

## COVER STORY

# WHAT'S IN 'ROSE'?

## A BITTERSWEET LOOK AT LOVE

Romantic ballet set to Schubert featured in Smuin program

By Aimée Ts'ao  
Correspondent

Internationally acclaimed choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa looks to be on the cusp of becoming a Bay Area fixture.

In March 2016, Lopez Ochoa's "Prism" (2014), originally made for Washington Ballet, appeared on Silicon Valley Ballet's home season after the company had toured it in Spain. Created to Keith Jarrett's "The Köln Concert," the piece echoed the jazz music in movement and spirit and was a welcome introduction to her work.

This past May, her evening-length piece of Southern decadence and steamy sex, "A Streetcar Named Desire" (2012), turned up in Berkeley danced by the Scottish Ballet under the auspices of Cal Performances. It was made in collaboration with theater director Nancy Meckler for the Scottish company and expanded the play in many ingenious ways — in dance, one gesture can mean so much more than dialogue.

Now Lopez Ochoa, of Colombian-Belgian origin and based in Amsterdam, is in San Francisco to restage her ballet "Requiem for a Rose" (2009) for the Bay Area contemporary ballet company Smuin. After putting the dancers through their paces during the record-breaking heat wave (enough to wilt any flowers!), she sat down to talk.

Asked which company "Requiem for a Rose" was originally made for, Lopez Ochoa says, "The first classical ballet company in the United States that invited



CHRIS HARDY — SMUIN BALLET

Choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, center, rehearses her work "Requiem for a Rose" with Smuin dancers Jonathan Powell, left, and Erica Felsch. The piece is part of Smuin's "Dance Series 01."

me was Pennsylvania Ballet. Roy Kaiser (then artistic director) had seen my seven-minute duet 'Before After' and asked me to come make a work."

As for the work's inspiration, it's a deeply personal story.

"I will always remember the day," she says. "I was 17 years old, and I received a bouquet of red roses on my doorstep. It was from a 35-year-old man I had met at a ball I had gone to with my brother who was in the military. I called my mom and she said, 'There is a language of flowers, so you have to count them. If there are six, it's friendship; 12, he's in love with you; 24, it's a proposal.'"

"So I counted them," she continued, "and indeed there were

12 roses. He was in love with me and I thought that was so romantic, such a grand gesture. I didn't even have a vase, so I cut them very short and put them in glasses around my room. It was beautiful for maybe five or six days and then they died. When they die, they stink. I remember how that beauty turned into something dirty. I thought what a beautiful metaphor for romance. It is gorgeous, but ephemeral. The romance goes away but the love remains. For me, love is not pretty, it's deep, it's a lot of work."

The music for "Rose" is the adagio section from Schubert's String Quintet in C major, because as Lopez Ochoa says, "This is the most romantic music I know."

"I'm not a romantic woman at all, but this is a romantic ballet. This music encapsulates so much of the four dance sections. An adagio is usually four minutes long and this movement is 14, and even has an allegro part, a resurrection."

The much-in-demand Lopez Ochoa has since ventured to Oklahoma for the premiere of her latest ballet, "Shibuya Blues," for the Tulsa Ballet. But she will be back this week when Smuin debuts its "Dance Series 01," featuring "Requiem for a Rose," in Walnut Creek on Friday. Then she will be in residence at San Francisco Ballet for three weeks creating a new ballet for Unbound, a festival of new work by 12 choreographers.

### SMUIN

Presents "Dance Series 01"

**When and where:** 8 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. Saturday at Leshner Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek; Sept. 29–Oct. 7 at Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco; Feb. 22–25 at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts

**Tickets:** \$25–\$79; [www.smuin-ballet.org](http://www.smuin-ballet.org)

which will open in May. She says she hasn't started her work yet, but already knows the dancers won't be in pointe shoes and she is using electronic music.

"I did seven years of Vaganova training at the Royal Academy of Ballet in Antwerp in Belgium," she explains, "and also studied flamenco, jazz and hip-hop. All three contribute to my dance language."

She says she feels she gives herself more creative liberty when her work has a solid foundation.

"When I'm choreographing, I always try to give myself a theme," she says. "I don't need the audience to really understand it, but I feel the more I put parameters for myself, the freer I am to work in that language. For some pieces the look is angular, for others more humorous because it's the theme."

With the dance-making field dominated by men, it is refreshing to see a woman in such wide demand on the creative side. But she is not taking anything for granted.

"I'm just not someone who repeats herself. I'm afraid of that — that would be the end of my career," she says.

For the moment, it doesn't look like she needs to worry.

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