

PORTLAND & OREGON ART

Oregon Ballet Theatre, Pink Martini team up for 'love and happiness' double bill

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Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers (from left) Katherine Monogue, Eva Burton, Chauncey Parsons (in air) and Michael Linsmeier perform with Portland band Pink Martini in Nicolo Fonte's "Never Stop Falling (in Love)" in 2014. The company and band reprise their performance this fall. (Blaine Truitt Covert)

By Amy Wang | The Oregonian/OregonLive

[Oregon Ballet Theatre](#)'s 2017-18 season opener has the feel of an all-star lineup.



Oregon Ballet Theatre's resident choreographer, Nicolo Fonte. (Heidi Williams/Staff)

Leading off is George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," arguably one of the best-known and best-loved American compositions ever. Performing the piece in a world-premiere performance will be two of Oregon's most respected pianists, Thomas Lauderdale and Hunter Noack. Lauderdale's popular Portland band, [Pink Martini](#), comes onstage in the second half of the program to reprise its 2014 collaboration with the ballet company, "Never Stop Falling (in Love)." Tying it all together is choreography by [Nicolo Fonte](#), in his second season as Oregon Ballet's resident choreographer, whose work has been performed nationally and internationally.



Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers rehearse the number "Never Stop Falling (in Love)" for the company's season opener. (Amy Wang/Staff)

Fonte promises a joyful, exuberant program (the exuberance shone through clearly at a recent rehearsal). Here are eight things to know about Oregon Ballet Theatre's season opener.



Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers (from left) Peter Franc, Xuan Cheng and Brian Simcoe rehearse for the company's world premiere of Nicolo Fonte's "Rhapsody in Blue." (Yi Yin)

"Rhapsody in Blue" was chosen partly for its contrast to Pink Martini's music and partly because it defies genre (like Pink Martini itself). "It's a kind of a bridge between pop and classical music and it's kind of a jazz-classical fusion piece," Fonte said.



Thomas Lauderdale (left) and Hunter Noack perform the four-handed version of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" during the Oregon Ballet Theatre's 2017-18 season announcement Feb. 23, 2017. (Jim Thomson)

To mix things up even more, this production will feature a four-handed piano version of "Rhapsody in Blue," rather than the more commonly heard orchestral and jazz band versions.



Pink Martini frontman Thomas Lauderdale performs with the Oregon Symphony. (Thomas Boyd/2015)

But wait, there's more. "Rhapsody in Blue" is a relatively short piece, "almost too short to choreograph to," Fonte said. So Lauderdale suggested extending its musical phrases and otherwise tinkering with it, including adding improvisation. It's "still totally recognizable" but dreamier and more expressive, Fonte said.





Emily Parker and Thomas Baker in rehearsal for Oregon Ballet Theatre's production of Nicolo Fonte's "Rhapsody in Blue." (Yi Yin)

The dancers will appear in what Fonte called "heightened streetwear," clothes bought off the rack and then tailored to allow for dance movements. "You could run into somebody wearing one of those outfits on the street and you wouldn't do a double take," Fonte said. "It just didn't feel right to have them in tights or something too dancierly. I wanted them to be like people because the theme that Thomas and I and Hunter were interested in was something called blue hour," a twilight period when "all sorts of mysterious, mystical things can happen."



Pink Martini (Handout photo)

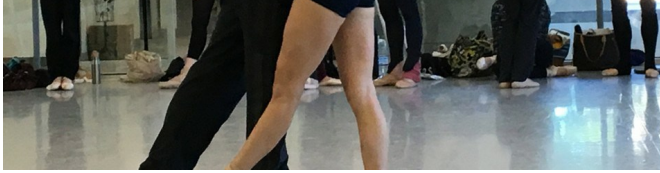
The program's second piece, "Never Stop Falling (in Love)," has its roots in Oregon Ballet Theatre's 25th anniversary season in 2014-15, when the company's artistic director, Kevin Irving, commissioned Fonte to create something "Portland-centric and very celebratory." Irving asked if Fonte would choreograph a piece to Pink Martini's music, Fonte said. "At that time, of course I knew of Pink Martini but I didn't really know Pink Martini, I didn't really know their music that well. I said, 'OK, I'm game to do that ... but the only way that I'll do it is if we get them to do it live.'"



Oregon Ballet Theatre's 2014 production of Nicolo Fonte's "Never Stop Falling (In Love)" featured Xuan Cheng with (from left) Michael Linsmeier, Brian Simcoe and Avery Reiners along with Pink Martini vocalist China Forbes (right). (Blaine Truitt Covert)

Not only did Pink Martini respond enthusiastically, but band founder Lauderdale also created original music for the production and opened up his musical collection – including yet-to-be released music. "We struggled a little bit to figure out what song it should be at the end," Fonte said. Lauderdale finally offered him the use of music from the album "Je Dis Oui," then a work in progress (it came out in late 2016). To make the production a true collaboration, Fonte and Lauderdale worked hard to keep it from looking like "a Pink Martini concert with some incidental dancing in front of it, or the reverse, which was just some dance to some Pink Martini music." One solution: Fonte incorporated Pink Martini's lead singer, China Forbes, into his choreography at certain moments.





Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers during a rehearsal of the number "Never Stop Falling (in Love)" for the company's season opener.
(Heidi Williams/Staff)

By the time audiences get up to go home, Fonte hopes that they feel "joy and exuberance and, especially in our present political climate, that they feel hope, hope for some sort of semblance of happiness and love, the possibility of love and forgiveness, and honesty. I think those are all elements that I've been talking to the dancers about and trying to get them to express that more and more and more. Honesty's a big important thing, yeah? But the program really is about love. Love and happiness, yeah. Togetherness, yeah."



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