

POINTE



From left: Vivien Farrell, Ian J. Bethany, and Paul Martin in *Stephen Mills' POE: A Tale of Madness*. Photo by Paul Michael Bloodgood and Virtigo Pictures, courtesy Ballet Austin.

Ballet Austin Gets Macabre for *Stephen Mills' POE / A Tale of Madness*



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Once upon a midnight dreary—five years ago, in fact—an eerie concept for a ballet rose, complete with a new score.

The world premiere of Ballet Austin's [Stephen Mills' POE / A Tale of Madness](#), which runs March 22-24 at Austin's The Long Center, weaves together elements of some of Edgar Allan Poe's most iconic works to tell his own grim story. With choreography by BA artistic director Stephen Mills, *POE* features a libretto written by producer [Shawn Sides](#) and a commissioned score by [Graham Reynolds](#), which will be played live by the Austin Symphony Orchestra.

The new gothic ballet follows the success of Mills' 2019 [Grimm Tales](#), a similarly hair-raising work that brought the Brothers Grimm's not-so-cheerful fairy tales to life. The creation of both ballets was achieved through the support of the [Butler New Choreography Endowment](#), a \$3 million gift given to BA in 2016 to fund a new dance work every three years. The pandemic and related delays put *POE*'s development on hold for two years. Now, after seven months of concentrated planning and collaboration, Mills and the production team are ready to take Poe's story(ies) to the stage.



From left: Vivien Farrell, Ian J. Bethany, Paul Martin, and Edward Carr in Stephen Mills' *POE: A Tale of Madness*. Photo by Paul Michael Bloodgood and Virtigo Pictures, courtesy Ballet Austin.

Mills finds Poe's work particularly engrossing. "I just love the darkness of it," he says, "the complexity—the way in which you don't really understand what's going on until the end, when he masterfully wraps it up."

Mills and Sides did not want to present Poe's works one after the other, or in their strict entirety. "We wanted to do something more complex," says Mills, "because with any artist, what they make is really wrapped up in who they actually are."

In Poe's case, that famously included alcoholism, a fascination with death, and the loss of significant women in his life to tuberculosis (including his wife and first cousin, Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe, whom he married when she was 13 and affectionately called Sissy). In addition was the writer's failed publishing career and steady descent into madness. The ballet, Mills says, will touch on all of these things, mixing the real people from Poe's life with the characters born of his pen. Among the stories and poems included in *POE* are "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Imp of the Perverse," "Annabel Lee," and, arguably, the writer's most preeminent work: "The Raven."



Costume designs by Margaret Mitchell. Photo courtesy Ballet Austin.



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Throughout the ballet, the raven character acts as a symbol of Poe's darkest moments. "The essence of ['The Raven'] is never-ending remembrance," says Mills. "Some things happen to you that are so traumatic that you can never forget them." *POE* opens in a mental hospital, where the writer was placed after he was infamously [found in the streets](#) of Baltimore—delirious, ill, and wearing someone else's clothes—just four days before he died in the ward.

Flashbacks and hallucinations take us through Poe's troubled story, beginning with the loss of his mother at age 3 and ending back at the hospital. Another notable character is Poe's doppelgänger, who acts as a sort of "better angel" of conscience, Mills explains, offering a window into the writer's troubled inner monologue. (The concept of the rival doppelgänger is a motif Poe employed in several of his works.)

The dancers will don the uncanny creations of costume designer Margaret Mitchell and perform amid dark, sprawling sets by [Michael B. Raiford](#). The goal is a deeply gothic effect—a reflection of a recent proclivity toward the macabre, both in ballet and the larger cultural zeitgeist, Mills notes.

"People are really interested in this man, gone over 150 years ago, who died penniless and almost unknown," he says. "And yet all these years later he is still such a powerful force in American literature."