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ARTS

In New Production of *Belle*, Ballet Austin Finds Grace in Beauty and Beasts

Stephen Mills mulls better life through dance

BY CAT MCCARREY, FRI., SEPT. 27, 2024

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Photo by Anne Marie Bloodgood / Courtesy of Ballet Austin

Music begins, searing synth drones and discordant piano couplets from composer **Graham Reynolds**. A father bids goodbye to his three daughters, embracing each as he leaps away to the unknown. Two twine around him, performing the motions while haughtily raising cruel noses to the air. The final daughter sinks into the father's

arms, radiating tenderness. This is Belle and her sisters, sending off their father and capturing tense family dynamics through a sinuous dance.

It's the second week of rehearsals for the dancers. The embrace isn't quite right. The roles of Belle and her father repeat their duet part, wrapping arms together around her figure until it's the right angle, the perfect sweep outward and down. It must be right, as they prepare to take the stage in Ballet Austin's *BELLE / A Tale of Beauty & the Beast*.

The retelling of *Beauty & the Beast* first played almost a decade ago, premiering in 2015 as *Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty & the Beast*. The "redux" may be dropped, but this is the same production. Same visually striking sets and costumes. Same engrossingly kinetic choreography. Same commitment to art that grows in unexpected directions.

Belle originally grew from a 3M Innovation commission. The Minnesota-based company set down roots in Austin during the 1980s and has steadily invested in local arts and community organizations ever since. In 2012, Ballet Austin's Sarah and Ernest Butler Family Fund Artistic Director Stephen Mills received a grant from the corporation specifically to create a new ballet. 3M prides itself on innovation – it's baked into the mechanics of the company at large – and they extended that expectation to their arts donation. "The 3M corporation was curious about the way in which dance is iterative," says Mills when reflecting on the original seeds of the ballet. "With that gift, I was able to think ... 'What if I expand on that process? How might I be able to start with one version of something and progress it along?'"

Stephen Mills has been Ballet Austin's artistic director and choreographer for the past 35 years. He's no stranger to adaptation – his repertoire over the years boasts vivacious retellings of opera and Shakespeare, ballets that include *The Magic Flute*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Hamlet*. Even his earliest works, like 1989's love story *Red Roses*, creep into the realm of fairy tale. Mills appears to revel in folklore with an edge. Gothic colors and whole-chested dramatics. In some sense, all his ballets feature characters on the peripheries. This one's no different.

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STEPHEN MILLS, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

According to Mills, “My personal connection to *Belle* is my personal experience being an outsider. Being a gay kid in a small Kentucky farm town? That puts you as an outsider.” It echoes in the stories he chooses to adapt.

Here, the Beast is a monstrous creature outside of acceptable society. But so is Belle. Even with her sisters, in her own town, she's an outcast. Live like that too long and things get dangerous. "What is a modern form of a beast, you know?" muses Mills. "It is that raw, violent, angry thing that we all have inside of us."

The effects of violence permeated the air while I chatted with Mills in late August. He couldn't shake current events. Our conversation kept turning to the election, to Gaza, to the tangible darkness in the world. "Every once in a while, you come back to, 'How is the war in Gaza related to me?' It's directly related to me, it's directly related to all of us. The thing in Ukraine, how is it related? The election we're about to have, the discrepancy, the vast wealth gap, the way policing happens in this country. It's all related to me. So if I'm going to be active in my community, that's helpful in some way. We have to believe. But to be ignorant of the fact that these things are going on is maybe worse. Because if you're not even paying attention to it, it's not on your radar, when an opportunity might come up for you to be useful it just flies by you."

Belle was born in those states of turmoil. Even though the 3M grant was awarded in 2012, the piece didn't premiere until 2015. A year defined by election anxiety, unease, and racial riots over Freddie Gray and the rumblings of more intense border panic. How can dance matter, then? What use is ballet in a time of bullets? "I don't want it to sound as though beauty can fix everything. It can't," says Mills. "I think all different people find all different things beautiful. The things you find beautiful, I might not, and vice versa. Beauty is what we make of it. Maybe I am catastrophizing individual people in Gaza. That's not what I mean because even there, there are likely small beauties to be found. I think that's the most important thing, is that even in desperate times, finding the smallest glimmer of beauty. Because beauty's hope."



Striving for something beautiful in those most desperate of times is deeply baked into the very bones of not just Ballet Austin's production of *Belle*, but the earliest inspirations of the story. Mills saw 3M's ballet commission as an exploration of iteration, creating something fresh through repetition. The tale of Beauty and the Beast as we know it was made in that same experimental way.

The most famous version of the story was published in 1756 by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, an ardent French feminist. She created magazines to uphold further rights for women and argue for widespread access to education. Beaumont truly believed that knowledge is power. That passion drove her to write more clear morals into her version of "Beauty and the Beast," which was a shortened version of Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's original 1740 story. Fast forward to 1946. In the wake of World War II, French filmmaker Jean Cocteau created a lush production dripping with unearthly special effects, filmed in a country rebuilding itself after German occupation. In 1994, composer Philip Glass – one of Stephen Mills' personal heroes – took the film and grafted an opera on top of it. "[Glass] calls it repetitive musical structures, but this minimalist kind of idea is just in our zeitgeist now because of him," muses Mills on Glass' contributions. "That film with that score on top was so monumental to me. ... That really helped to change the way I think about movement generation."

