up quickly. She remembered everything, so I tried to teach her as much as possible and in a way that she could remember it so she'd get something out of it."

That she did. Sarah says she plans to continue dancing in college, not professionally but for fun. In addition to the basic ballet steps and different ways to use her face and body to



Camera File Photo

Robert Sher-Machherndl, choreographer and artistic director of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, demonstrates a series of moves for his students at the Dairy Center for the Arts. In a new episode of MTV's reality show "Made," airing Saturday morning, Sher-Machherndl helps turn a self-proclaimed clumsy bookworm into a ballerina.

convey a message, she says the experience taught her a lot about her character.

"It showed me that even in the hardest of situations, I could continue and find success in my own right," she says.

Contact Camera Staff Writer Aimee Heckel at 303-473-1359 or heckela@dailycamera.com.

## "Made: Ballerina"

airs locally at 10 a.m. Saturday on MTV. For more information on the show, visit [www.made.mtv.com](http://www.made.mtv.com); for more information on Lemon Sponge Cake, visit [www.lemonspongecake.com](http://www.lemonspongecake.com).

# 'Anilla' cryptic but wonderful

By Marc Shulgold

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

For the past five or six years, we've been visiting the strange dance universe that springs from the imaginative mind of Robert Sher-Machherndl. Each sojourn to that foreign land yields new surprises and renewed admiration.

On Friday in Gates Concert Hall, the Viennese-born (and now Boulder-based) choreographer unveiled his latest full-length work — a cryptic piece for three dancers cryptically titled *Anilla*.

Don't worry about the title (vanilla without the V? Manilla without the M? The Spanish word for ring?). And don't spend too much time trying to assemble the numerous stand-alone segments into a cohesive plotline. That's not his style.

What is his style — and has been consistently over the years — is the mixing of movements that can shift from "beautiful" to "ugly" in a single motion. A perfect arabesque will end with the foot incorrectly turned at a right angle. Straight-back dancers may suddenly crumple to the floor. Arms curved in a gentle *port de bras* might suddenly fly up and down in robot-like motions.

The music, too, swings both ways: from the serenity of Pärt, Ives and Mozart to the pops and blips of an electronic-industrial soundtrack. Somehow, it all makes sense.

As performed with conviction by Sher-Machherndl, Tessa Victoria and Valerie Madonna on Friday, *Anilla* slowly drew its audience into this initially cold world of indifferent relationships. Gradually, almost invisibly, the mood changes (thanks to some lovely music courtesy of Edith Piaf and a pair of heavenly Mozart Adagios). Dancers grow closer, more supportive of each other.

## Lemon Sponge Cake

- **Grade:** A-
- **When and where:** Repeated March 10-12 at the Dairy Center, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder
- **Cost:** \$20 to \$22
- **Information:** 303-545-2298
- **Of note:** The company performed Robert Sher-Machherndl's *Anilla*.

In a series of atypical blackout scenes, the dancers engaged in solos, duets and trios that made use of a more typical use of repeated combinations. Those repetitions only rarely outlasted their welcome.

Madonia and Victoria brilliantly brought the quirky choreography to life, turning contradictory steps and poses into something logical and natural. No small accomplishment.

The simple costumes of Jenifer Sher and the evocative lighting by Heather Saunders added just the right touch of intrigue.

There were numerous moments of invention (back-to-back segments danced to those Mozart Adagios, and Sher-Machherndl's solo to Piaf's *La Vie en Rose*, for example) that stood out from the occasional, uneasy repetitive segments. Meaning was never obvious, but never so obscured as to shut out the viewer.

In a wonderfully dramatic final turn in the spotlight, Sher-Machherndl drenched himself in water, falling to the stage in a curled-up pose suggesting birth. Or something.

Marc Shulgold is the music and dance writer.

Shulgold via Rocky Mountain News.com or 303-892-5296

# THE DENVER POST

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| NATION |

## OVERNIGHT IN COLORADO

# Troupe's ballet is offbeat and welcome

*A concentration-camp tale showcases the creativity and emotion of Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake.*

By Kyle MacMillan  
*Denver Post Fine Arts Critic*

Every dance scene needs alternatives to its large, well-entrenched companies, and the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet admirably fills that role in the Denver-Boulder area.

The tiny Boulder-based company was founded in 1999 by Robert Sher-Machherndl, a former principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet and Bavarian State Ballet.

The Austrian native has since

focused his attention on choreography, developing an inventive, offbeat and decidedly contemporary style that is gaining increasing national attention, and deservedly so. He is an obvious talent.

The latest opportunity to see the company in Denver came over the weekend, when it presented back-to-back performances in the up-close intimacy of the University of Denver's Byron Theatre — a black-box space.

The program, reviewed Sunday afternoon, opened with a new offering, "Leopoldstadt 22," a moving if stark 15-minute work set in some unspecified concentration camp. It is performed in darkness on a bare stage except for the harsh light from one over-

head bulb.

The seminarrative work evocatively conveys a sense of entrapment, the two dancers looking longingly at the light, an elusive beacon of hope. The movement, sometimes achingly slow like the passage of time in such a place, is interrupted by bursts of frustrated frenzy.

It opens with an amazing solo by Tessa Victoria, in which she never moves outside an 8-foot square. She frantically rubs her body as if to try to cleanse her grim reality, flaps her arms like a caged bird and lies flat on her back in seeming defeat.

The solo gives way to a duet with Sher-Machherndl, largely an onlooker to that point, in which the two desperate figures try to connect and fail. Victoria

collapsing and having to be pushed across the floor.

At the end, Sher-Machherndl cradles her in his arms, trying to gather in her flailing limbs as she experiences a kind of seizure and dies. He lets out a cry of anguish, as much for her as all humanity.

Rounding out the program was "Alien Nation," which debuted in December. The deliberately formless work, with its rich mix of imaginative, off-kilter movement, aptly conveys a sense of isolation and impersonality. But its one-hour duration is at least 20 minutes too long.

*Fine arts critic Kyle MacMillan can be reached at 303-954-1675 or kmacmillan@denverpost.com.*

## Happy National Dance Week

Did you know that this week (April 20-29) is National Dance Week? Our nation's tribute to dance takes place every year during the week containing April 29—the birthday of the great 18th-century dance theorist and choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre. While multitudes of special events are being held all over the country, I'd like to celebrate in these pages by pointing out the enormous number of American cities represented by the dancers and choreographers whose work I saw in New York City this past month. The American dance community is truly national in scope and should not be thought of solely in terms of its activities in New York and Los Angeles.

This spring's Ballet Builders concert—New York's annual showcase of works by emerging choreographers—featured ballets by dance makers from Austin, Minneapolis, Boulder, Princeton, Los Angeles, and Montreal; for the first time in the event's 17-year history, the lineup included no local choreographers. The stage of the Joyce Theater was taken over by the Memphis Ballet for a week last month, and the keystone piece in New York's recent retrospective of the choreography of John Butler was performed by members of the Richmond Ballet. The Joyce also hosted a program of flamenco dance by Flamenco Vivo Carlota Santana. Santana, the company's co-founder and artistic director, is now teaching at Duke University in North Carolina. She is a recipient of a Choreographer Fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council and serves on the board of directors of Arts North Carolina.



Gina Patterson's "Liquid Eyes," presented on the Ballet Builders' program

### Ballet Builders 2007

Presented at Florence Gould Hall (March 31 and April 1) by its annual sponsor, New Choreographers on Point, Ballet Builders 2007 offered a dandy little show of seven new ballets by out-of-townets. The most intriguing piece on the program was the excerpt from "TigerLily," a duet choreographed by

Robert Sher-Machherndl, the founding director of Boulder, Colo.'s Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet. The duet tweaked and twisted the ballet vocabulary, creating a disturbing mood as the performers seemed to get caught or stuck in different positions. The halting use of energy lent an internal sensibility to the work; even when the dancers' outward actions stopped, it seemed as though emotional movement continued inside their arrested bodies.

A professor at the University of Texas, Austin, David Justin gets an A+ for his choreography of "Solemn Opus: The Journey of Lost and Found," a modern-ringed ensemble ballet that, with its meticulously designed spatial configurations and expressive vocabulary, perfectly exemplifies the compositional rules that define the well-made dance. The program's other fine work was "les rêveuses," a clever parody of classical ballet's deference to musical authority, choreographed by Montreal's Christophe Garcia.

"The Rest Is Secret," a pas de deux by Los Angeles Ballet's Kelly Ann Sloan, didn't cohere choreographically but featured a brilliant performance by Sarah Hairston of the Cincinnati Ballet. Despite its bland choreography, "Liquid Eyes," an ardent quartet by Gina Patterson, proved moving, thanks to its heartfelt music by Jeff Buckley and dramatic performances by Patterson and fellow members of Ballet Austin. "Everything That Grows," a duet by Jennifer Hart of Minneapolis, opened with original gestural vocabulary but then developed into a continuous stream of movement and suffered from a lack of structural phrasing. Surprisingly, "North Star," the program's least successful work (though it contained

many challenging, well-executed lifts), was contributed by the artistic director of Princeton, N.J.'s American Repertory Ballet, Graham Lustig, who has, on other occasions, proven to be a meritorious choreographer.

