

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## It's Not Just About the Chocolate

Ann Haskins · Tuesday, March 21st, 2023

March is providing an unofficial California festival that serendipitously surveys the ballet-side of the multi-dimensional choreographer/director Christopher Wheeldon.

Earlier this month, Wheeldon was announced as choreographer for *Fred and Ginger*, the film about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers set for pre-production later this year. The Michael Jackson musical *MJ* that Wheeldon choreographed and directed continues its Broadway run at least to September. Wheeldon nabbed the 2022 Tony for *MJ*'s choreography, an award he previously won for *An American in Paris*.



“Like Water For Chocolate.” Photo by Tristram Kenton

Meanwhile, Wheeldon’s ballet choreography is on view at three California venues this month,

including the U.S. premiere of his latest, *Like Water for Chocolate*, a full-length ballet rendition of Laura Esquivel's book about thwarted lovers, magical realism, and emotion-charged cooking. **American Ballet Theatre** offers the ballet's U.S. premiere at Costa Mesa's Segerstrom Center for the Arts with seven performances from March 29-April 2. Another of Wheeldon's full-length ballets, *Cinderella*, is next up in the **San Francisco Ballet** season with performances from March 31 to April 8 at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House. The ballet's inclusion in the outgoing artistic director's final season marks a special place in that company's history and Wheeldon's career. The casting for SFB's opening night has the evanescent Misa Kuranaga as *Cinderella*. Kuranaga dazzled audiences here when she guested with Los Angeles Ballet before she joined SFB.

Closer to home, **Los Angeles Ballet** offers a trio of Wheeldon's abstract one-act ballets at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica March 16-18. New artistic director Melissa Barak danced for Wheeldon while at New York City Ballet and in his short-lived company, a relationship that may bode well for LAB in the future. The upcoming LAB shows include the encore of *Ghosts* (2010) which was seen last year as part of the former artistic directors' final season, plus company premieres of *Morphoses* (2008), a quartet set to music of György Ligeti, and *Fool's Paradise* (2007), a large group work referencing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with music by Joby Talbot, a frequent Wheeldon collaborator who also composed the score for *Chocolate*.



Los Angeles Ballet. Photo by Reed Hutchinson

ABT's U.S. premiere of Wheeldon's three-act ballet *Like Water for Chocolate* is highly anticipated. There was a livestream of one Royal Ballet performance of *Chocolate*, but unfortunately not to any LA area theaters, making the ABT performances the first chance to see the ballet.

As with most of Wheeldon full-length ballets, *Chocolate* is a co-production with ABT teaming with Britain's **Royal Ballet** where Wheeldon is Artistic Associate. The Royal Ballet presented the

world premiere last June. New York won't see the ballet until late June when it opens ABT's New York season at the Metropolitan Opera. Not only does SoCal get the bragging rights about the ballet's U.S. premiere, the premiere here further cements ABT's bi-coastal status as the resident dance company at Orange County's Segerstrom Center for the Arts.



Christopher Wheeldon. Photo courtesy of the artist

Wheeldon recently spoke to press about the new ballet, its long incubation from his first encounter with the story, the unexpected positive side of pandemic postponement, and the upcoming U.S. premiere.

Wheeldon first encountered Esquivel's book indirectly during a period of adjustment, if not culture shock. Raised in Britain, he had trained and danced with the Royal Ballet before moving to New York to dance with New York City Ballet. The man who one day would win Broadway and international ballet accolades began his New York career in an ignominious apartment that looked out on brick wall.



The Royal Ballet “Like Water For Chocolate.” Photo by Tristram Kenton

“It was 1993, I was battling a bad case of homesickness and had to get out of that apartment,” he recounted, “I went to the movies and saw the film version of *Like Water for Chocolate*.

Then he read the book.

“I loved the family saga and the magical realism,” Wheeldon recalled, “and it also was the beginning of my journey falling in love with Mexico. Growing up in the UK, we did not have Mexican food or its culture. I began to discover those things in New York, especially after I met conductor Alondra de la Parra who became my gateway into Mexico.”

Parra who grew up in Mexico and first studied conducting there, receives credit as Music Consultant for the ballet and will conduct both the SoCal and New York ABT performances. Parra also introduced Wheeldon to Laura Esquivel. The author and the choreographer developed a strong rapport that led to talk about the potential for a ballet. At that time, Wheeldon had never done a full-length, story ballet.



The Royal Ballet in “Like Water For Chocolate.” Photo by Tristram Kenton

“I grew up up in what can be called the William Forsythe era when shorter, physical, abstract works were what companies were looking for,” Wheeldon recalled. Those also were the ballets bringing Wheeldon high praise and attention. He was ready to explore making a full-length story ballet, but wanted more experience before he tackled the challenges inherent in *Chocolate*.

His first venture into the realm of the full-length story ballet came in 2011 with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a rendering and riff on Lewis Carrol that the Royal Ballet co-produced with the National Ballet of Canada. SoCal saw *Alice* in fall 2012 when the National Ballet of Canada brought the ballet as part of the Music Center dance season.



