Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Finally Here

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, May 31st, 2023

He's one of the most in demand ballet choreographers that LA never sees….until now. In a year that he is being feted for his 50 years with San Francisco Ballet and his ballets are being performed nationally and internationally, Val Caniparoli is enjoying his LA debut as Los Angeles Ballet offers his full length *Lady of the Camellias.*

Los Angeles Ballet in "Lady of the Camellias." Photo by Reed Hutchinson.

The romantic tragedy has fueled films from Garbo's *Camille* to Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge,* Puccini's opera *La Traviata,* and ballets by Sir Frederick Ashton and John Neumeier. Caniparoli's

1994 version is among his most popular ballets.

A fan of the Garbo film, Caniparoli has described drawing on that as much as the original Dumas story of a courtesan who passionately loves a young aristocrat but is persuaded to give him up to avoid ruining his class standing and professional future. They reunite just before she dies of consumption.

The veteran choreographer took time from final rehearsals with Los Angeles Ballet to talk about the ballet, his decades in San Francisco, his upcoming plans, and his long-coming LA debut.

Val Caniparoli. Photo by Eric Tomassen

Unlike his other ballets where Caniparoli selects the music and plans the production with the costume and set designers, *Lady of the Cameliias* involved resurrecting a ballet left unfinished by the original choreographer's death.

"Norbert Vesak was one of my first teachers and the first one to give me a job at the San Francisco Opera Ballet before I joined San Francisco Ballet. Norbert was supposed to do the ballet for Ballet Florida and his partner Robert de la Rose was to be the costume designer. In 1990, we happened to be on the same flight. They were excited about the ballet and showed me the designs they were going to New York to buy fabrics for. Before the flight back, Norbert suffered a brain aneurysm and died. Ballet Florida shelved the project for two or three years, then decided to try to resurrect the ballet with Ballet West. My name came up and I agreed as long as I could shift around the music and the story line, and have the flexibility to make it my own," Caniparoli recounted, adding, "It was uncanny because Norbert was the man who gave me my first job, my start. It was really strange because I was picking up a project that wasn't really started yet and making it happen. And it actually worked."

Caniparoli didn't study dance before he was 20, but did study music and theater.

"I actually performed as Armand onstage in a summer theater program at Washington State University, so I knew the story, and the Greta Garbo film has been one of my favorites, ever since I was a kid. When my conditions were accepted, I decided this was, in many ways, meant to be," he mused.

In addition to working within the constraints of the already designed sets and costumes, an additional challenge was crafting a ballet that would work for two different sized companies.

"One of my knacks is responding to the size and nature of the commissioning company. In 1994, Ballet Florida had 23 dancers and Ballet West had 45, so I planned it so it could be done by a company of 23 or a company of 45. You have to have the dancers for the central characters but beyond that, what goes on around them can accommodate the size of the company. Today, the ballet can be brought down to size for a company of 23 or 24 or enlarged up to a company of 85 like the Finnish Ballet," he explained.

Caniparoli's version revolves around four characters, the two lovers, the courtesan's protector and the young man's father. As of press time, for all three performances the courtesan *Marguerite* is LAB principal Petra Conti, her lover *Armand* is guest artist Zachary Catazaro formerly with New York City Ballet and Bayerisches Staatsballett, Armand's father is former Joffrey Ballet dancer Fabrice Camels, and Marguerite's protector is LAB company member Tate Lee.

Los Angeles Ballet in "Lady of the Camellias." Photo by Reed Hutchinson

Since 1994, Caniparoli has tweaked aspects of the ballet including trimming the length as audience attention spans have shortened over the years.

“I was a fairly young choreographer in 1994. I’ve learned a lot more about story-telling and editing myself, which is sometimes the hardest thing to do. Today the ballet is about 45 minutes shorter than in 1994. Even now, I’ve already tweaked things during these rehearsals. Nothing major, just small things responding to these dancers and how they tell the story.”

How did he find working with Los Angeles Ballet for the first time?

“I never know what to expect coming into a company for the first time. Some dancers take to me right away. Other dancers don’t realize they have a say. Those dancers can take a while to relax and realize I’m not a tyrant with only one rigid way to do something. This company seemed to relax from the first and understood they can talk and make suggestions. We have had fun and they look really good. Petra is exquisite. I worked with her before when she was with Boston Ballet. And Zach is amazing. He’s a poet,” Caniparoli summed up.