# Pointe

ballet at its best

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NEWS

## Building Blocks



New Choreographers on *Pointe* presents the 16th season of **Ballet Builders** at Florence Gould Hall in New York City, April 8-9. This season features choreography by Joseph Jefferies of Ballet Memphis, Robert Sher-Macherndl, director of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet in Colorado, and other New York-based choreographers. **Ballet Builders** allows choreographers to develop and present their material. In the last 16 years, 75 choreographers have created new works. For more: [www.balletbuilders.com](http://www.balletbuilders.com) —DH

**Valerie Madonia and Robert Sher-Macherndl of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet**

## Contemporary ballet both lovely, edgy

By Marc Shulgold  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

BOULDER — Quietly, the intriguing art form known as contemporary ballet has sneaked into the dance world, blending the familiarity (and prettiness) of classical steps and pointe work with the unpredictability of cutting-edge modern experimentation.

The possibilities are as exciting as they are limitless — for choreographers, dancers and audiences.

Thus, it's important to know that one of contemporary ballet's most interesting creative minds is working in our midst.

We've watched Robert Sher-Machherndl for a few years now, and the full-length pieces he's set on his Boulder-based company Lemon Sponge Cake have remained consistent in their singular vision and unending surprise.

The Viennese-born dance maker's latest piece, *Le Ballet Star*, was presented twice over the weekend at Chautauqua Auditorium, a space too large for the subtlety of his choreography, not to mention the company's modest-sized but faithful fan base.

As seen Saturday, this hourlong psychological journey into the world of the ballerina emerged as a curious work — often involving but

### Lemon Sponge Cake

- **Grade:** B+
- **When and where:** The troupe performed Saturday at Chautauqua Auditorium, Boulder.

sometimes off-putting.

*Le Ballet Star* was danced by a contingent from the small, all-female Lemon Sponge Cake troupe (Tessa Victoria, Jennifer Dale and Nicole Hess) and two guest artists, Stephanie Walz and Valerie Madonia. The choreographer made a brief appearance midway through.

Typically, Sher-Machherndl created a number of unusual steps and combinations that reappeared frequently, gaining importance with each repetition. Dancers race-walked around the spacious stage, jogged in circles, struck poses and then, seemingly at random, crumpled to the floor. The loveliness of the usual assortment of ballet poses (arabesques, particularly) was juxtaposed against the sharp angularity of the choreographer's anti-balletic combinations.

Most interesting was his inventive exploration of *port de bras*, the gentle curving of the arms into a circle.

Here, the circles were formed with

an ugly, un-gentle quickness. In unison, the dancers would work their arms in endless repetition — perhaps commenting on the numbing routine of ballet class.

Though Madonia was announced as the big guest star (she'd been with the Joffrey and Ballet Theatre), this piece gave moments of prominence to other dancers. Lengthy solos were danced early on by Walz (who'd been a guest here last year) and to longtime Sponge Caker Victoria, a lovely artist who's growing into a special performer.

Finally, Madonia had her major solo, a piece of achingly sad beauty. At one point, she raised her boneless arm and wrist above her head in a magnificent series of softly expressive turns. If she indeed is meant to depict "Le Ballet Star," she certainly delivered on that promise.

One complaint: Sher-Machherndl has always selected quirky music to support his ballets, jumping from techno pulsations to new-age adagios. Here, he used recordings of Bach's Double Violin Concerto, a dreamy piece by the oft-used Arvo Paert and Edith Piaf crooning *La Vie en Rose* — but, in between, he often resorted to annoying electronic squeaks and scratches that proved a distraction from the action on-stage. Sometimes, his cutting edge is simply too cutting for these ears.

# Colorado Daily

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## THE MIX

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AUGUST 13, 2010

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### DANCE

# Deeply emotive

'LE BALLET STAR' IS POSSIBLY LEMON SPONGE CAKE'S MOST AMBITIOUS PIECE YET

By **BECCA SACKETT**  
Staff Writer

**F**ive dancers stand absolutely still in the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet studio, spaced out according to choreographer Nolan Sher-Machiberndl's detailed instructions. Pushed to exhaustion and covered in sweat, the dancers wait for the distinct sound of a helicopter propeller that opens the choreographer's latest piece. A thunderous drum begins and the dancers begin again, relaxing at the first pace the ballet demands. The group, comprised of five women, each brings a different style and dancing experience. It shows the studio in a flurry of activity and tempo, pliability and variety in their bodies and stances in greater length.

"Le Ballet Star," which makes its world debut this weekend at the Cheesecake Auditorium, is an appropriately chaotic, remarkably complex and astonishingly beautiful new work of art from the German-born Sher-Machiberndl and his company of talented dancers.

"The piece is about experience and maturity," the choreographer explains. "It's about beginning and ending in that every dancer has to stop dancing someday."

It is arguably his most ambitious and stunning achievement

to date, applying the strengths of each dancer while challenging them to push themselves further and further with each movement. The music, composed of both classical and contemporary composers, guides the audience through the ballet, relaxing along with the movements, an intense emotional reaction from the viewer.

Sher-Machiberndl's past ballets have mainly focused on the abstract, using the dancer as a vehicle for his deconstructive and examination of the classical ballet style. "Le Ballet Star" seems to have a deeper meaning, a much more defined purpose, and a story behind the dance that opens the piece.

#### WHASSUP

Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's "Le Ballet Star" makes its premiere Saturday night at 8 p.m. at Cheesecake Auditorium (900 Riverside Road). The ticket also shows Sunday night at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$22, \$24 and \$30. For more information on ticketing, visit [www.chesecake.com](http://www.chesecake.com).

in-ross and then with one simple stroke, tears at the viewer's heart through the use of his most emotive dancer, Tessa Victoria.

Victoria's solo, along with the simple piano notes of Arvo Part, is a breathtaking examination of the love and anguish suffered after a tragic event. Victoria has been with Sher-Machiberndl since Lemon Sponge Cake's



Lemon Sponge Cake's Contemporary Ballet dancers Tessa Victoria, front center, and Brooke Ross. This Saturday, the dance troupe premieres "Le Ballet Star." (Sher-Machiberndl and Cheesecake)

[See BALLET, Page A22]

# BALLET: Accentuates each dancer's talents

[BALLET, from page A13]

conception and the two have that kind of working relationship that can only develop over years of getting to know each other.

Victoria's greatest asset as a dancer is her ability to express emotion while performing on stage, and Sher-Machherndl knows it. Watching her dance this particular piece is like being a child again and looking at something magical for the first time.

This is one of Sher-Machherndl's greatest artistic weapons as a choreographer. Where most ballet companies have to adhere to pre-existing ballet movements, Sher-Machherndl tailors his ballets to accentuate each dancer's unique talents.

"That's the best thing about working with Robert," explains dancer Jennifer Dale, "(is) he relates to us and challenges us, making us much stronger dancers in the process."

Dale, who has emerged as the foundation of Lemon Sponge Cake, is a tall and slender dancer whose choreography makes use of her beautiful arms and legs, stretching them elegantly across the stage.

Stephanie Walz, a guest artist from Florida who is making her second appearance with Lemon Sponge Cake, has a classical style about her dancing which is utilized in a solo accompanied by a composition from Bach. Nicole Hess, brand new to the company, is a shorter and quicker dancer and Sher-Machherndl has her moving about the stage as fast and as sprightly as she can.

At the center of "Le Ballet Star" is guest artist Valerie Madonna, a former 10-year principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet, the historic Chicago based ballet company. Sher-Machherndl and Madonna met in New York at the 2001 Ballet Builder's Awards and quickly became friends. The two came up with the initial idea behind



Dancer Jennifer Dale, shown here, promises that this particular piece is more versatile than any work choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl has done before. (Doree Mizuno-Tsuneoka for *Chicago Tribune*)

"Le Ballet Star," which Sher-Machherndl then turned into a fully functional ballet.

"Valerie's strength is her experience and her ability to perform the steps with absolutely perfect technique," praises Sher-Machherndl.

This perfect technique is exploited in a 15-minute solo written specifically for Madonna, which serves as the climax of the entire ballet.

"Robert's choreographic

voice speaks clearly, while at the same time allowing the unique language of the artist he is working with to emerge," says Madonna. "'Le Ballet Star' is a dynamic vehicle for the dancer as an artist and physical force."

"Le Ballet Star" is the most expansive and encompassing work of the young choreographer's career (he is only in his early 40s) that includes exan-

nations on current world events, the life of a dancer, a look at his childhood and memories of his mother.

"This piece is more versatile than any of his other work," says Dale. "There are more diverse movements, more diverse music and very fast and technical steps. This ballet is going to be very exciting to watch."

