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'Zaum - Beyond Significance' premiers tonight

By Sam Blackwell ~ Southeast Missourian

Only the first question a ballet titled "Zaum: Beyond Significance" raises is, What does zaum mean? In Russian, za means beyond, um means mind. That is the landscape the Russian and European artistic movement called the Cubo-Futurists explored early in the 20th century. With the onset of industrialization, the machine became the symbol for the way society should work.

These artists recognized the revolutionary nature of mechanization, "but they wanted to go beyond rationality," says dance professor Paul Zmolek. "They wanted to embrace the spiritual." The relevance of all this to the present is its familiarity. "It is similar to what is going on right now," says Zmolek. "There is new technology and deep concerns about rumors of war."

"Zaum: Beyond Significance," an original ballet choreographed and directed by Southeast Missouri State University dance professors Josephine Garibaldi and Paul Zmolek, will premiere tonight at Rose Theatre. Additional performances will be presented Friday and Saturday nights.

The Cubo-Futurists arose at a time between world wars, when threats of war provoked extreme nationalism. In Russia, the revolutionary spirit was still alive. Henry Ford's assembly line was an exciting invention that led to studies of how people move in space. In the theater, actors were trained to develop physical styles that transcended the words they were speaking with the goal of triggering emotional states in the audience. Cubo-Futurist poets sought to create a fourth dimension of language. Zaum was the language they invented for that purpose.

These artists believed art could make a difference in the world, Paul Zmolek says. "It was meant to provoke a reaction. They wanted to give art significance beyond the museum." [Garibaldi and Zmolek] call "Zaum" a ballet even though most of the movements are not balletic. Some sections of the 55-minute work parody ballet. The Cubo-Futurists often used "chance" in their compositions. In some cases in "Zaum," dance sequences are based on the dancers' Social Security numbers.

Creative process

[Garibaldi and Zmolek], who are married, have collaborated on dance choreography for more than a decade, dating to when both lived in California. This time they turned the usual creative process upside down. Instead of presenting composer Dr. Robert Fruehwald with a ballet needing music, or scenic designer Dennis C. Seyer with movement in search of a set, or costume designer Rhonda Weller-Stilson with bodies to camouflage or reveal, or lighting designer C. Kenneth Cole with scenes to illuminate, they asked each of their fellow collaborators to do their work first. They provided the starting points for the [Garibaldi and Zmolek], working with 18 student dancers, to begin choreographing "Zaum." Says Josephine, "We told them we wanted problems to solve."

Fruehwald is a Southeast music professor who previously has composed chamber music for flute and music for wind ensembles primarily. His inspiration for "Zaum" was George Antheil's "Ballet mecanique," a work written in 1924 but not given its world premiere until three years ago. Antheil's original instrumentation called for 16 synchronized player pianos, a siren, seven electric bells, three xylophones, four bass drums, a gong, two standard pianos and three airplane propellers. For "Zaum," Fruehwald used piano, computer generated computer sounds, industrial

noise and percussion. He also employs spoken-word text written by artists from the period, including painter Wassily Kandinsky and composer Erik Satie. Some musical passages are humorous. "It is a mixture of the avant-garde revolutionary feeling the music had ... made a little less revolutionary," Fruehwald says.

Weller-Stilson started with the designs of the early Russian theater. She kept seeing underpinnings, and this became one of the ballet's most striking characterizations, the group of six dancers called the High Society Hoop Ladies. Their hoop skirts are absent, revealing the black stockings and garter belts beneath. The multi-tiered set Seyer designed for last year's production of the musical revue "Sondheim!" was part of the inspiration for this new work, Josephine Zmolek says. "I said, 'Imagine the possibilities.'" He created a skeletal but highly mechanical set that is built by the dancers as the ballet proceeds. Like much in the ballet, the set reveals the structure beneath things. Many of the Cubo-Futurists were executed in the communist purges. Stalin tried to erase their memory, ironic because many of them were true believers in the revolution.

The movement is now just a footnote in the history of art, Paul Zmolek says, probably because the art it produced was too avant-garde for the masses. "They were idealists. In hindsight you can look at it and see it may have been doomed to failure."

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