

DANCE AT THE TOP

The Vail International Dance Festival brings the best and brightest to Colorado for a grand tradition that's taking on new life.

By **Gwen Gray**. Photography by **Eric Gray**.

A SEAT AT MOTHER NATURE'S STAGE

Each year during the two-week Vail International Dance Festival, on early August evenings, the sun dips into the Vail Valley, turning the surrounding Gore Range hillsides into a forested amphitheater of light. Hummingbirds whirl above glimmering Gore Creek, which rushes beneath Vail Village's landmark covered bridge and alongside the town's Swiss-inspired storybook homes and hotels.

A steady exodus begins from the village around 6:30pm. If you follow the blanket-toting procession along the meandering creek-side trail, past the Betty

Ford Alpine Gardens, you'll discover an unexpected place of reverence for these evening pilgrims.

Inside the open-air Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, the dance world's finest, famous and yet-to-be-famous take to the stage night after night for two weeks of dazzling dance traditions and surprises.

Each year, I find myself among the devoted. I sit impatiently in the audience before the festival's popular International Evening of Dance, too excited by the buzz around me to read the program, cursing myself for forgetting, yet again, to opt for warm tights, a pair of boots and a coat — instead of a summer dress and sandals — in the cool alpine air. >>



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pagne into plastic flutes. Many of them are clearly dancers, gracefully leaning over to greet one another with kisses on the cheek. Down below, in the covered pavilion, seasoned spectators take their seats and steel themselves in stylish wool wraps, silk shawls, even a few furs.

The light grows dimmer, a crow caws and soars above, and the ushers’ bells jingle. The crowd becomes hushed as the first dancers take to a darkened stage.

Some years, it may be a boundary-bending hip-hop act, other years a pair of virtuosos from the world’s top dance companies — maybe the New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, the Bolshoi, Paul Taylor Dance Company or Paris Opera Ballet (all the greats have graced the VIDF stage) — or perhaps a ballroom couple dancing the tango, flicking and pivoting their way across the stage while intertwined like laces.

One thing remains the same every year, no matter who is on the stage: They are good. The best, in fact. And the crowd never fails to notice — leaping to their feet the moment the first act is over, erupting in applause and shouting, “Bravo!”

THE VAIL DANCE FAMILY

What brings the best of the best to this mountain town in Colorado every summer? There’s a long tradition of excellence at Vail — the festival is now in its 26th year — but artistic director Damian Woetzel has played a major role in ensuring the festival has continued to thrive, or more accurately, evolve.

A former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, Woetzel first participated in the festival as a dancer and choreographer, returning several years in a row. In 2007, on the eve of his retirement as a performing dancer, he was asked to become artistic director.

It was obvious from the get-go that the charismatic Woetzel had a new vision for the festival, one that has now come into crystal-clear focus. VIDF has gently shifted its emphasis over time, creating a series of ongoing dance *relationships* — collaborations, conversations and returning artists >>



In one of the unconventional scenarios that make VIDF so endearing, several of the dancers are usually already on stage, in broad daylight. Some are wearing sweats and legwarmers, some their white hotel bathrobes, and all are focused on warming up at the free-standing barre or on the stage floor.

My husband passes his hand in front of my face. “Hello? You there? You’re trying to tell which brand of pointe shoes she’s wearing, aren’t you?” he chides. And he’s right. It’s rare you get to see your dance idols in the light of day, without the artifice of stage lighting.

The daylight also affords a look at the flowers growing at the edge of the stage floor, through the open back of the amphitheater: tall, bright blue delphiniums, bright black-eyed Susans or perhaps pink cosmos. (In more than one ballet performance here, I’ve seen the male dancer pluck an actual flower from the garden and hand it to his female partner.)

Audience members scramble up the hillside lawn that is the general admission seating area. They stake out places with their blankets and picnic baskets, unwrap cheeses and crackers, and pour themselves glasses of cham-

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Woetzel says, "I think that there's a bit of a Team Vail feeling that's gone on over the last years. A lot of these dancers come back. It's because there's something being built. There's that feeling that you get work done here that's important."