# THE DENVER POST

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 19, 2005

## DANCE

By Elana Ashanti Jefferson Denver Post Staff Writer

### Ballet meets electronica | Diffused, ambient beats forged on an upright bass and layered over wobbly synths and crackling



Valerie Madonia once helped the Joffrey Ballet troupe start a residency in Telluride.

sound effects mark the opening of German DJ Stefan Betke's third album, "3."

Betke is a Berlin nightlife magnet who performs under the moniker Pole, a name that refers to experimental electronica using elemental instrumentation and a 4-pole synthesizer filter.

Pole got under the skin of forward-thinking Boulder choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl. The result is the premier of his new concert, "Le Ballet Star," Saturday and Sunday at Chautauqua Auditorium.

Sher-Machherndl, artistic director of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, became acquainted with "3" after wandering into a SoHo art gallery where the CD was playing. Ever drawn to the culture of "cool," Sher-Machherndlatched an idea.

Meeting former Joffrey Ballet prima ballerina Valerie Madonia during last year's Ballet Builders showcase in New York — Sher-Machherndl received critical praise for his work there — helped that idea blossom into "Le Ballet Star."

The movement is rooted in Madonia's refined classical ballet training and expands with Lemon Sponge Cake's characteristically modern ballet interpretation. "What I do just fits (Madonia's) style of dance right now," Sher-Machherndl said earlier this week.

There's little narrative in "Le Ballet Star" except what's expressed choreographically. The show's progressive dance and music is intended to frame the evolution of Sher-Machherndl's brand of ballet, which ripened through stints with the Dutch National Ballet and Bavarian State Ballet but became something more enterprising once the choreographer relocated to Boulder. "I'm more daring and uncompromising," he said.

Sher-Machherndl stepped up the cool factor in "Le Ballet Star" by mixing his own score. Pole dominates that mix, but Sher-Machherndl rarely creates without a hint of Arvo Part. The choreographer's offbeat listening sensibility also is evident when music by Jo-

hann Sebastian Bach and Philip Glass is fused with music by Ravi Shankar.

"He never wants to make anything sweet or kitschy or expected," said Madonia, who learned her parts for the new ballet during two visits. Sher-Machherndl made it Telluride. The dancer has owned a home there for about 20 years but recently settled in the picturesque mountain town.

"(Machherndl) has got such a strong sense of his own style. He doesn't settle or try to make it popular," added Madonia, whose career has included time dancing and working with Mikhail Baryshnikov at the American Ballet Theatre.

Madonia said the funky score in "Le Ballet Star," which she describes as dynamic and physical, gives the work an avant-garde flavor in which classical

ballet movement wiggles into an experimental landscape.

Struggle and resolve frame the ballerina's solo. Audiences also will get a sense of Sher-Machherndl's unfiltered vision when the choreographer mounts his own solo in "Le Ballet Star." And they will get a peek at how his style unfolded within his 6-year-old Boulder contemporary ballet company when Lemon Sponge Cake regulars Stephanie Walz and Teresa Victoria dance in the concert.

"I love the contradiction between the name and the work," Madonia said. "Lemon Sponge Cake is so sweet, but the work is not necessarily sweet at all."

Staff writer Elana Ashanti Jefferson can be reached at 303-820-1957 or [ejefferson@denverpost.com](mailto:ejefferson@denverpost.com).

#### "Le Ballet Star"

CONTEMPORARY DANCE | Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet world premier | Chautauqua Auditorium, 900 Baseline Road, Boulder, 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday | 522-530 | Through TicketsWest, 866-464-2626 or [chautauqua.com](http://chautauqua.com).



# Rocky Mountain News

FRIDAY, AUGUST 19, 2005

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## New ballet built around star

### Boulder troupe's new work written for ex-Joffrey dancer

By Marc Shulgold

ROCKYMOUNTAINNEWS.COM

When Robert Sher-Machherndl staged a dance piece as a New York program called "Ballet Builders" last year, he apparently took the title literally.

As a result of that appearance, the Boulder choreographer hooked up with former Joffrey dancer Valerie Madonia and has since built a ballet for her and his all-female contemporary company, Lemon Sponge Cake.

"She was appearing in another pas de deux at that (April) concert, and I introduced myself," he recalled. "I told her it would be great to have her dance for me. She really is a prima ballerina."

Not only did Madonia agree, she also hooked up the Boulder dance-maker with another superb performer, Stephanie Walz, who appeared with Lemon Sponge Cake last season, and who will share the stage with Madonia and the company this weekend, when the full-length *Le Ballet Star* is premiered.

With his star in place, Sher-Machherndl worked with unexpected quickness. "I usually take my time when I make a new work, but the creative process this time was different — everything came rapidly."

It didn't hurt that most of the preparation work took place at Madonia's



studio in the majestic surroundings of Telluride. But the choreographer credits his dancers, not the scenery, for his quick creativity.

"Valerie was with the Joffrey for 10

years, and before that she danced in American Ballet Theatre when Baryshnikov ran the company," he noted.

### Lemon Sponge Cake

■ **When and where:** 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday in Chautauqua Auditorium, Ninth Street and Baseline Road, Boulder

■ **Cost:** \$22 in S30

■ **Information:** 1-866-464-2626

■ **Of Note:** The contemporary ballet company performs *Le Ballet Star*.

**Dancer Valerie Madonia** projects the ideal and reality of a ballerina's life.

LEMON SPONGE CAKE

Flip to CAKE on 22D

### Cake: Lonely life plays out onstage

Continued from 21D

"I was amazed at how quickly she learned the steps. It really got the piece flowing."

What sets Madonia apart, he explained, is her elegance. "It's how she presents the steps," he said. "Her timing is just beautiful. There's a certain quietness when she dances. It's very lyrical."

Not surprisingly, *Le Ballet Star* is built on her. "I wanted to show the aura that exists around a ballet star," the dance-maker explained. "It's about the artist as a beautiful performer."

But amid the romantic ideal is the harsh reality of a dancer's life, he added: "I'll show how her everyday life can be so boring." And, in the end, rather sad.

What happens in a dancer's life when she has to stop? The inevitable emerges in this hourlong piece. Retirement from the stage, he observed, is "a personal tragedy — but it's also a natural result of getting older. When all is said and done, it can be a very lonely life."

The work opens with Sher-Machherndl moving nostalgically to songs by Edith Piaf, in an homage to his mother, who encouraged him to dance. Then, the women take the stage.

"Understand, I don't follow the cliché route with this," he said. "I was naturally able to avoid that." That ease of creation came partly from his growing comfort in working with a small troupe of ballerinas.

Mostly, however, he was inspired by the presence of Madonia. "When you think about what she's done in the past — dancing in the Joffrey and for Misha (Baryshnikov) — well, that is such a kick."

Marc Shulgold is the music and dance writer. shulgoldm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-5296

## Otherworldly pieces entrance audience

### REVIEW

By Marc Shulgold

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

There is an intriguing, otherworldly quality to the edgy contemporary ballets of Robert Sher-Machherndl — just as the man himself, tall and serious and hairless, suggests an artist not of this world.

His latest works, *Leopoldstadt 22* and *Alien Nation*, unveiled Saturday in Boulder's Dairy Center, offered little to change that perception. These are two uncompromising pieces, equally demanding for dancers and their audiences.

Fortunately, Sher-Machherndl has always enlisted performers of superior skill, fully committed to his vision. The small company, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, features female dancers with the choreographer as the sole male. Here, Sher-Machherndl was joined by longtime cohort Tessa Victoria and newcomer Alana Niehoff, a lanky Aurora native.

In *Alien Nation*, Niehoff and Victoria performed dreamy slow-motion solos. Their steps relied on classical ballet tradition, then suddenly dissolved into anti-balletic movements.

Now and then, they were joined by Sher-Machherndl, who offered mechanical sup-

### Lemon Sponge Cake

■ **Grade:** B

■ **When, where:** Repeated at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Byron Theatre, Newman Center for the Performing Arts, 2344 E. Iliff Ave.

port, rather than engage in fully danced duets.

Typical of his work, steps and combinations recurred, becoming iconic moments in a collection of isolated episodes that gradually develop cohesiveness.

What it all meant never became evident. Nor did the musical soundtrack clear things up: Bach alternated with electronic noise that seemed to emerge from the Rice Krispies School of Composition. It didn't take long for all those annoying snaps, crackles and pops to wear on one's patience.

The evening opened with *Leopoldstadt 22*, another dense piece, danced by Sher-Machherndl and Victoria, who seemed locked in a lonely world of despair (the piece was intended as a comment on the Holocaust, the Viennese dance-maker noted).

Imprisoned under a single white light, the pair performed an evocative, understated pas de deux that had the Dairy Center audience in its spell.

# MAGAZINE DANCE

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

DECEMBER 2007

## Resurrection

Star power comes to Colorado this month. Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet welcomes former ABT principal Susan Jaffe (right) to their stage Dec. 1–2 for a world premiere of *Plus One*. The piece, created for Jaffe by choreographer and artistic director Robert Sher-Machherndl, is a commentary on relationships, humanity, and humility. Jaffe, who retired from ABT in 2002, has been teaching and working as an administrator at ABT. She says she will continue to work with Sher-Machherndl in 2008. See [www.lemonspongecake.com](http://www.lemonspongecake.com).



