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Oregon Ballet Theatre opens season with first original U.S. production of 'Napoli'

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(From left) Xuan Cheng, Avery Reiners and former Oregon Ballet Theatre company member Tracey Sartorio in the company premiere of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015. (James McGrew)

In Kevin Irving's mind, Portland and "Napoli" are an ideal match.

The characters in the classic ballet are relatable folks: laborers, a pasta maker, a lemonade seller. And the style, "unpretentious and yet exhilarating at the same time, feels like Portland to me," said Irving, artistic director of Oregon Ballet Theatre.

[Oregon Ballet Theatre](#) opens its 2018-19 season with a full production of Danish choreographer August Bournonville's 1842 romantic ballet, a first for a U.S. company. What's more, OBT isn't just importing another company's production - it's creating its own in what Irving called "a big investment."



Kimberly Nobriga and Peter Franc in a promotional photo for Oregon Ballet Theatre's performance of "Napoli," Oct. 6-13. (Christopher Peddecord)

"It was a little bit of a draw for me that no other company had done this before," Irving said. His hope: that "Napoli" will become a perennial favorite with audiences.

As opening night approaches, here are six things to know about "Napoli."

1. It's a romance for the rest of us.



Brian Simcoe in the company premiere of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015 at the Keller Auditorium. (James McGrew)

No lords or ladies here - the love of young Teresina's life is the fisherman Gennaro. But Teresina's mother frowns on Gennaro's poverty, so the couple steal away on a boat. They encounter a storm, and Teresina vanishes.

"Everyone assumes she's dead," Irving said, but "she's fallen into this underwater kingdom ruled by a rather malevolent character," who turns our heroine into a naiad, a water spirit.

Undeterred, Gennaro goes in pursuit of Teresina, and their love and "her force of character" overcome the underwater god. Back in Napoli, they celebrate with "the best kind of wedding party, where everybody dances until they are exhausted," Irving said.



Amy Watson and Candace Bouchard in the company premiere of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015 at the Keller Auditorium. (James McGrew)

2. It exemplifies the Danish style of ballet, which Bournonville helped mold.

After studying in Paris under storied balletmaster Auguste Vestris, Bournonville choreographed more than 50 works for the Royal Danish Ballet. "He created the entire cornerstone of Danish ballet," Irving said. Only a few of his ballets have survived, but they include "Napoli," which has been staged consistently over the last 176 years.

Irving described the Danish style as warm and generous, natural and unstuffy - and highly athletic. "It's a hell of a lot of jumping," he said. "It's very, very interesting to see the company take on this challenge. ... This particular style pushed them to gain this whole new subset of strengths and qualities related to the fact that they have to jump so much."



Dancers Kimberly Nobriga and Peter Franc in Oregon Ballet Theatre's full production U.S. premiere of "Napoli," Oct. 6-13. (Christopher Peddecord)

3. It's colorful, joyous and lively.

"The scenography is going to be visually stunning," Irving said. "The OBT Orchestra is playing this really fun score at every performance. It won't be music that people know, but it will instantly seem like music they've known their whole life."

Irving said he doesn't expect OBT audiences to follow what's become a Danish tradition of sitting out the second act at a nearby bar. "First of all, we're not putting an intermission between the first and second acts," he said. More seriously, the second act will be a new experience here. And it is, Irving said, "a necessary moment in the arc of the story," comparing the undersea journey to a trip into the subconscious. "I think that actually is going to provide some of the biggest thrills. ... It's so lush and visually stunning."



Chauncey Parsons in the company premiere of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015 at the Keller Auditorium. (James McGrew)

4. It's an ambitious production.

"Napoli" has three acts, each with its own set, and calls for more than 170 costumes. That is one reason OBT's initial run at the ballet, in 2015, consisted of staging only the third act.

"It was part of my plan to introduce the work to the company and to the audience and kind of whet the appetite," Irving said. Doing so also allowed the company to make a down payment, of sorts, by creating the set and costumes for the third act several years in advance of a full production.



Kelsie Nobriga and Matthew Pawlicki-Sinclair in rehearsal for August Bournonville's "Napoli," Oct. 6-13 at the Keller Auditorium. (Yi Yin)

5. It's the first full-length ballet built by the company since former artistic director James Canfield presented his version of "The Nutcracker" in 1994.

"It is a really big project and ... a testament to the maturity of the organization and our health that we have been able to make this investment in the future," Irving said.

6. It's an opportunity to reboot perceptions of ballet.



Makino Hildestad in the company premiere of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015. (James McGrew)

Despite its vintage, "Napoli" is not your great-grandmother's ballet.

"When I look at 'Napoli,' what I see is the physical power, endurance and virtuosity of the individuals and the synthesis of dancing, music, scenery and lighting that make an experience that you can't get off of a screen," Irving said. "You really have to be there in order to feel what it is."



Candace Bouchard in the company premiere of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015 at the Keller Auditorium. (James McGrew)

"Napoli"

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 6; 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 7; 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Oct. 11-13

Where: Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St.

Tickets: Start at \$35, obt.org or 503-222-5538



['Napoli' Comes to Portland](#) from OREGON BALLET THEATRE on Vimeo.



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