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STEPHEN MILLS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ART IN MISERABLE TIMES

With the space and resources to experiment, Mills found that for the first time he could breathe and tease out dances in new ways. This came to life with *Belle*. "I would make my version and then I would hand this version to somebody else. I'd say, 'How would you approach this? ... Now, give that version to so-and-so and see what they do with your version,'" describes Mills. "We'd do this round-robin thing until it came back to me. And then I would take it and do my final iterative process. Any number of movements might have gone through five or six iterations. It was like that game of telephone. It did not come back the way it started, which was great because more brains are better than less brains."

Mills continued this expansive mindset with his Austin-based collaborators. In his own words, "Art convenes communities." He reached out to local composer Graham Reynolds, who was best known for his work scoring **Richard Linklater** films. Working with Reynolds was an intentional move. It was his way of making not just a

score, but a soundscape. Mills asked Reynolds to make *Belle* cinematic. The result? An incredible mix of classical-tinged electronica. Mills loves the subtle sound effects. “That atmosphere that [Reynolds] builds in the story is so Alfred Hitchcock. The music is great, but the ambience that’s created in those in-between spaces is really cool.” **Listening to the score**, there are romantic strings and industrial beats, an eerie combination that just ... works.

The music holds a harsh edge softened by soaring elements. So does the set. Created by Michael B. Raiford, who also designed the spikily Alexander McQueen-esque costumes, it encapsulates something soft and lovely growing from severe sources. “There were many layers of inspiration for *Belle*,” said Raiford over email. “The original story and the Cocteau film are so very dark and surreal. I responded to places and surfaces that might help create those feels.” The result is something like Cocteau through a Berlin lens. Imposing walls glimmer with dim light. It’s not just the subject matter that leans toward the dark. The presentation lives in gloom. Raiford’s strict color scheme relies on blacks, grays, silvers, and reds. The performers work in a structure as confined as the palette, penned in on three sides. Mystical elements like moving staircases and dancers as architecture (much spookier than any Disney version) live within that space. Background video, directed by Raiford and filmed by Colin Lowry, flashes static with bold linear structures. “I wanted all the walls to create those twisted reflections,” says Raiford. “That happens via a metallic texture on the set walls and eventually through fun house mirrors that become part of the environment.” As the story progresses, the mirrors gradually appear, reflecting the characters as they gain more knowledge of themselves.

An entire dance in the second act is dedicated to reflection. Belle, trapped in the castle, performs a solo completely surrounded by a Versailles-like hall of mirrors. “She sees the story of her life reflected back at her,” elaborates Mills. “She is confronted with her own self. What is the good and evil within herself? For me, I think my life in dance has been about reflecting.” Light and dark, the forces of good and evil, these are the forces grappled with in *Belle* and in Mills’ work at large.



Stephen Mills at a rehearsal of Ballet Austin's Belle (Photos by Katherine Irwin)

When Raiford described his sets, he talked about covering the metallic walls with graffiti-inspired visuals. "I'm also fascinated by ancient graffiti. The idea that something has happened in a space over time marked by the occupants. There is a literal and poetic depth to the combination of those elements." The generations of dancers have made their mark on *Belle*. The generations of artists have made their mark on *Beauty and the Beast*. And Ballet Austin, under the direction of Mills, takes up the mantle to make their mark on art in a wretched world.

Cynicism sometimes tempts Mills. Part of him believes that like the Beast, "we are still just animals at our base, with just greater capacity to do damage." That's the gut reaction, the allure to write off everything as inevitable in the face of human evil. But like *Belle*, longer rumination times spark some semblance of, well, hope.

When Mills confronts the process of creating art in a world sphere, he has to strike that balance. No, ballet will not solve the world's problems. But it can hold a mirror to humanity. It can reveal small sparks that keep us going. At his core, Mills thinks "that in life, we are responsible. There's always going to be evil. There will always be evil. But it's our responsibility as people to fight that. ... I think at our heart, we are positive."

Two weeks into rehearsal, the dancers portraying Belle's family continue work on their goodbye. It's the catalyst for great change in their family, sparking a new dynamic. Front and center, a flatscreen plays recordings of the 2015 dancers, showing their initial creation. Facing it, the current four principal dancers echo those past steps. They are new dancers, their grace and carriage are slightly different. Behind them, the B-cast of characters more haltingly perform, their movements a half beat off, a hesitant projection of dipped torsos and wild leaps. They are their own hall of mirrors, an infinity pool of artistic movement.

Mills, for his part, views the reflection not as a regression toward past mistakes, but progression toward a new-and-improved version. "Always forward," says Mills. "We're not going back."

BELLE / A Tale of Beauty & the Beast comes to the Long Center Sept. 27-29.



Photo by Anne Marie Bloodgood / Courtesy of Ballet Austin

Ballet Austin's 2024-2025 Season

Here's what Ballet Austin has in store for audiences this season

December 6-23: 62nd Annual Presentation of *The Nutcracker*

Concept and choreography by Stephen Mills

Music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Live accompaniment by Austin Symphony Orchestra

February 14-16: *Heart's Desire: Three Exceptional Dances*

Polyphonia

Choreography by Christopher Wheeldon

Music by György Ligeti

Desire

Choreography by Stephen Mills

Music by Arvo Pärt