Paul Kolik, Courtesy ABT

## Troupe a giant leap for women

Lemon Sponge Cake  
evocative, quirky,  
'like no one else'

By Marc Shulgold  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Those unfamiliar with Robert Sher-Machberndl's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet may watch the company perform *Where is the Love* and wonder, "Where are the guys?"

In the four years since the Austrian-born choreographer formed Lemon Sponge Cake, the small company has remained all-female — apart from occasional brief appearances by the dance maker.

The shows set for this weekend in Boulder and next weekend in Denver are no different.

"Why is it only female?" he wondered aloud. "I really don't know why. There's a comfort level for me, I suppose. And I'm not yet finished with all my (choreographic) ideas for women dancers."

Sure, he acknowledged during a visit to the Rocky Mountain News, if the right man came along. "... I'd be interested — if he were tall, a good mover and with solid ballet technique."

In fact, Sher-Machberndl will be holding open auditions for the first time ("just to see what's out there") in the near future.

Future company members need to be forewarned: This is an ensemble of only six and each is a superb dancer, solid in pointe technique and able to switch gears in an instant, should the quirky, thoroughly contemporary choreography call for it.

In the case of the program's second work, *AustriaPop 2*, performed earlier this year in Boulder, one dancer must also shed any sense of modesty: During a lengthy, evocative solo, Tessa Victoria performs topless.

Voyeurs should know that the entire work is performed with Victoria facing upstage, or turned to the audience with folded arms strategically placed.

"I have to say, eroticism doesn't interest me at all," Sher-Machberndl noted. "I mean, obviously they're female. But it's more about her shyrest than anything else."

Indeed, when seen at Chautauquin Auditorium, Victoria's secret never upstaged the loveliness of the movements and the innocence of the concept.

"It's a challenge for Tessa," he said of the solo. "The piece is designed to show the expressiveness of the back — something you rarely

see in dance. And, as a dancer, she has a certain power in the situation — to control the audience's response."

This art form always has been a celebration of the human body, and most costuming is designed to show the beauty of a dancer's figure. The classic tutu permits full viewing of the female leg (elongated by the elevation onto the toes), while the tights worn by men in most traditional ballets likewise accentuate the shape of the male midsection and legs.

Which brings a chuckle from Sher-Machberndl.

"I'll tell you a secret: I can't see men in tights anymore. I just don't like the look of it. Isn't that funny? I did that for years," he said, a reference to his performing career with several important European ballet companies.

While on the subject, the choreographer takes aim at the stifling world of classic ballet. "I'm on a mission. I'm trying to redefine ballet. to



### Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet

- **When and where:** 8 p.m. today-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder; 8 p.m. Dec. 10-11, 2 and 8 p.m. Dec. 12, Cleo Parker Robinson Theater, 119 Park Ave. West
- **Cost:** \$22
- **Information:** 866-864-2626
- **Of note:** The company performs *Where is the Love* and *AustriaPop Volume 2*

find a new way to give it to audiences.

"In my opinion, ballet companies have killed ballet, by sticking so closely to all of the old traditions and the old repertoire. Audiences need to take it seriously again. I think it will happen, though I know it takes time. But it will come."

One way in which Sher-Machberndl is shaking things up (besides his controversial costuming decisions) is in his choice of music. In full-length pieces such as *Point*, *Strange Lands* and *LoveCrimes*, he will segue from rhythm-and-blues songs of the '50s to modernist works by Arvo Part and Philip Glass to dance-club techno electronics. Somehow, it always seems to make sense.

"In *Where is the Love*, I use a work by Part that's only about 5 minutes long," he said. "I'll repeat it several times. I really like it — it sounds more like Copland than Part."

In addition to the premiere of *Love*, the upcoming programs introduce a new member of the company, Jennifer Dale.

"With a sixth dancer, I can do a little more, extend some things. Since Jennifer has joined us, I've edited *AustriaPop* a bit."

Hence the number "2" that now appears in the title.

"I've been very happy with Jennifer," he added. "It's so hard to join an established group like this, but she picks things up very fast. That's always been true of the other girls — they learn very quickly."

"I tell them in rehearsal, 'You must dance the piece like no one else.' That's our mission: To take dancing to a new place. I think that gives them confidence."



Tessa Victoria dances topless in *AustriaPop 2*, designed to show the expressiveness of the back. At top, Victoria takes a flying leap.

Marc Shulgold is the music and dance writer. Shulgold@rockymountainnews.com or 303-852-5296



# DAILY CAMERA

## 'LOVE' MOVEMENT:

Lemon Sponge Cake's latest an enthralling mix of classical technique and human gesture

By Carl Cunningham

Camera Dance Critic

In the spring, Robert Sher-Machherndl, artistic director of Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, addressed "LoveCrimes." Now, in the bitter onset of winter, his newest work asks, "Where is the Love"? The substantial duet danced by two of Sher-Machherndl's regularly featured soloists, Tessa Victoria and Adrienne Earnest, shares the program with "AustriaPop Vol. 2" — a revamped and slightly edited version of the ballet that premiered this summer at Chautauqua Auditorium. The new show premiered Friday at the Dairy Center for the Arts.

"Where is the Love" opens the evening and confirms Sher-Machherndl's ardor for the hauntingly beautiful and sparse compositions of Arvo Part. In both his 2003 ballet "Strangelands" and in this year's "LoveCrimes," Sher-Machherndl turned to Part for portions of his soundscape. It was his solo for Victoria to Part's "Spiegel im Spiegel" (an excerpt from "Strangelands") that earned Sher-Machherndl acclaim at the Ballet Builders Showcase in New York City.

In this new work Sher-Machherndl derives his choreographic inspiration from the string

quartet arrangement of Part's "Summa" and then adds interspersed sections of text spoken in a variety of languages. Within the emotional resonance of Part's aural tableau, the Austrian choreographer finds the perfect home for his signature combination of precise classical lines and touchingly human gesture.

The most beautiful moments in the new ballet occur more than halfway through the work, when the isolation of the two dancers dissolves. Gradually Earnest and Victoria — who execute the majority of the choreography either one at a time or on completely different sides of the stage — begin to share longer moments of synchronicity. Even more satisfying than the side-by-side execution of impossible balances and luxurious leg extensions are the more subtle moments of unison — simultaneously unfolding fingertips or slight adjustments in the head.

In her four seasons with Lemon Sponge Cake, Victoria has emerged as a master of Sher-Machherndl's quirky choreographic style, but in "Where is the Love" Earnest demonstrates a growing understanding of the intricacies of the choreography, matching her technical prowess with more

theatrical depth.

The second half of the program offers audiences "Austria Pop Vol. 2," a 45-minute dance marathon for the six exquisite dancers of Lemon Sponge Cake (although Amy Doktor does not perform due to injury) set to the music of Johann Strauss, Philip Glass and, of course, Part. Though Sher-Machherndl has made several striking changes in this updated version of the ballet, including omitting one of the more comedic sections in which the dancers continually knock Victoria down while she tries to execute a grand plié, he leaves her tender solo (danced topless and almost entirely with her back to the audience) untouched.

It is in this solo section that Sher-Machherndl is at his best. Utilizing a narrow pathway between the two upstage wings, he creates a precious balance between movements of contorted awkwardness and feats of exquisite technical bravado. Lighting designer Heather Saunders adds deep pockets of shadow along Victoria's trajectory that give just enough contour to her body, and the music (presumably Philip Glass, although Sher-Machherndl's program notes are frustratingly incomplete), provides a lush jungle of piano melodies for



Tessa Victoria is featured in Lemon Sponge Cake's new work, "Where is the Love."

Victoria to navigate as she executes a difficult series of balances and rotations with her arms wrapped tightly around her torso.

For audiences unfamiliar with the contemporary ballet idiom, the program offers lots of food for thought. The combination of classical line and more pedestrian walking patterns and gesture is fascinating to the eye, and the breaking of familiar conventions — such having the dancers stand completely still during musical crescendos —

gives viewers a fresh perspective on the choreographic formula.

And for Lemon Sponge Cake regulars, "Where is the Love" and "AustriaPop Vol. 2" offer plenty of characteristic Sher-Machherndl moments. He excels in finding movements that belong neither to the world of classical ballet nor to everyday, pedestrian activity.

