

Belle

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Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast, to be revived Friday through Sunday at the Long Center.

Although Mills has ushered more than 50 new dances into the world – and many of those have taken on lives of their own in subsequent stagings – he finds “Belle Redux” among the most haunting.

That feeling is reinforced every time a rehearsal begins.

“Your interaction with the dancers reveals the work to you,” he says. “For instance, the candle in Act 2 in the Hall of Mirrors. It only occurred to me after talking to the dancers – and getting an essence of the moment from Jamie Lynn Witts, who shares the role of Belle – that right there are two metaphoric images for revelation: a candle taking away darkness and a mirror reflecting something. It was a self-revelatory moment. It reminded me that we all have things that scar us. Within us is an animal we must stay mindful of.”

Mills shares a graphic example of this corporeal insight into dance – especially story ballets – that came from rehearsals for “Hamlet,” his most widely performed dance, from when he staged it for the Washington Ballet.

“There’s the scene where Gertrude is in bed – while Polonius is behind the curtain – and she kisses Hamlet, her son,” Mills says. “That never made sense to me. But I was acting out Gertrude, and it dawned on me that this was the bed where she was married to the king. Hamlet’s father. I realized out of nowhere that the king must have felt to her like Hamlet – his body, his skin, his hair – and she was transported

back to a moment with a husband whom she loved.”

Mills’ openness to this kind of sudden discovery comes from an insight about the nature of innovation shared by Joaquin Delgado, executive vice president of 3M’s consumer business group, the company that underwrote “Belle Redux.”

“People use the words ‘creative’ and ‘innovative’ interchangeably,” Mills says. “Let creation comes from absolutely nowhere. Everything else is an iterative process – innovation – when you take something and make it better.”

For instance, this ballet is based on an ancient fairy story – “Tale as old as time,” as the Disney musical would have it – yet it has gone through many innovations. Two of particular importance to Mills’ take are the exquisite 1946 Jean Cocteau movie “La Belle et la Bête,” whose grays, whites and blacks informed the design of the Ballet Austin edition, and Philip Glass’ 1994 opera based on Cocteau’s movie, echoed ever so slightly in composer Graham Reynolds’ otherwise completely original score for the Ballet Austin piece.

Mills, too, constantly innovates. “Usually in dance, the practice consists of asking one question,” he says. “As in: I need to make this diagonal, to string a series of steps to get from one side to another and call it done. But the truth is there are a million ways to get to that diagonal. So I make four or five versions of the same thing now. It’s a process of looking at things more closely and questioning everything. That’s innovation versus creation.”

For a handy example, Mills cites the endless versions of the American flag produced

by painter Jasper Johns.

“He showed how many ways you can do a thing,” Mills says. “How deeply you can mine an idea. In the end, you have a wealth of options to choose from. More choices are better than fewer ones.”

Of Mills’ 50 original works, a couple dozen, by his estimate, are in the active repertoire, refined each time they are staged.

“They all evolve in that way,” he says. “I get to make those choices on the spot. ‘Hamlet,’ for instance, has been performed by 10 companies, with many different sets of dancers. It has been touched the most. Everything depends on the company and who’s in front of you.”

“Light: The Holocaust and Humanity Project” is his second most performed work. Among its most interesting of performances were ones staged in Israel.

“It has remained pretty much the same except the last movement,” Mills says. “I change that quite a bit because there are still things that don’t please me. Some things stay, others don’t.”

During a recent 31-day, 16-show tour of China, Ballet Austin presented a program of Mills’ works, including “Bounce,” with music by Graham Williams, and “Liminal Glam,” presented with a score by Glass.

“I’m still enjoying it all,” he says after 17 years at the helm of Ballet Austin. “Though I now look at my role differently. When you get to a particular place in your career, the insecurities prove to be false. You know the things you are good at and the things you are not. You don’t pretend anymore.”

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Edward Carr (Beast) and Michelle Thompson (Belle) in “Belle Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast.” CONTRIBUTED BY TONY SPILBERG

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