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Dancing's great outdoors

Dance companies as varied as Kultura Philippine Folk Arts and Lux Aeterna take advantage of the unique spaces the Ford and the Bowl have to offer in interpreting their vision.



Scenes from a night of modern dance at the Ford Amphitheatre, June 18. The Los Angeles dance company BodyTraffic performed "Transfigured Night" as the sun set on the Hollywood Hills. (Jay L. Clendenin, Los Angeles Times / June 18, 2010)

By Victoria Looseleaf, Special to the Los Angeles Times
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A concert under the stars stirs up images of picnic dinners and sparkling wines for audiences. But for dancers, outdoor venues are a unique canvas, offering site-specific possibilities and their own set of challenges.

Now through October, Los Angeles' two major outdoor theaters — the Ford Amphitheatre and the Hollywood Bowl — will be showcasing 20 different dance companies, each

customizing the space to match artistic vision and practicality.

The 1,245-seat Ford, with its bi-level performance area, terraced steps and lush trees and vegetation, has proved to be a perfect, well, stomping ground for Kultura Philippine Folk Arts. The 20-member company, founded by Celia Diaz de Fato in 1992, is making its sixth appearance in two nights in early July.

De Fato says the Ford show is virtually impossible to repeat in an indoor theater.

"We make use of the dual stages and the steps coming from the hill. In the mountain tribe dances, the steps simulate the rice terraces in the Philippines, and the shrubbery gives a natural mountain effect. In our dance of lights," she adds, "the candles in glasses are illuminated, which cannot be duplicated anywhere."

For two hip-hop troupes, Lux Aeterna, directed by Jacob "Kujo" Lyons, and Antics, founded by Amy "Catfox" Champion, the raked stage has made dancers' head spins problematic. The companies will be on a bill of 10 performers as part of J.U.I.C.E., the third annual hip-hop festival at the Ford in October.

Says Champion: "Both Kujo and I fell off the stage doing a back spin. The physics of the rake means there is less of you in contact with the ground."

Lyons nevertheless finds the venue intriguing. "The oddly-shaped upper stage has offered all kinds of creative possibilities. Every piece I've done at the Ford has been tailored to that stage."

Adam Davis is managing director of the Ford. "It's magical, but can offer challenges. It gets cool at night and we try to get in as many shows before the temperature dips in October."

The last concert of the season will be Oct. 9, when Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble, founded in 1983 by Eytan Avisar, presents "Jerusalem Soul." Executive director Genie Benson says the weather is the biggest issue for the troupe, which last performed at the Ford in 1997.

"It could be slippery," says Benson, "it could be windy, it could be cold. Hopefully it will be none of those." She adds that it gets darker earlier in the fall and that's good. "Last time the first half of the show was in light. It's so dramatic and gorgeous at the Ford, having natural light ruins it."

This year's dance season at the bucolic venue is the biggest since the County Arts Commission first began programming there in 1993. Performances also include tango, flamenco, Brazilian and contemporary dance.

Laura Zucker, executive producer of the arts commission, is pleased that summer rain is infrequent in Los Angeles. "We did have to cancel one year when Focus Fish [family circus and aerial acts] got rained out. Even though it stopped raining, the equipment was too slippery to finish what they were doing."

As for aerial acts, C. Derrick Jones and Nehara Kalev make up the husband-and-wife team Catch Me Bird, founded in 2004. Incorporating spectacular high-flying moves in their August Ford show, "Iron," the couple will also dangle from the 60-foot towers that frame the amphitheater's stage.

"The biggest challenge is condensation on the Marley floor," Jones says. "It can get moist at night and that creates a hazard. But the beauty of performing there is that we dance off of

their towers."

Ford newbies this year include Invertigo Dance Theatre, IN/EX Dance Project and Method Contemporary Dance, a trio of companies that share the stage in September. Bradley Michaud founded the über-athletic Method in 2005. The troupe usually performs barefoot but, Michaud says, "We're going to be wearing shoes, since condensation could make it slippery at night."

Making its eighth appearance at the Ford in late July is audience favorite Viver Brasil. Founded by Linda Yudin and Luiz Badaro in 1997, the colorful troupe always has the audience dancing in the aisles with some of its members leading the way. This year the 17 dancers and musicians will also feature two elder members from the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé.

For Yudin, performing outdoors is not a problem, but re-creating the choreography indoors for a proscenium stage is. "All of the premieres we've created have been made with the Ford in mind."

Dance also has a storied history at the Hollywood Bowl, the 18,000-seat summer home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Arvind Manocha, chief operating officer of the orchestra, points out that dance and music have "obvious symmetries."

As to weather, Manocha adds, "Rain has never been an issue, but it does get cooler at night. The challenges of the Bowl are not unlike any of the other stage productions that involve non-musical elements."

Since its 1922 opening, such groups as the Martha Graham Dance Company and Bolshoi Ballet have graced the stage framed by the iconic shell. This season three troupes will join forces with musical organizations to present concerts.

One of those is locally based Diavolo, the hyper-physical dance troupe founded in 1992 by Jacques Heim. The company will perform John Adams' 1988 score, "Fearful Symmetries," in September. Conducted by Bramwell Tovey, the work is the second part of a trilogy commissioned by the L.A. Philharmonic (the first, in 2007, featured Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting his "Foreign Bodies"). Diavolo's premiere includes a 5,000 pound motorized "field," an 800-pound cube and 10 daredevil dancers.

For Paris-born Heim, the challenge of appearing at the Bowl three years ago in September was the temperature. "It was so hot that the Marley was soft and melting," recalls Heim. "But we stretched it and taped it and it worked out."

Heim added that performing on the stage where some of the world's greatest dance companies appeared was humbling. "It's like being part of a special club," he says.

In a way, all dancers and choreographers are part of a club, one that seems more exclusive when they're performing in the Cahuenga Pass surrounded by trees, chirping insects and the faint sounds of traffic.

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