The Royal Ballet in Christopher Wheeldon's "Alice." Photo by Johan Persson

Wheeldon's full-length *Cinderella* was another co-production, this time with San Francisco Ballet and Dutch National Ballet. Amsterdam hosted the 2012 world premiere and in 2013, SFB presented the 2013 US premiere. The special relationship SFB developed with Wheeldon is indicated by the selection of *Cinderella* in the final season programmed by retiring artistic director Helgi Tomasson.

Discussions about Wheeldon's reputation for choreography often emphasize the physicality of his movement, especially in his exquisite pas de deux. Sometimes his command of humor doesn't get the full attention it deserves. A clip of a prior San Francisco Ballet performance of *Cinderella* is at [Christopher Wheeldon's site](#). The segment with Cinderella's two stepsisters and a [video clip of the Queen of Hearts in \*Alice\*](#) capture better than any words Wheeldon's alacrity with humor in his ballets.



Ellen Rose Hummel and Elizabeth Powell as the Stepsisters in San Francisco Ballet's production of Christopher Wheeldon's *Cinderella*. Photo by Erik Tomasson

After polishing his skills with several successful full length ballets, in 2019 Wheeldon felt ready, his relationship with Esquivel and Para had matured, and work began on a full-length ballet

interpretation of *Like Water for Chocolate*. The Royal Ballet premiere of *Chocolate* was scheduled for November 2020 with ABT planning for the U.S. premiere in 2021. With the onset of the Covid pandemic in early 2020, *Chocolate*, like so much of the world was put on hold.

“When the pandemic hit, I had broken the ice and knew the direction the ballet would take,” he recalled. “The pandemic gave me lots of time to think it through and also to consider and navigate the cultural shifts occurring. I was working hand in hand with our Mexican collaborators, not literally putting Mexico onstage, but with the goal to abstract the culture in the book.”

Despite the disappointment and disruption, Wheeldon credits the pandemic postponement with deepening the ballet that resulted. Some of that pandemic time included Wheeldon’s time in Mexico with Esquivel.



Marcelino Sambé as Pedro in “Like Water for Chocolate.” Photo by Tristram Kenton

Wheeldon is quick to admit his ballet, like the 1992 film, departs from the book but retains the central elements. The love story of Tita and Pedro remains the pulse of the ballet as does Tita’s otherworldly gift of imbuing her emotions into others through her cooking. Pedro loves Tita but as the youngest sister, family tradition holds she can never marry but must devote her life to caring for their mother. The matriarch instead offers the oldest sister and Pedro marries her to remain near Tita as part of the family, while repressed emotions roil like molten lava below the surface. In a Royal Ballet preview event, Wheeldon explained the rough translation of the title refers to something boiling over which finally occurs.

That Royal Ballet preview event includes Royal Ballet’s opening night Pedro and Tita (Marcelino Sambé and Francesca Hayward) rehearsing a sensuous Wheeldon-esque pas de deux where the lovers never actually touch.

(The rehearsal starts about 8 minutes into the Preview on [YouTube](#).)



The opening night leads for the U.S. premiere are ABT principals Cassandra Trenery as Tita and Herman Cornejo as Pedro. Trenery was part of the recent press event and talked about dancing Tita in the SoCal opening, also her first time dancing a Wheeldon ballet.



American Ballet Theatre's Cassandra Trenery. Photo by Quinn Wharton

“I have always wanted to work with Chris. His movement has a liquid quality with an off balance action that’s very physical. It requires finding the group effort in the pas de deux, what we are trying to say to each other.” Trenery explained. “Chris sometimes will read passages from the book to help us find the correct intention in the story and unlock the key moments.”

So no need to head to New York to sample what makes Wheeldon so in demand. Besides, the national tour of Broadway’s *MJ* arrives here just before the December holidays. More preview videos are at [Wheeldon’s official website](#) and YouTube.



Christopher Wheeldon. Photo by Lindsey Thomas

### ***Upcoming live Wheeldon ballet performances:***

**Los Angeles Ballet** in *Ghosts*, *Fool's Paradise*, and *Morphoses*. At The Broad Stage, 1310 11<sup>th</sup> St., Santa Monica; Thurs.-Sat., March 16-18, 7:30 pm, \$84-\$137, \$76-\$124 seniors, students, military & children. [Los Angeles Ballet](#).

**American Ballet Theatre** in the U.S. premiere of *Like Water for Chocolate*. At Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa; Wed.-Sat., March 29-Sat., April 1, 7:30 pm, Sat. & Sun., April 1-2, 2 pm., \$29-\$250. [SCFTA](#).

**San Francisco Ballet** in *Cinderella*. At the War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness, San Francisco; Fri.-Sat., March 31-April 1 & April 7-8, 8 pm, Sat.-Sun., April 1-2 & 8-9, 2 p.m., Tues.-Thurs., April 4-6, 7:30 pm, \$29-\$455. [San Francisco Ballet](#).

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