## ★ dance review

### IF YOU GO

**WHAT** • Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet presents "Where is the Love" and "AustriaPop Vol. 2"  
**WHEN** • 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 and 8 p.m. Sunday  
**WHERE** • Cleo Parker Robinson Theater, 119 Park Avenue West, Denver  
**TICKETS** • \$22  
**CALL** • (866) 464-2626 or visit [www.ticketswest.com](http://www.ticketswest.com)

## ENTERTAINMENT

JOE RASSENFOSS, ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR, 303.892.5410, E-MAIL: SPOTLIGHT@ROCKYMOUNTAINNEWS.COM

# Dancing on the edge

Choreographer, dancer  
'get into a zone' to scale  
Paërt's layered music

By Marc Shulgold

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

With a title like *Vertigo*, you might expect a dizzying display of whirling-dervish spins from the dancers in Robert Sher-Machherndl's latest full-length work.

The word, after all, refers to a condition of dizziness, in which everything seems to spin uncontrollably.

Or maybe the title has a connection with the song of that name by U2. That's not too outlandish, considering that the Boulder choreographer's musical tastes have included techno-rock.

Perhaps it's meant as a nod to Alfred Hitchcock's classic film about a man suffering from the ailment.

Actually, it's none of the above, the dance-maker says. "I believe that U2 took the title from Hitchcock, and we took it from them," Sher-Machherndl said of the work performed in Denver this weekend by his all-female troupe, Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet.

*Vertigo* won't make dancers or dance-watchers dizzy, he reassured. "The choreography does reflect the title in that it stays pretty much on the edge. The word is just a starting point for me. Sometimes when I put something in writing, it becomes part of the whole (creative) process."

With all respect to Hitchcock and the Irish rock band, the true inspiration for *Vertigo* was guest dancer Stephanie Walz, a former principal with American Ballet Theatre and now a member of the Florida-based Maximum Dance Company.

"It started with her," Sher-Machherndl said of Walz. "Without her, everything would have been different."

Walz, who dances a 15-minute solo in the piece, says her connection with the Austrian-born choreographer began with a phone call.

"I was looking for outside work, since Maximum doesn't perform all year and the company doesn't have the full range of choreographic styles." She called a Colorado friend, who suggested Sher-Machherndl.

Contact was made between dancer and dance-maker, the two exchanged videos of their work and, thanks to a rare confluence of schedules, a March date was set.

That was the easy part. There was no guarantee of success. "It's always a risk when you've never met," Walz

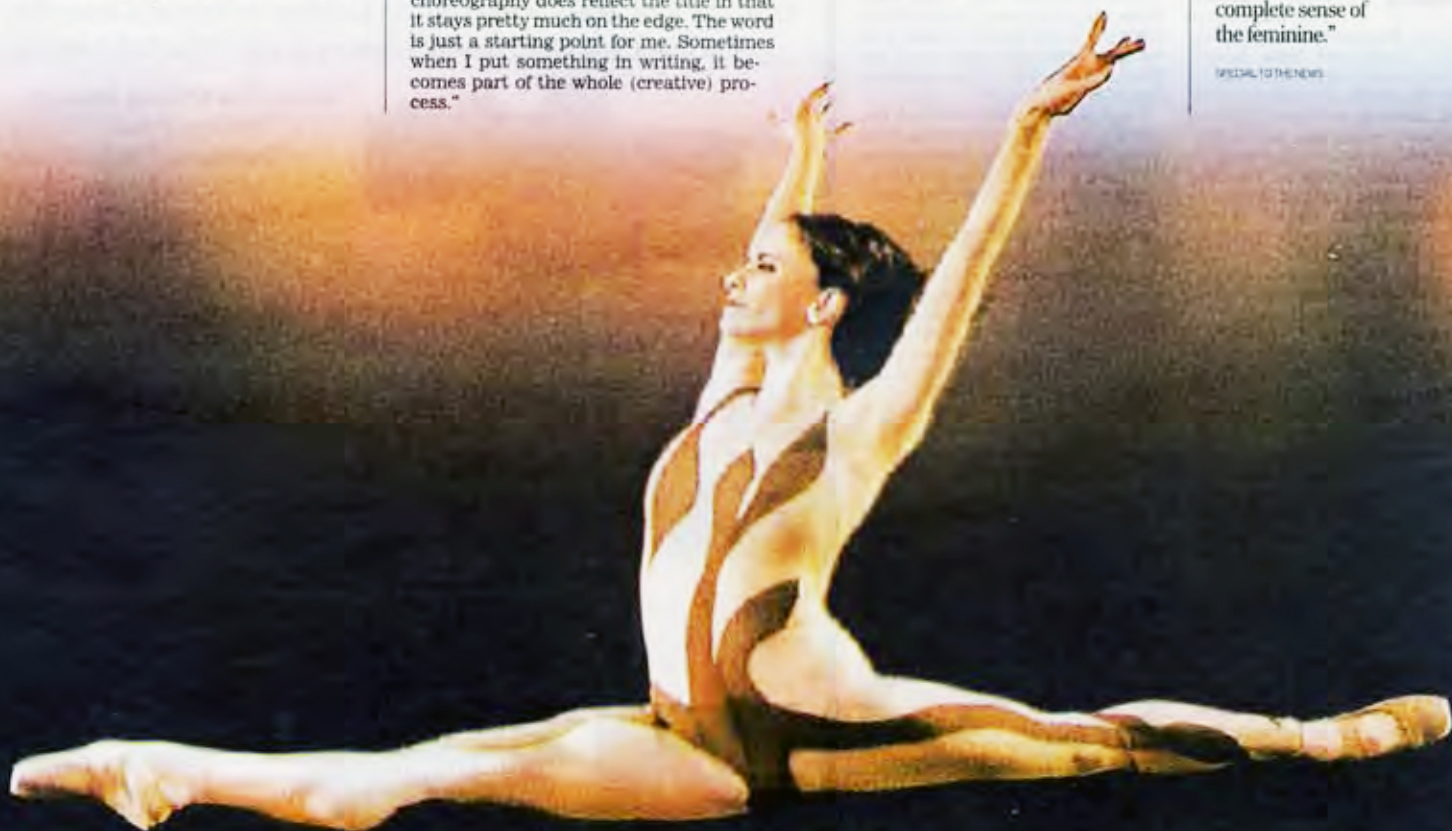
Continued on next page

### Vertigo

- **When and where:** 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Cleo Parker Robinson Theatre, 119 Park Avenue West
- **Cost:** \$22
- **Information:** 866-464-2626
- **Of note:** Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet performs Robert Sher-Machherndl's newest work.

**Dancer Stephanie Walz** says Robert Sher-Machherndl's choreography "communicates a complete sense of the feminine."

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS



# Guest artist adds flavor to Lemon Sponge Cake's latest offering

By Carl Cunningham

Camera Dance Critic

In the center of the Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Dance Center, Tessa Victoria emerges from a deep lunge stretch and flashes an unexpected smile. She looks like she's about to embark on a ski trip, not rehearse an excerpt from Robert Sher-Machherndl's contemporary ballet offering.

Clad in fleece and wind-resistant attire from head to toe, Victoria explains she is trying to keep her muscles warm.

"These are the best," she says, pointing to the enormous down booties she has over the top of her pointe shoes. "I can even

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT** • Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet presents "Vertigo"

**WHEN** • 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. March 20 (also 8 p.m. March 25 and 26 at Cleo Parker Robinson Theater, Denver)

**WHERE** • Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder

**TICKETS** • \$22

**INFO** • (866) 464-2626 or [www.ticketswest.com](http://www.ticketswest.com)

stand on pointe in them." She demonstrates, rising up on her toes easily, but the look is not what Sher-Machherndl has in

mind for his "Vertigo" and so, in a matter of minutes, Victoria sheds her layers and reveals the requisite satin pointe shoes and tight-fitting ballet attire.

"Vertigo" is a rather unlikely title for the concert of primarily solos and duets for Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet company members Victoria, Jennifer Dale and Linnea La Rocco, as well as guest artist Stephanie Walz and artistic director Sher-Machherndl. Vertigo refers to a state of dizziness, unbalance and light-headedness, but in this contemporary work the dancers are none of these things. Instead they are confident, precise and

*Please see ARTIST on 6D*



Stephanie Walz, a former member of the American Ballet Theater, is a guest artist at Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's upcoming performances of its new show, "Vertigo."

## Artist adds to flavor of Cake

*Continued from 1D*

strikingly balanced — even when executing the difficult movement sequences characteristic of Sher-Machherndl's vocabulary on pointe.

The newest addition to Lemon Sponge Cake's distinctive landscape is Walz, a former member of the American Ballet Theater and an accomplished freelance artist who performs regularly as a principal dancer with the Miami-based Maximum Dance Company. Though Walz comes to Boulder as a guest, she is linked to Sher-Machherndl through a peculiar channel of shared colleagues.

When Victoria and Sher-Machherndl traveled to New York City for the Ballet Builders performance last April, they met former American Ballet Theater principal dancer Valerie Madonia. Madonia admired Sher-Machherndl's work and later recommended Walz, her colleague, as a potential guest artist.

"She said, 'Oh, I have this friend who's also from American Ballet Theater. She would like what you do, she wants to dance more contemporary work now,'" Sher-Machherndl recalls.

After talking with Walz, Sher-Machherndl realized they had another colleague in common: Maximum Dance Company founding artistic director and dancer Yannis Pikieteris. Sher-Machherndl danced with Pikieteris at age 17 in Munich.