While Vail's idyllic mountain-town cachet surely plays a role (some of the dancers speak of wandering down to the icy creek to soothe their feet after rehearsals), you get the sense the cast is here as much to learn from one another as to take their own places on the storied stage.

BUILDING SOMETHING NEW

The on-stage stories have only become more diverse over the years. The beloved International Evening of Dance that I attend as ritual is now just one of several perennial favorites in the Vail

International Dance Festival lineup. There's the Upclose series at the Vilar Performing Arts Center, where Woetzel pauses the performance to impart a fascinating knowledge of dance technique or tradition; the highly acclaimed evening of world premieres; the budget-minded Dance for \$20.14 (which goes up a penny in price each year); the Ballroom Spectacular; and the star-studded Dance TV evening, with appearances from "Dancing with the Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance" cast members.

Yet within this familiar structure is an unprecedented level of creativity. The festival has been the launch site of two major new dance companies — Christopher Wheeldon's Morphoses and New York City Ballet MOVES — and ticketholders have come to expect original choreography, new on-stage collaborations between musicians and dancers, new dancer pairings and other artistic experiments.

And why shouldn't they? The dancers visibly relish the opportunity to create (or "to build," as Woetzel would say) and audiences revel in the chance to witness it. >>

and companies — where, previously, one-off performances punctuated the star-studded bill.

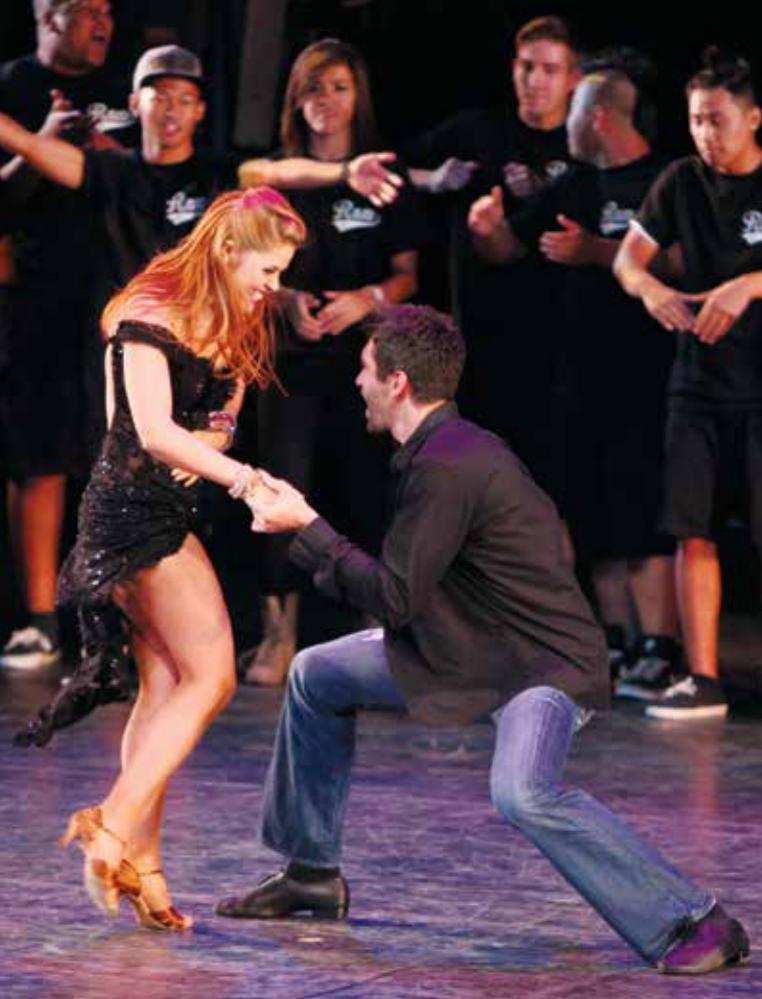
"It used to be dancers would arrive with their best 'bag of tricks,' so to speak, and stay for a night or two," Woetzel says, "but generally now those dancers come for four to five days before because they're doing a new piece or they are meeting a new partner. There is something being built here in addition to just having the performance."

