

San Francisco Ballet performs Justin Peck's "Hurry Up, We're Dreaming."



## A CELEBRATION OF DANCE, AL FRESCO

### The San Francisco Ballet returns to Sun Valley

BY KATE HULL

When Bob Smelick visited the Sun Valley Pavilion with his family at its 2008 gala show featuring the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, he was struck by the splendor of the stage, the striking backdrop, and the intimacy of experiencing art al fresco. It reminded him of a pop-up San Francisco Ballet performance he saw in a Paris park years before.

"That was the first time I had seen ballet in an outdoor venue, and I became very intrigued with the beauty of ballet in a natural setting," he recalled.

Smelick's history with the dance dates back decades. His daughter, Gillian, danced at the San Francisco Ballet School before she went on to study medicine, now a third year resident at Stanford Medical School. But in her youth, Gillian's passion for dance was a

family affair. The founder of Ballet Sun Valley, Smelick is a trustee emeritus on the San Francisco Ballet, where he was a board member for 20 years.

At the end of that summer almost 11 years ago, Smelick had an idea: what if he could bring the San Francisco Ballet to Sun Valley? He passed the thought along to the SF Ballet's artistic director, Helgi Tomasson. It sparked his interest, but the execution seemed daunting.

"There was an original concern that Sun Valley Pavilion was not a good venue for ballet," Smelick said. "There are no curtains, no lighting." But the Paris show that was etched into his mind didn't have any frills either, and, to Smelick, it was breathtaking.

He drove the idea forward, securing space in the pavilion's 2012 summer calendar and brought it back to the San Francisco Ballet. Soon, a one-performance tour was on the books. That summer, Sun Valley hosted a sold-out showcase featuring 20 dancers from

the internationally renowned ballet company. Artistic Director Tomasson called it one of the most beautiful venues in which the company has ever performed.

"San Francisco Ballet had one incredible performance that was very well received, even without the curtains or the lights," Smelick said. "There was a breeze floating through the tent, the aspens bent in the wind, and clouds floated by. My wife even commented that it was the most beautiful ballet she'd seen."

Shortly thereafter, they began working to secure dates for the upcoming summers, and Smelick got to work on procuring the performers. However, the summer touring schedule for San Francisco Ballet and the sought-after calendar of the pavilion made booking tough.

In 2016, Isabella Boylston, a Wood River Valley native and a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre, approached Ballet Sun Valley. She sought to create a festival with dancers from a variety of well-known interna-

tional ballet companies. In August 2017 and again in 2018, Ballet Sun Valley hosted an independent dancer festival at the pavilion with Boylston as art director.

“Judging by the audiences’ reaction to the first three years, there is a real appetite for this art form in Sun Valley,” Smelick noted. “It adds to the cultural texture of the entire community, alongside the music festival, writers’ conference, and a number of things Sun Valley offers. This is a wonderful complement to those.”

The 2019 showcases are a highly anticipated return for the San Francisco Ballet. Performances will be on July 5 and 7 at the Sun Valley Pavilion, with 38 dancers from 13 countries, and two entirely different programs with dances that span the spectrum of ballet.

“Helgi is bringing a level of performance that he’d bring to the Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, you name it,” Smelick said.

The first evening, entitled Program A, will be a Gala-style performance with a number of pas de deux and shorter dances, featuring a collection of seven pieces, including works choreographed by Tomasson, Victor Gsovsky, Yuri Possokhov—San Francisco Ballet choreographer in residence—and Danielle Rowe, formerly of Nederlands Dans Theater.

The second show on July 7, Performance B, will feature a mixed repertory-style performance with three longer ballets, all of which premiered in 2018 at the celebrated dancing event, Unbound Festival.

The weekend will be punctuated by a youth educational program providing instruction at all levels of ballet. “Three San Francisco Ballet dancers will teach students of all ages during a three-day immersive program for dancers from around the country, free of charge,” Smelick explained.

And new this year, Ballet Sun Valley is also offering an adaptive ballet program for instructors. “Ballet Sun Valley and Boston Ballet are putting together a special needs program to teach instructors, both dance and special needs-focused, to teach dance as a therapy [tool],” he said.

Thanks to the unyielding passion of a dedicated lover of dance and a community that welcomes fine arts with open arms, it seems that Ballet Sun Valley is merely in its first act. And whatever is on the horizon, it’s sure to take your breath away. ☀

# STEVEN LEE ADAMS



“Desert Bighorn in San Rafael,” oil on canvas, 48” x 60”

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