"He was an excellent dancer, like Baryshnikov," Sher-Machherndl says. "We just reconnected after 20 years or more. It's a great contact and he said, 'Anytime you need a dancer you can just invite them.'"

Now, as well as sharing dancers, Sher-Machherndl and Pikieteris also share a similar artistic vision for their contemporary ballet companies. Both artists are committed to infusing the more than 400-year-old ballet vocabulary with a healthy dose of modernism.

For "Vertigo" Sher-Machherndl delves further into his exploration of the compositions of Arvo Part, creating both new choreography for Part's scores and integrating his recent offering, "Where Is the Love" — originally a duet for Victoria and Adrienne Earnest — to Part's "Summa."

"I just wanted to continue with the music," Sher-Machherndl says of the duet in the context of his new work. "The whole evening is Arvo Part."

In "Vertigo" the duet has been revamped for Victoria and Walz. In the Sunday matinee it will be altered again, with Sher-Machherndl assuming Walz's part.

Several days before a performance at the Denver Ballet Guild Competition, Sher-Machherndl and Victoria rehearse this version of the duet. It is immediately apparent that they are a nicely matched pair, a duo of rebels well-versed in the art of holding their own. But one of the most interesting aspects of the casting change lies not in Sher-Machherndl's different body structure and ability, nor in his masculine energy, but rather in his lack of pointe shoes. Even completely identical and synchronized movement books different in soft shoes than it does on pointe, and it feels different as well.

"I felt like I wanted to do it, just try it out," Sher-Machherndl says of his decision to learn the duet. "I wanted to see how it looked with a guy and a girl."

The opportunity to see different casting usually is a treat relegated to larger companies with a slew of talent and long show runs, but in just one weekend at the Dairy Center, Lemon Sponge Cake offers Boulder audiences both a celebrated guest artist and a radical re-programming.



SUNDAY

March 13, 2005 • \$1.00

DAILY CAMERA



## DAILY CAMERA

## DANCE

## LEMON SPONGE CAKE

PREVIEW • Boulder company premieres new dance at Chautauqua

By Bill Menko  
For the Camera

Stepping into the dance studio of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, the first thing you notice are the posters. They're stark, they're sexy, and they're everywhere. On each, a lone female dancer bends low, poised on her toes. Her lithe arms are hung out like spider's legs from a slender, barely clad torso, suggesting either a black widow or a perching bird of prey. Her dark hair falls over her face, shrouding it in mystery.

The black-and-white poster is for the company's upcoming performance, "Le Ballet Star" premiering Saturday and Sunday at Chautauqua. Prints of it line the walls of the studio. Other posters from previous shows are interspersed here and there, reminders of past accomplishments. But the current poster predominates completely, as if to say, "Yes, those other shows were all well and good, but what matters now is the present work."

Artistic Director Robert Sher-Machherndl affirms the need to forge ahead.

"Every piece I do is sort of a step forward," he says. "Like everyone else, I try to challenge myself. I don't want to get stuck in a rut, get comfortable — you know, 'Forget it, it's finished.'"

For the current piece — his 10th full-length ballet for the company — Sher-Machherndl has decided to bring the idea of the ballet star into the foreground. Enter Valerie Madonia, the very ballet star who appears on the poster. Madonia has performed as a soloist for no less than Mikhail Baryshnikov, in addition to serving a 10-year ten-



**GUEST MOVES** Valerie Madonia appears in Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet's "Le Ballet Star," premiering this weekend at Chautauqua.

ure as principal dancer for the Joffrey Ballet.

Sher-Machherndl and Madonia met in New York last year and communicated a strong desire to work together. "Le Ballet Star," which features a 15-minute solo by the visiting prima ballerina, is the realization of that desire.

But there isn't just one ballet star in this dance. Sher-Machherndl has assembled an ensemble that includes several highly accomplished dancers. Stephanie Walt studied under Baryshnikov at the American Ballet Theater School of Classical Ballet and subsequently danced for that renowned company for nine years. She travels

extensively as a guest artist.

Meanwhile Tessa Victoria is dancing with the company for her fifth season. Victoria, who has danced for the Houston Ballet and Ballet West, performed a solo by Sher-Machherndl in New York City last April when the company was honored with an invitation to the "Ballet Builders" showcase.

Working with such talent allows Sher-Machherndl much freedom.

"When I work with Valery and Stephanie — or Tessa, who I've worked with for five years already — when you work with a really experienced dancer, it's different. They know already, the work process is really

quick," he says.

Having a facile working relationship with the dancers is particularly crucial for a choreographer like Sher-Machherndl, who never comes up with movement in the studio on his own beforehand, instead preferring to develop it while working with individual dancers in the moment.

"Even the solo I do in 'Le Ballet Star', I did it on (another) dancer," he says. "It's much easier, and then also, your discipline is better."

According to Sher-Machherndl, rousé comes first in his creative process. This time around, he has honored a long-standing admiration for the work of orchestral composer

## iFYOUgo

**WHAT** • Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet premieres "Le Ballet Star"

**WHEN** • 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday

**WHERE** • Chautauqua Auditorium, 900 Residing Road, Boulder

**TICKETS** • \$22-\$30

**INFO** • (303) 444-2628 or visit [www.chautauqua.com](http://www.chautauqua.com)

Arvo Part, while juxtaposing against that the sparse, rumbling electronic club offerings of German laptop composer Pole. While the mixture is eclectic on the surface, Sher-Machherndl believes there is an underlying consonance between the two strains of music, rooted in a shared minimalist inclination.

Along with the music come the steps. And "Le Ballet Star" is very much a dance where the meaning is in the steps. Sher-Machherndl's choreography draws on the extensive catalog of ballet movements and puts them to innovative use. While traditional ballet favors the clean geometry of pure lines, Sher-Machherndl prefers to work from those lines and then bend and break them, creating enticing, ever-changing angularities softened by a supple responsiveness perhaps more familiar to modern dance than ballet.

Another point of departure from classical ballet is Sher-Machherndl's use of movement that takes place on the floor, in a lying or sitting — as opposed to standing — position.

According to Madonia, "Robert's choreographic voice speaks clearly, while at the same time allowing the unique language of the artists he is working with to emerge. 'Le Ballet Star' is a dynamic vehicle for the dancer as artist and physical force."

## Pointe

November 2004/January 2005

## Reviews

Bolshoi Ballet

Fall For Dance  
Festival

The Joffrey Ballet

Korean National  
Ballet

Lemon Sponge Cake

Pittsburgh  
Ballet Theatre

the great premier danseur. But any excuse is worthy to bring out *Apollo* and *Petrouchka*, both splendidly staged and performed on opening night.

The evening's standout performances included Victoria Jaiani's fetching Terpsichore in *Apollo*, and Willy Shives in the title role of *Petrouchka*.

The first piece on the program was the "Pas D'Action" from Act III of the full-length ballet *Laurencia*. Though Nureyev set this dance on The Joffrey in 1969, the company never performed it due to an injured lead male dancer. The current staging by Anna-Marie Holmes, featuring the choreography of Vakhtang Chabukiani, was a decorative, lightweight opener danced crisply by the ensemble of eight. Julianne Kepley and Ikolo Griffin provided bravura performances as the bride and groom.

The deeper pleasures of the evening began with the company's fine rendering of George Balanchine's *Apollo*, set by Paul Boos. From the opening moments when Apollo's mother, Leto, swirled her arms giving birth to him, the ballet cast a spell of enchantment. Young Fabrice Calmels' height and athletic physique gave him instant and commanding bearing in the title role. While he has room to mature into the dramatic nuances of the part, he convincingly transformed himself from uncertain neophyte to confident sun god, leading his muses toward Mount Olympus. CONTINUED ON [POINTEMAGAZINE.COM](http://POINTEMAGAZINE.COM)

In Colorado: Memories Of A  
Lemon Sponge Cake

By Daniel Gesmer

Skateboard artist/entrepreneur Daniel Gesmer has written extensively about Nijinsky for publications around the world.

In the premiere of *AustriaPop*, which Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet presented in August 2004 at Chautauqua Auditorium in Boulder, CO, 43-year-old choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl plumbed his memories to create a semiabstract, autobiographical ballet evoking universal themes, both personal and social. Though not particularly "pop," this meditation on his childhood in Austria was richly suggestive, entertaining and thought provoking.

Sher-Machherndl aims to stretch the limits of classical pointe technique,

so ballet can integrate contemporary movement sensibilities and comment on the current scene. Trademarks of his approach are novel transitions from the floor to pointe and back again; and the use of unusual rhythms and canons—or even pedestrian, anti-classical insertions—to make classroom exercises and combinations seem strange and interesting.

He claims an urban mindset, drawing ideas from everyday life, television, film, magazines and fashion in all forms, from clothing to furniture and interior design. His watchwords are "cool," "funky," "entertaining" and "sexy," though works like *AustriaPop* clearly probe much deeper than that.