Woetzel has fostered a dance family of sorts, nurturing selected artists-in-residence every year, such as fan-favorites Charles "Lil Buck" Riley, who brought the Memphis jookin' style to Vail, and Tiler Peck and Robert Fairchild, the star duo from New York City Ballet. They've all made return appearances, allowing audiences to come along on their journeys of growth and transformation.

2014 SEASON: JULY 27–AUG. 9

The festival's artist in residence will be the Argentine ballet superstar and American Ballet Theater principal Herman Cornejo. Companies in residence will include the much-lauded Pennsylvania Ballet and powerhouse contemporary dance company BalletX. The festival also welcomes back revered ballerina Wendy Whelan in the Vail debut of her new project "Restless Creature," along with New York City Ballet dancers (and fest favorites) Tiler Peck and Robert Fairchild, Carla Körbes from Pacific Northwest Ballet, the Martha Graham Dance Company, tango artists Gabriel Missé and Analía Centurión and the Memphis jookin' sensation Lil Buck.

Vail International
DANCE FESTIVAL





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Even when it comes to the classics (ballet fans can be assured there are plenty of them each year), there’s a sense of newness. Woetzel says, “No matter how familiar a piece might be to you, whether as a dancer or an audience member, things look quite different in Vail ... with the mountains all around and the outdoor setting. I think people on both sides of the stage realize that, and that’s very special. Now I always look to take that one step further and make sure that many of the pieces are ones you really can’t see elsewhere.”

A series of master classes and free community events round out the festival. Dancers and choreographers make scheduled appearances throughout Vail

Above a spontaneous post-show dance party that broke out on stage during the Dance TV event; festival-goers pass through Vail Village; and the author almost loses her mind at the chance to meet Cyrus Spencer of “So You Think You Can Dance” fame.

for interactive, crowd-gathering “Dancing in the Streets” events — a line-dancing class in front of The Arrabelle resort, a Memphis jookin’ throw-down at the Vail plaza, even a Martha Graham technique demo in the middle of town.

Additionally, the VIDF’s educational program, Celebrate the Beat, goes on year-round in Vail Valley schools, exploring with children the value of “joyful concentration” through dance. Hundreds of them have a chance to appear on stage each year.

With so many facets to the festival, one gets the sense that Woetzel’s pushing right up until the last minute of the last day of the festival to encourage new creativity, spark new moments of artistic expression, and to facilitate those fleeting, only-in-Vail moments.

He says, “The atmospheric disruptions can make it very special. I remember a rehearsal of Christopher Wheeldon’s ‘After the Rain,’ that was interrupted by a lightning storm, but the dancers just kept going. I mean, there’s just nothing like it on earth.”

COLORADO’S SUMMER PERFORMING ARTS FESTIVALS

Summer festivals bring some of the world’s best performers to stages around Colorado. Here’s a mere sampling.

Art & Jazz Festival

Grand Junction, May
downtowngj.org/artjazz.cfm

Crested Butte Music Festival

Crested Butte, June 15–July 28
crestedbuttemusicfestival.com

Jazz Aspen Snowmass

Aspen Snowmass, June
jazzaspensnowmass.org

Juneteenth Music Festival

Denver, June
juneteenthmusicfestival.com

Colorado Music Festival

Boulder, June–August
comusic.org

Colorado Shakespeare Festival

Boulder, June–August
coloradoshakes.org

Blues Under the Bridge Festival

Colorado Springs, July
bluesunderthebridge.com

Aspen Music Festival

Aspen, July–August
aspenmusicfestival.com

Denver Post Underground Music Showcase (UMS)

Denver, July
theums.com

Steamboat All Arts Festival

Steamboat Springs, August
steamboat-chamber.com

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Gwen Gray settled in the Boulder area nearly two decades ago after growing up in Colorado’s San Luis Valley. When she’s not watching her three-year-old daughter pirouette around the room or listening to her husband play guitar, she’s often writing about arts, culture, food and travel.