

ARTS

# 'A little perverse': Edgar Allan Poe haunts Ballet Austin's 'Poe: A Tale of Madness'



**[Michael Barnes](#)**

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Drums pound and rumble. Strings glide and shriek. Keyboards surge and tumble.

Nightmare music.

Yet, at the same time, beautiful and tragic music.

Thus commences a rehearsal for "Stephen Mills' Poe: A Tale of Madness," Ballet Austin's latest premiere, which plays March 22-24 at the Long Center for the Performing Arts.

As the rehearsal progresses, dancers swoosh, flutter and crumble in heaps. White hospital beds rush by on wheels.

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Since the performers dance without full costumes or makeup under the lights of the company's main studio downtown, it's difficult at first to make out the characters or the story.

Yet it quickly makes sense. One dancer is the Raven. Another is Death.

One, unambiguously, must be 19th-century horror story writer Edgar Allan Poe, driven to madness in part by another character, an impish doppelganger.

Floating across the stage, veiled in black, is Poe's departed mother.

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The remainder of the company play multiple roles, including the snobby literati of New York City, complicit in Poe's madness.

It's also abundantly clear that the dancers are not performing just one particular Poe tale at a time. Elements from five stories — "The Raven," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Masque of Red Death" and "The Imp of the Perverse" — are blended into one macabre hallucination.

I think Poe, who laid the groundwork for 19th-century Romanticism and Gothic literature in this country and, to some extent, abroad, would have applauded.

## **The creative catalysts of dance-maker Stephen Mills**

Since he famously set a full-length "Hamlet" to the music of Philip Glass almost a quarter of a century ago, Mills has repeatedly found a knack for turning cultural artifacts into completely new, living, breathing ballets.

"I was looking for something that was interesting and had not been done before," Mills says of his attraction to Edgar Allan Poe. "There are plenty of films of Poe's stories, but not dances. When I was in high school, given a choice between Poe and, say, William Faulkner, I always picked Poe. I guess I was a goth before there was such a thing."

Avoiding cliché, Mills pushed beyond Poe's familiar elements of horror to unearth underlying conflicts and moral conundrums.

"His stories and his personal life mirrored in so many ways," Mills says. "For any artist — over a period of time — you can find them in their work."

Mills chose an ingenious Austin theater artist, Shawn Sides, to devise a "libretto," which might be called instead a "scenario," since there are no spoken words in this ballet.

"Shawn and I spent some time talking and doing research," Mills says. "I didn't want to take two or three stories and put them side by side. And Poe is so interior, there might be just one, two or four characters in any of his stories. That wouldn't make a very good dance. We looked carefully at his life and made a long list of his writings that might work in parallel with that life."

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To evoke the madhouse setting of a hospital in Poe's Baltimore, scene designer Michael Raiford deploys 25 white beds onstage, which turn into corridors and hallways. Coffins pop

up everywhere.

One thing that any ballet lover will recognize right away: Some of the costume elements and ethereal movements of the women echo the Romantic ballets of the mid-19th century, such as "Giselle." That work premiered in 1841 and much of it is set in a graveyard.

"I didn't shy away from that kind of atmosphere," Mills says. "Those were the ballets during Poe's time, 'Giselle' particularly. I embraced it."

A similar kind of Gothic atmosphere entranced Mills during his youth.

"When I was a kid, when 'Dark Shadows' was on, I was there for it," he says about the daytime soap opera (1966-1971) set among vampires. "I don't like horror movies, but was always into this kind of sinister thing. I've never done this kind of dance, and I was reminded that I was interested in things these when I was young.

"It's a little perverse."

## **The abounding sounds of composer Graham Reynolds**

Maybe you have heard of Graham Reynolds. He's the gifted Austin composer of music for some 200 movies and stage works, along with numberless concerts and recordings.

You read that right: 200.

His IMBD page alone lists some 100 film soundtracks.

"I do work fast," Reynolds admitted. "I like to over-create and then edit. I did a lot of that for 'Poe.' A lot ended up on the editing room floor. I like to write and create in little cracks in time. For instance, I tried out some 'Poe' music during last year's SXSW, also at this year's. Trying things out all the time makes it go more quickly."

And while Reynolds has collaborated with Mills for previous shows such as "Cult of Color," "Grimm Tales" and "Belle Redux," this is his first full orchestral score for a ballet, which will be conducted by Austin Symphony Orchestra music director Peter Bay.

"There are a lot of strings," Reynolds says. "It features a string quartet, a string quintet, a string ensemble and several solos. Hefty piano part, naturally for me. (The piano is his primary instrument.) There are heavy drum parts: three giant base drums, each tuned

slightly differently, a marimba, vibraphones and a drum set. Add to that clarinets, flutes, trombones and tuba."

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Why such a thick, complex sound?

"Poe was so many things," Reynolds says. "He means different things to different people. He was a smart, complex person who wrote more than horror stories. So complexity has to be in there hopefully."

During the process of composing for Ballet Austin, Reynolds and Mills usually start with some kind of foundational idea.

"What it will be, at that point, is yet to be determined," he says. "This time the idea was Poe. Shawn came on with a libretto to help decide what the story would be." (Sides and Reynolds are a longtime couple.)

The rehearsal recording that I heard turned out to be a provisional mix of real instruments and MIDI (musical instrument digital interface). The full orchestra joins the process this week.

How does one orchestrate for 50 or 60 instruments?

"That's always the challenge," Reynolds says. "Especially for an instrument that you don't play. Every composer handles it differently. The more players you know, the better. They can say: 'That's too high for too long,' or 'That's an awkward leap on the strings. You can do it in theory, but it's not natural.' Every composer builds up a body of knowledge and consults experts to make sure the whole thing is playable."

"How that works is a mystery to just about everybody."

## **'Poe: A Tale of Madness'**

**When:** 7:30 p.m. March 22-23, 3 p.m. March 24

**Where:** Long Center for the Performing Arts, 701 W. Riverside Drive

**Tickets:** \$15 – \$125