To parody the entrenched traditions that enveloped him during his 1960s childhood, *AustriaPop* juxtaposes discordant, pedestrian ensembles with heroic selections from the music of Johann Strauss and the Vienna Boys Choir (whose training center is just two blocks from Sher-Machherndl's boyhood home). Melancholy music by Arvo Pärt and Philip Glass accompanies more lyrical, human passages that suggest the choreographer's varied feelings about the familial and cultural environments in which he grew up, as well as his path toward inner resolution and a professional dance career. Pure movement evolves spontaneously into a canvas for stories that seem to emanate from his subconscious. CONTINUED ON [POINTEMAGAZINE.COM](http://POINTEMAGAZINE.COM) 

David Acosta

Adrienne Earnest of Lemon  
Sponge Cake in Robert  
Sher-Machherndl's  
*AustriaPop*



# Rocky Mountain News

& THE DENVER POST

SATURDAY, AUGUST 14, 2004

★ 50 cents in Denver

## Lemon Sponge Cake a delectable mouthful

By Marc Shulgold  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

BOULDER — The name of the company is a mouthful, as is the name of its director-choreographer. But the ongoing work of Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet and Robert Sher-Machherndl emerge as delectable treats that seem to taste better and remain with you longer at each serving.

On Friday in Chautauqua Auditorium, the Viennese-born choreographer unveiled his latest full-length opus — a tribute of sorts to his hometown. *AustriaPop* predictably serves up bits and pieces from Strauss, and, unpredictably, snippets of minimalism.

Anyone familiar with this wonderful five-member company and its imaginative director would expect such quirky juxtapositions. The odd juggling of music is just the beginning in Sher-Machherndl's strange and involving world of dance.

As the term *contemporary ballet* implies,

### Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet

- **Grade:** A-
- **When and Where:** Repeated at 8 p.m. today in Chautauqua Auditorium, Ninth and Baseline streets.
- **Information:** 303-440-7666

there is a blending of two dance styles: Classical ballet poses, steps and combinations — performed with assurance — alongside modern steps and poses.

This odd blending could become a silly hodge-podge in lesser hands, but Sher-Machherndl knows what he's doing. Working with (and against) a selection of Strauss waltzes and polkas, intercut with slow and evocative chamber works by Glass and Paert, the dancemaker weaves a fabric of repeated steps, stillness and agitated passag-

es that never wears out its welcome.

There's no storyline — there never is in his full-length works — but there are moods expressed and human relationships explored. The dancers — Amy Docktor, Lesley Henry, Linnea La Rocco, Tessa Victoria and Adrienne Earnest Zetterberg — brilliantly project feelings of sadness, loneliness and joy. But in endlessly subtle ways, and in endlessly inventive movements.

Perhaps the most involving segment of *AustriaPop* features Victoria in a sweetly sensual solo, danced topless — modestly, with her back to the audience. It's never clear what this segment means, but then one is never quite certain what any of the evening-length piece means.

When the dancers, finally, explode with energetic movements in the concluding Strauss (a segment almost disappointing in its literalness), the end of this intoxicating journey is clearly in sight.

This is Sher-Machherndl's finest effort. Until his next opus, no doubt.

# THE DENVER POST

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 13, 2004

DANCE LISTINGS > 12FF

## dance

By Elana Ashanti Jefferson Denver Post Staff Writer

### The music of his Austrian youth, in Boulder | Robert Sher-Machherndl grew up in Vienna two blocks away from the Vienna Boys Choir

headquarters.

The founder and artistic director of Boulder's Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet Company contemplated trying out for the renowned youth choir. But dance was Sher-Machherndl's calling.

After 25 years in the dance world, it's ironic that Sher-Machherndl waited this long to conceive a concert based on the music for which his hometown is most famous.

#### "AustriaPop"

**DANCE** | A Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet world premiere; Chautauqua Auditorium, 900 Baseline Road, Boulder, B tonight and Saturday | 522-530 | TicketsWest, 866-464-2626

Beginning tonight, Lemon Sponge Cake will mount AustriaPop, an 85-minute dance retrospective of Sher-Machherndl's childhood in Vienna. The show draws heavily on waltzes by Johann Strauss, along with music by Philip Glass and Arvo Part.

"I've never worked with music like this," the choreographer said this week, "but I've always wanted to."

Sher-Machherndl is a former principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet and the Bavarian State Ballet. The veteran performer described this weekend's premiere as a series of snapshots from the time he was 6 and 7 years old.

"It was the time before I was

in school, and then in school," said the choreographer, who melds classic and contemporary ballet techniques, and asks his company to perform an unusual amount of pointe work.

"I remember so strongly this age," he said. "I try to show the different moods and emotions with the music and the choreography."

Both company dancers and fans note that Sher-Machherndl has developed a distinctive dance vocabulary. But perhaps the most intriguing segment of AustriaPop is a solo featuring Tessa Victoria, the company's rehearsal assistant, who portrays Sher-Machherndl as a boy in a piece performed topless in diffused light

with her back to the audience.

"It's about vulnerability and shyness," Victoria said of the seven-minute solo. "Being young is a time when we're all unsure of ourselves but we're trying to express ourselves and put ourselves out there."

Victoria underscored that the racy topless technique avoids being salacious because she faces the back of the stage during the entire solo. "The whole idea is that you don't see anything," she said.

The dancer described the show in general as a "very organic" performance that requires tremendous strength and emotion.

"I really enjoy the movement," the dancer said. "It's



A Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet

Tessa Victoria will perform in Lemon Sponge Cake's premiere of "AustriaPop," tonight at Chautauqua Auditorium.

very challenging."

Victoria added that Sher-Machherndl's athletic choreographic style makes for performances that are accessible to both dance novices and connoisseurs. That's a major reason many of the Lemon Sponge Cake dancers partici-

pate in each show despite scant compensation.

"We do this for the love of it," Victoria said.

Staff writer Elana Ashanti Jefferson can be reached at 303-820-1957 or [ejefferson@denverpost.com](mailto:ejefferson@denverpost.com).

# The NEW YORK Sun



TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2004

## ON THE TOWN

PIA CATTON

Another solo, this one for a woman, was a highlight of Ballet Builders at Florence Gould Hall. Robert Sher-Machherndl — artistic director of the three-year-old Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet in Boulder, Colo. — presented a solo from his full-length evening work “Strangelands,” which combined contemporary ballet, drama, and heartfelt emotion.

According to the choreographer, the piece was meant to play with the idea of “going and not going, being held back.” Dancer Tessa Victoria marched across the stage with purpose, only to find herself changing her mind and nearly collapsing. With her back to the audience, she peered over her shoulder, then pulled her chin away. Falling down as if to do a push-up, she rubbed her cheek against an imaginary partner, then seemed to look out to the audience for reassurance. Mr. Sher-Machherndl’s style suggests influences of William Forsythe and Jiri Kylian, but the solo has a warm, emotional mood.

The larger piece from which this solo was taken is for seven female dancers — in fact, the Lemon Sponge Cake Company has only female dancers. Though the absence of men was initially unintentional, the company has now evolved in an all-female direction. “I really want to concentrate on the female form and pointe technique. That’s what I do,” said the choreographer.

The Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, meanwhile, is hoping for a Joyce Theater engagement, but its next definite performance will be the August premiere of “AustriaPop” — a contemporary ballet set to waltzes by Strauss — at the Chautauqua Center in Boulder, Colo. Finally, Mr. Goecke is readying more pieces for the Stuttgart Ballet, and he too is looking forward to returning to New York someday soon: “I hope I can work with Wendy Whelan,” he said.

# 5280

Denver's Mile-High Magazine  
August 2004

## Home



### LEMON SPONGE CAKE

A Contemporary Ballet Company  
with a Colorado Edge

Lemon Sponge Cake is delicious. Filled with long-legged women en pointe, the chic look and fast-moving dance technique of this ballet company is drawing Colorado audiences in for a taste.

The husband-and-wife team of Robert Sher-Machherndl and Jenifer Sher have designed an audacious contemporary ballet company with a Colorado edge: athletic, sexy, courageous, fun. Chief choreographer and artistic director Sher-Machherndl draws on his first-class European ballet training. (He was a principal with the Bavarian State Ballet, Nederlands Dance Theater, and Dutch National Ballet companies.) He and his wife (also a former dancer) arrived in Boulder in 1999 and immediately established a



ballet school and two contemporary ballet companies.

Finding a studio at the Dairy Center for the Arts in Boulder, now a laboratory for all kinds of dance companies, Sher-Machherndl set up a training ground for the next generation of ballet. It's his chance to impart his clear, clean ballet lines to younger legions of dancers. And now, he is widely being recognized. *The New York Times* recently described him as "a choreographer to watch for."

As a technique teacher in demand around the state, Sher-Machherndl's reputation as a ballet master is set next to the extraordinary traditional example set by the Colorado Ballet's artistic director, Martin Fredmann. See for yourself with an upcoming performance of *AustriaPop* at Boulder's Chautauqua Auditorium, Aug. 13-15.

