

DANCE

DANCE; Thinking Post-Modern but Talking of Michelangelo

By Kevin Giordano

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ON a recent trip to Italy, the choreographer Anna Myer visited museums and churches. After seeing images of the Virgin Mary, the Cross, the Crucifixion, cherubs and angels, she came away "drenched in beautiful sculptures by Michelangelo." A year later, back in Cambridge, Mass., where she lives and works, she created "In Italian," an 18-minute dance to the music of Vivaldi that her company, Anna Myer and Dancers, will perform at St. Mark's Church from Thursday through Sunday.

Ms. Myer, whose work seamlessly blends classical ballet esthetics (minus point shoes) with post-modern ideas, will also offer three other dances: "HeartChunks," set to Chopin, traditional Mexican folk music and the pop singer Chris Isaak; "Quintet to Brahms," danced in tutus and bare feet; and "Take Ten," a project commissioned by Dance Umbrella of Boston using 10 dance movements from 10 Boston choreographers.

Ms. Myer, who is 43, started dancing at age 7 in the living room of her parents' home in Cambridge, where she put on "cabaret" shows. In 1962, she was awarded a Ford Foundation Scholarship and began studying with Esther Brooks at the Cambridge School of Ballet. Ms. Brooks, who was "brilliant and scary," was her "first great teacher" and later encouraged her to study in New York. After high school, Ms. Myer studied at American Ballet Theater's open school with, among others, Patricia Wilde, a former principal with the New York City Ballet.

"My first year in New York, I looked around and saw what work I had to do," said Ms. Myer, who had stayed with an East Side family while she took up to four ballet classes a day. "I had to lose weight and change my body. I was homesick and I cried for most of the summer, but I just pushed myself to do this."

A year later, in 1973, she was accepted into the scholarship program at American Ballet Theater. Although she recalls fondly taking classes with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Twyla Tharp, Ms. Myer found the ballet world in New York "not conducive to meeting people and making friends." At the time, she was also struggling to keep her weight down, a situation that once caused her dance teachers to demand that she not go home for Thanksgiving.

"Ballet is a fierce place," said Ms. Myer. "You have to do everything to hold on to who you are, and if you do that, it's hard to be in that world, because you get to be too much of a person who knows too much about life."

After three years at Ballet Theater she joined the Boston Ballet -- not a happy experience to hear her tell it -- where a colleague introduced her to Ana Roje, a former prima ballerina of the Yugoslav Ballet and a former ballet mistress of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, who would become her second great teacher. Almost immediately Ms. Myer began studying with Roje and was soon invited on a tour with her company in Yugoslavia. She left Boston Ballet in 1978.

"I fell in love with her," Ms. Myer said of Roje, recalling an early incident when she had to lose weight and Roje told her to come to class dressed in wool and sweats. When Ms. Myer arrived, Roje shared the burden by also dressing in wool and sweats. "Ana worked you so hard but never with a bad word," Ms. Myer said. "She taught ballet the way I always dreamed of dancing, which is to be athletic." Roje, a student of the famous teacher Nicholas Legat, relayed her teaching style to Ms. Myer, who has carried it into her own teaching.

In 1980, Ms. Myer helped found the Copley Square Ballet as an offshoot of Roje's company. The 1980's, however, were a turbulent time for Ms. Myer. Her first marriage came to an end, followed, she said, by various "dysfunctional relationships." The death of a family member sent her life into a tailspin. The Copley Square Ballet began to disintegrate, and Ms. Myer found herself not dancing or teaching and "having to begin again." When a fellow dancer, Caitlin Corbett, suggested she create her own dances, choreography became that beginning.

"I never had any desire to choreograph," said Ms. Myer, who created her first piece, "Dark Angels," in 1992. "But when I changed my life and started over, all of a sudden I thought, 'I'll start choreographing.' I felt like I was dancing in my living room again." Her present company, based in Cambridge, is now in its seventh year and has eight dancers plus Ms. Myer, who performs with them on occasion. Many of her dancers come from ballet backgrounds, which infuses her work with a continuous line of ballet esthetics, though she has never studied formal ballet composition. That Ms. Myer's work is highly romantic can be seen in her 1998 "Quintet to Brahms," which features dancers gesturing with the melancholy nuances of lovers. And since her choreography has always been pastoral and thoroughly poetic, it's no surprise that Ms. Myer finds the Renaissance so appealing. Her current infatuation is the result of a car trip through Italy last summer with her second husband, Andrew Tazarelli, a painter who was Ms. Myer's eighth-grade art teacher. Ms. Myer watched the Italians' hand gestures and mannerisms. Later, these elements would be fodder for "In Italian."

"Painting is a huge source for me," said Ms. Myer, ecstatically rattling off the Michelangelos and Berninis she saw in Italy. "Seeing Michelangelo's paintings was like looking at dance." She added: "I'm a romantic. And we need romance in our lives."