Just before coming to LA, Caniparoli was in Finland reprising his *Jekyll and Hyde.* Among the Finnish Ballet dancers were three who had danced Caniparoli’s *Armand* in three different companies, Finland, Hong Kong, Kansas City.

This Los Angeles Ballet’s performance of a Caniparoli ballet took more than a decade to happen.

After its founding in 2004, Caniparoli was one of the choreographers LA Ballet co-artistic directors Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary talked with about including his ballets in LAB repertoire. Over the years, the discussions focused on *Lamborena,* an exuberant ballet that is among the choreographer’s most requested. In 2018, the artistic directors shifted their focus to *Lady of the Camellias* which had a highly successful production at Boston Ballet.

After seeing a video of the Boston Ballet production, plans were in place by early 2020 for LAB to present *Lady of the Camellias* in spring 2021. Arrangements were made to acquire Boston Ballet’s sets, costumes, and props. Then in March 2020, the Covid-19 public health emergency shut down theaters, and the planned season, like everything else, was put on hold. When theaters reopened in late 2021, *Lady of Camellias* was slotted for spring 2023. That began to look problematic in summer 2022 when the Neary and Christensen were abruptly fired and the current artistic director Melissa Barak was selected. Caniparoli wanted to respect Barak’s plans and reached out.

“I did not want to force the issue with a new director with a new vision. It was important to make sure the ballet would work for the company,” he recalled. “I asked if she really wanted to do this, and Melissa assured me that she wanted to do it as planned.”

The same weeks LA Ballet dances its first Caniparoli ballet, San Francisco’s Smuin Contemporary Ballet is dancing his *Swipe* set to a score by Gabriel Prokofiev, Sergei Prokofiev’s grandson. The highly technical excursion for four men and three women, is only the latest Caniparoli ballet in the Smuin repertoire.

While Caniparoli’s home base is SF Ballet, Smuin has been something of a home away from home, commissioning or performing nearly a dozen of Caniparoli’s ballets including one inspired by a sushi roll and *Tutto Eccetto il Lavandino (everything but the kitchen sink)* which captures the choreographer’s wry, highly visual sense of humor. that surfaces in many of his works. Spoiler alert: a kitchen sink does make an appearance.

“I love working with humor. I love slapstick. I love anyone who falls,” Smuin dancers are a feisty

group, really strong. And I love working with them."

Smuin Contemporary Ballet in "Tutto Eccetto il Lavandino (everything but the kitchen sink)." Photo by Keith Sutter

Earlier this year, Caniparoli was one of nine choreographers commissioned as part of *Next 90*, SF Ballet's celebration of new choreography. His work, *Emergence,* followed dancers as they moved from isolated solos to finding ways to reconnect, first in pairs then in larger groups building into a final sense of community.

San Francisco Ballet rehearsing Caniparoli's "Emergence." Reneff-Olson Productions

While not explicitly a comment on the pandemic or the dance world emerging from nearly two years of isolation, in a video preview Caniparoli spoke about the questions and uncertainties that

pervade dancers return to class and performing.