NINOTCHKA BENNAHUM

PHOTO COURTESY OF LEMON SPONGE CAKE





# Rocky Mountain News

& THE DENVER POST

SATURDAY, JUNE 7, 2003

50 cents in Denver

## Lemon Sponge Cake dancers heat up a cool Chautauqua

By Marc Shulgold

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Boulder—An unexpected cold blast from the Canadian north late Friday couldn't keep a small but enthusiastic crowd from enjoying the choreography of Robert Sher-Machherndl, one of the most inventive dancemakers in the region.

Chautauqua Auditorium wasn't the warmest spot in town, but the remarkable dancing of Sher-Machherndl's five-woman troupe, Lemon Sponge Cake, managed to heat things up. Per-

forming two full-length works, *Strangelands* and the previously reviewed *Point*, the quintet offered an intriguing blend of classical ballet and post-modern dance.

If there is such a thing as classical post-modern ballet, this is it.

Sporting pointe shoes, the women moved freely from arabesques and pirouettes to casual slouching, leg trembling and floor rolling. Facial expressions were blank and interaction kept to a mysterious minimum.

Just as the relationship of one dancer to another proved a curious mixture of cool detachment

### Lemon Sponge Cake

**Grade:** B+

**When and Where:**

repeated at 8 p.m. today in Chautauqua Auditorium, 9th Street and Baseline Road, Boulder

**Information:**  
(303)440-7666

and total dependency, so too did the quintet's connection to the

wildly diverse hodge-podge of music.

From the assaultive repetitions of dance-club techno-what-ever music by the Chemical Brothers (in the opening *Strangelands*) to the gracious, introspective musings of Mahler's *Adagietto* or a somber cello-piano piece by Arvo Paert, the music seemed to hover over the dancers— affecting and directing them in ways that we could only guess.

There is sheer nerve in what Sher-Machherndl asks of his troupe: Anna Blackburn-Whittman, Shannon Guillot, Tala Mc-

Donnough, Lesley Potashnik, Henry and Tessa Victoria.

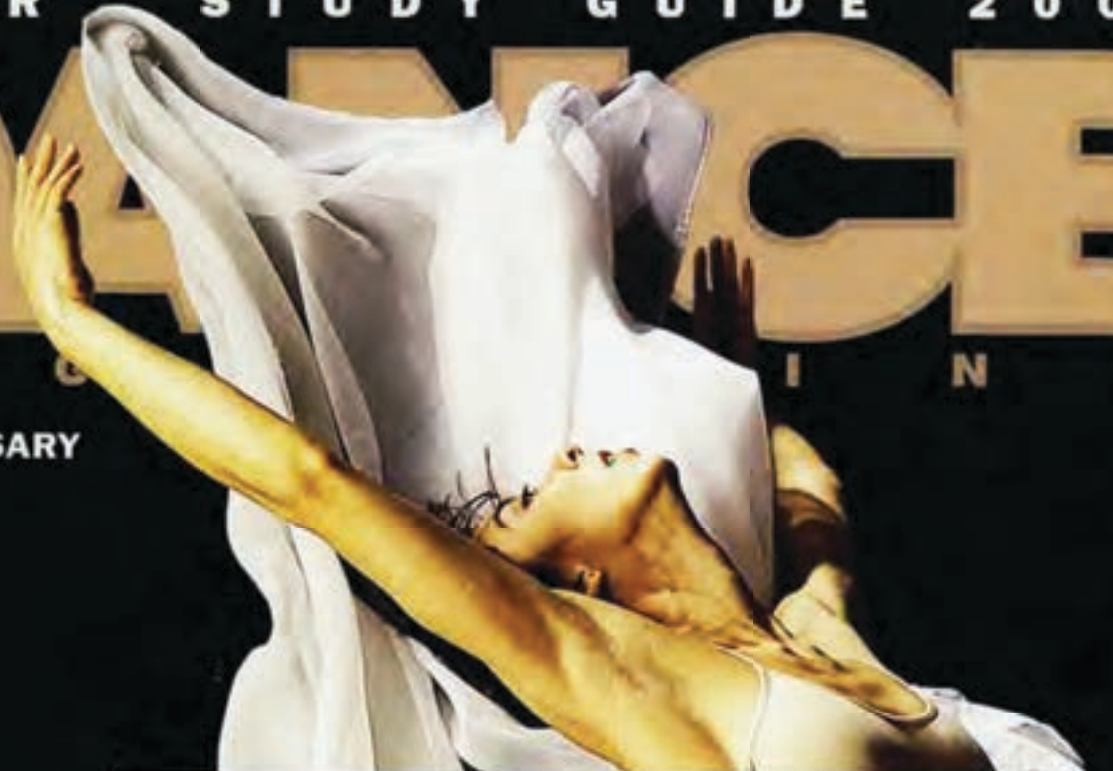
Just as a great rock guitarist must deliver a series of inventive, connected riffs in a lengthy solo, Sher-Machherndl juggles movement ideas nimbly, never settling into the expected or the trite. It makes for a long evening of intense dance, but there's really nothing that matches it for originality and audacity — two artistic qualities found all too rarely these days.

Marc Shulgold is music/dance writer. (303) 892-5296 or [mrshulgold@rockymountainnews.com](mailto:mrshulgold@rockymountainnews.com)

## DANCE

75TH ANNIVERSARY  
JANUARY 2002

dancemagazine.com



movement sensibilities. Doubtless it was also one of the hottest, highest-caliber classical dance concerts produced in Boulder in recent memory.

Sher-Machherndl did not fail to deliver on his primary watchwords: "cool, funky, entertaining, and sexy." He claims an urban mindset, drawing ideas from everyday life, television, film, magazines, and fashion in all forms, from clothing to furniture to interior design.

Until 1996, Sher-Machherndl enjoyed a distinguished career throughout Europe as a performer, choreographer, artistic director, and teacher. Highlights included a personal invitation to perform for the senior President George Bush in 1992, work with the Dutch National Ballet and Nederlands Dans Theater, and an appearance on *Dance Magazine's* February 1993 cover.

He left London to join his wife in Colorado; he was reportedly the first person in state history to receive an "Alien of Extraordinary Ability" visa, granting him permanent residence in the U.S. Jenifer Sher-Machherndl, a native of England, came up with the new group's catchy name and also designed the backless red-and-black *Point* costumes.

*Point* set its five young women, and occasionally their choreographer, in daring, edgy motion to infectious grooves that ranged eclectically from industrial to funk to blues to Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Sher-Machherndl wisely played to the individual personalities and technical strengths of his performers, but he also challenged them to embrace his distinctly progressive energy and style.

The work had no clear story line, but included a number of dramatically evocative passages as well as some startlingly imaginative transitions from ground to pointe. Through intertwined ensemble sequences,

solos, and duets, *Point* seemed to juxtapose innocence with experience and suggested the jaggedness of modern romance.

Most effective were the fast-paced sections set to hard-edged industrial strains from Moby, the Chemical Brothers, David Bowie, and Prodigy. Here Victoria seemed most at home. In a number of solo sequences, the gifted, redheaded veteran of Houston Ballet and Ballet West seemed a jaded secret agent or an angry "bad girl" from the wrong side of the tracks.

Also notable were Blackburn-Wittman for her exquisite line and placement; the choreographer's seemingly ironic play on Potashnick's innocent young look; and sections featuring the ensemble, lined up at stage rear, moving in memorably beautiful canons.

*Point* resolved on a serene, hopeful note and ended with a lighthearted, if slightly heavy-handed, image: The women took off their shoes and exited noisily along a roll of bubble wrap set diagonally across the stage, as if to symbolize the "popping" of the old paradigms of pointework and, perhaps, love.

The slower sections, some performed in near silence, were somewhat problematic. But Sher-Machherndl is already at work with his five-member company to revise and expand the production for a Joyce Theater booking and large-scale touring.

#### AUSTRIAN CHOREOGRAPHER MAKES STRONG POINT

LEMON SPONGE CAKE CONTEMPORARY BALLET  
DAIRY CENTER FOR THE ARTS DANCE SPACE  
BOULDER, COLORADO

OCTOBER 5-7, 2001

REVIEWED BY DANIEL GESMER

Boulder, Colorado, now boasts an unprecedented number of talented ballerinas. For *Point*, the second production of his Lemon Sponge Cake Contemporary Ballet, Austrian choreographer Robert Sher-Machherndl recruited five of the area's finest: Anna Blackburn-Wittman, Shannon Guillot, Tala McDonough, Lesley Potashnick, and Tessa Victoria, all current members of Boulder Ballet.

The seventy-minute, single-act work premiered in June 2001 and was revived for three additional showings in October, all at the recently remodeled Dance Space in Boulder's Dairy Center for the Arts. It marked a crossroads in the 39-year-old artistic director's mission to stretch the limits of classical pointe technique to comment on the current scene and integrate contemporary

