

10 BAY AREA NEWS GROUP 111

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## DANCE

# Smuin Ballet gets ready to roll out 'Sushi'

New piece by choreographer Val Caniparoli featured in company's 'Dance Series 02'

By Aimée Ts'ao  
Correspondent

With two days to finish his ballet, Val Caniparoli jumps up in front of the dancers and begins counting the music and inventing moves on the spot.

The Smuin Contemporary American Ballet members follow along, learning steps, then discarding or altering the material as their taskmaster rapidly edits and adds new ideas. It's even trickier because the music isn't in the usual phrases of eight counts. In a Stravinsky-like labyrinth, the counts keep shifting between phrases of 11, five, nine and seven.

At least, he notes, "They're hearing what I'm hearing — the accents are on the one and the four."

The urgency was understandable. In three days, Caniparoli was set to fly off to work on another project, returning to San Francisco barely in time to add finishing touches to a brand-new work set to premiere Friday at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

The title of the ballet — "If I Were a Sushi Roll" — sparks mild skepticism, but Caniparoli gives a clear explanation. When facetiously asked which came first, the chicken or the sushi, with a smile he replies, "the music." The title is actually a line from the song "Don't I Know You From Somewhere" by American composer Nico Muhly and the Faroese singer-songwriter Teitur Lassen. The track is off their acclaimed album "Confessions," excerpts of which provide the ballet's score.

Caniparoli originally was looking for music to evoke the Bob Dylan era when he chanced upon "Confessions," and found an improbable similarity.

"It was very much about the same things," he said.

Teitur's folksy guitar playing and plaintive, sincere voice even have a Dylanesque quality. The lyrics in the album were all culled from random internet posts, YouTube videos and the like, some quite silly, all reflecting on a forum where people feel safe exposing themselves to potentially millions of viewers.

"Everyone's putting themselves on online and thinks it's great," Caniparoli says. "So many things that are coming up in the news today really resonate with what was



Choreographer Val Caniparoli leads members of Smuin Ballet through a rehearsal of his new work, "If I Were a Sushi Roll."

## SMUIN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN BALLET

Presents "Dance Series 02"

**When & where:** Friday-April 29 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; May 11-12 at Leshar Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek; May 24-27 at Mountain View Center for the Arts; June 1-2 at Sunset Center, Carmel  
**Tickets:** \$32-\$79; [www.smuinballet.org](http://www.smuinballet.org)

happening all those years ago."

"I took a cue from the lyrics about the faces and the small spaces, so it grew out of the Japanese culture," he says. But there are more layers to the ballet in the choreography itself — first mundane daily life, then quiet personal longing and finally a deeper complexity of how we interact with each other and society.

In an effort to secure permission to use the music, Caniparoli, who didn't have Muhly's contact info, found the composer on Facebook and within half an hour he had a response.

"Now we're friends on Facebook, so it really is about social media," he said.

The collaboration between Muhly and Teitur Lassen (he only uses his first name professionally) seems unusual on the surface. But the contemporary classical composer and the musician, composer, singer-songwriter and producer based on the Faroe Islands have more in common than is obvious. Muhly has experience with composing for vocal parts, having written two operas and many choral works, and collaborated with Björk. He has also worked with choreographers Benjamin Millepied, Wayne McGregor and Stephen Petronio which may explain why Caniparoli was drawn to his sound.

Caniparoli is one world's most prolific choreographers. He began as a dancer with the San Francisco Ballet in 1973, and in the 1980s was appointed resident choreographer. To this day he continues as a principal character dancer in most of the evening-length ballets, and did a stellar turn as a Mafia don in Arthur Pita's re-envisioned "Salomé" last season.

His works have been performed by more

than 45 companies around the globe. Locally, Smuin Ballet, Diablo Ballet, Oakland Ballet, Amy Seiwert's Imagery, Menlowe Ballet and Company C have performed his choreography. San Francisco Ballet has performed more than 20 of his works.

Caniparoli's "Sushi" ballet is part of Smuin's "Dance Series 02" program, which will be performed through June 2 in San Francisco, Walnut Creek, Mountain View and Carmel. The program also includes a reprisal of Amy Seiwert's "Falling Up," which debuted in 2007. The ballet, set to music of Brahms, explores the range of dynamics between partners. It serves as a touching farewell to current Smuin choreographer-in-residence Seiwert, who is leaving the company to become artistic director of Sacramento Ballet this summer.

Rounding out the program is the intensely visual "Oasis" by Helen Pickett, which premiered here in 2016. The ballet, with an original score by Jeff Beal, composer for "House of Cards" and other TV shows and films, finds its inspiration in water and all its forms and ramifications. What could be more timely?