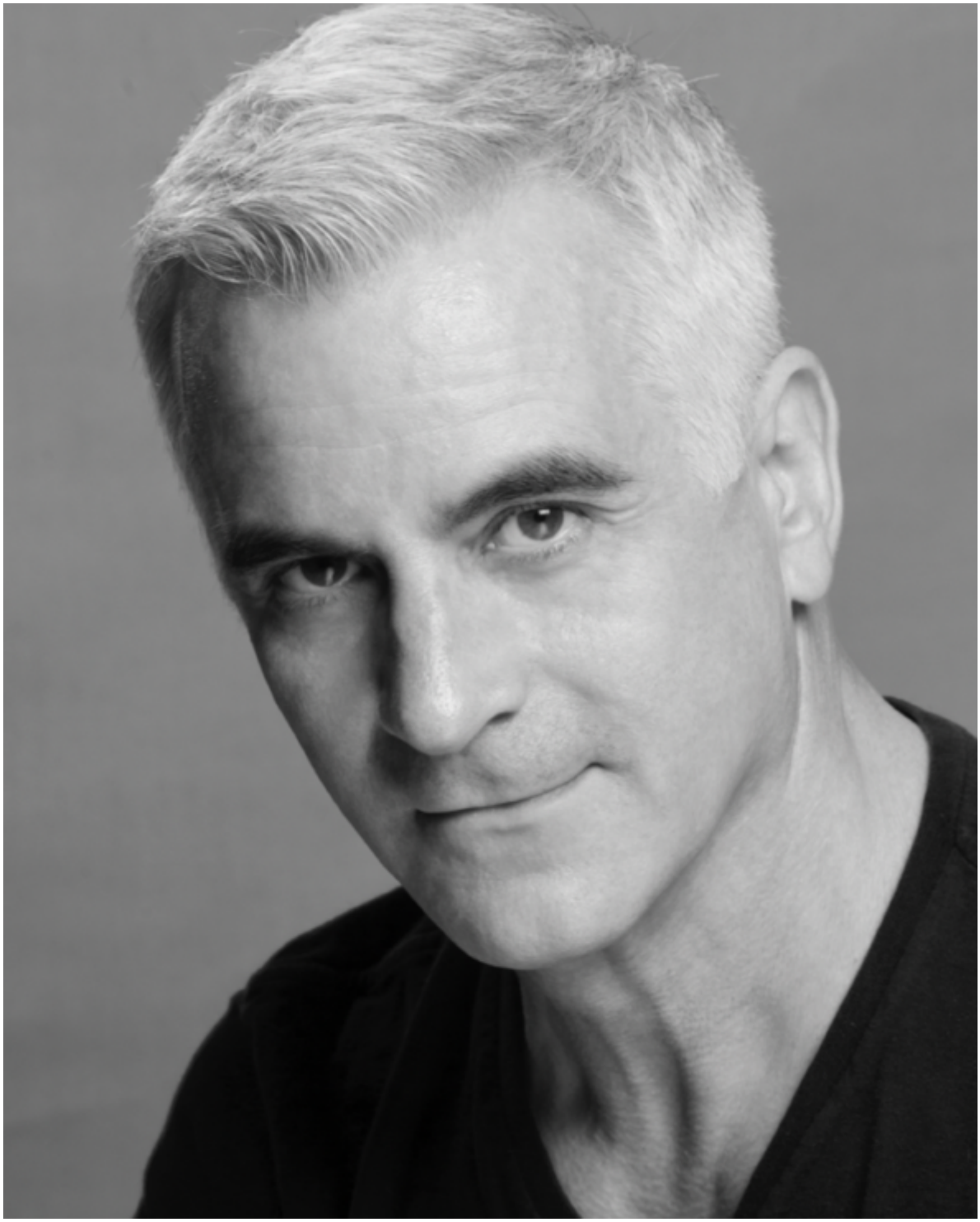
“It was how I was feeling at that time. And I think it’s still on everyone’s mind. We’re all still trying to recover from this pandemic and it’s still weighing on funding and audience attendance, so it’s on the mind of everyone in the arts.”

At the end of the SF Ballet season, Caniparoli announced he is ending his full-time relationship as a member of the company. He was quick to explain that he will continue as a principal character artist (a recent renaming of the SF Ballet character dancers). His legendary *Drosselmeyer* in SF Ballet’s *Nutcracker* will be back.

“I don’t know that things will change much. When I was full-time, I still had considerable freedom to travel and do other things. This frees me up to accept choreography commissions without checking whether the company will need me during that time. I think this will free me up and I can still be involved with a company that I love. We’ll see how that works, it’s an experiment,” he added with a chuckle.

That flexibility is already evident in his schedule for the next few months. After Los Angeles, Caniparoli heads to Cincinnati Ballet to stage his *Ibsen House*, then to Singapore Ballet to stage *Chant*, then his *Jekyll & Hyde* is set for Kansas City Ballet followed by Colorado Ballet. Caniparoli noted that he will be working with Smuin Ballet and with some other things in the works to add in. He has some ideas for new full-length ballets and other potential projects with two or three year development timelines.

While Caniparoli already has to his credit more than a hundred ballets in the repertoire of more than 50 companies, with his dance card already brimming for next season, more are sure to be added, now including Los Angeles Ballet.



Val Caniparoli. Photo by Eric Tomassen

Los Angeles Ballet in *Lady of the Camellias* at UCLA Royce Hall, 10745 Dickson Court, Westwood; Fri., June 2, 7:30 pm, Sat., June 3, 2 pm, $40-$137. Los Angeles Ballet

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