

Re-(w)rite of Spring

During VPL residency, choreographer and local dancers use Stravinsky's piece to challenge what society says about aging

By JON POTTER / Reformer Staff

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GUILFORD -- Autumn is the new spring.

At least it is for choreographer Thierry Thieú Niang and the group of dancers he's assembled for "du Printemps," a re-imagining of "Le Sacre du Printemps" by Igor Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky.

Challenging cultural assumptions of youth and aging, "du Printemps" features 25 dancers ages 60-100 who volunteered to participate with Niang in a three-week workshop of the work, courtesy of the Vermont Performance Lab and Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts.

An acclaimed French choreographer and dancer, Niang is a dancer and choreographer, Niang has been working for many years with children and senior citizens and works frequently in schools, at-risk communities, hospitals and prisons.

It was during one such workshop with senior citizens four years ago in Avignon, France, that Niang found himself discussing "The Rite of Spring."

One of older dancers told him, "This music is so challenging for us. It talks about spring and vitality and energy, and everyone says that we are in the autumn of our lives. Let's say we are in the spring of our autumn," Niang recalled.

From that he and the seniors built a piece which re-examines the concept of springtime. The central big of choreography has the dancers move around the stage in a circle, but counterclockwise, to turn back time. As they do so, using different gestures, some elementary props and costumes and varying speeds, the dancers create powerful imagery around the passage of time and what it means to be young, old and alive and at any age.

Niang has workshop sessions of "du Printemps" around the world over the last four years in France, Spain, Belgium and the United States. His most recent stop was in New York City and he's headed next to South Africa and Brazil. But over the last three weeks, he has been in Vermont and Massachusetts, his 48th "du Printemps" session, courtesy of the collaborative residency through the Guilford-based Vermont Performance Lab and the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts.

The workshop will culminate in public showings on Wednesday, May 28, at 7 p.m., at The Serkin Center, Marlboro College in Marlboro and on Friday, May 30, at 7 p.m., at The Hub at Gateway City Arts in Holyoke, Mass.

For reservations to the Wednesday, May 28 show, call VPL at 802-257-3361 or visit www.vermontperformancelab.org. For reservations to the May 30 show, call MIFA at 413-540-0200.

In all, about two dozen seniors will take part, including 10 who have been working with Niang this week at Marlboro.

"We are witnesses in the audience to your transformation ... and suddenly, there is no age," Niang told the dancers following the first run-through of "du Printemps" Thursday afternoon at Marlboro College. "Sometimes, society, because you are old, forces you to put on the costume of being old. Here, there is flesh, there is life."

That message is not lost on the dancers, who relish the chance at defiance of societal views about aging.

"It's a rite of passage. I think when you think of rites of passage, you think of young people," said dancer Elizabeth Pittman.

"I'm surprised at how good I feel. It's really waking up my body," added Marie Procter.

That is one of the points Niang is trying to make with this piece. At a time in life, when societal norms seem to be placing limits on their bodies, Niang wants them alive and dancing.

"This gives them a new perception of time in the body," he said. "It's still sensitive."



French choreographer Thierry Niang speaks to dancers during a rehearsal for his piece "Du Printemps" on Thursday. Niang is in the area for a three-week workshop and residency with 25 local participants ages 60-100. (Kavla Rice/Reformer)

It's still alive. It's still joyful. It's still full of desire."

The local dancers followed many roads to "du Printemps." Some, like Nancy Ragle, loved the music. Others, like Connie Kline, wanted a chance to work with a renowned choreographer like Niang. Some were driven by mere curiosity and others from having participated in other Vermont Performance Lab residencies.

"I worked with (VPL's) Sara Coffey before, and I fit no neatly into the age category," quipped Robin Wolf.

For at least one of the dancers in the group, the reasons were more profound. Barbara Haumann's son died just last week. The community of dancers Niang has nurtured have really helped her honor her son. "I'm doing this for him," she said.

Work Niang began with exercises to build the community and help the dancers tune into each other. Then they began to build "du Printemps," a piece which is based on simple movements and easy everyday gestures, starting with walking in a circle. That, too, is part of Niang's message.

"It shows the people you don't have to be a virtuoso for dancing," he said. "People have something like an instinct (for) movement. When you give them tools to transform it, it starts to look like dance."

Niang's workshop and residency are funded in part by FUSED: French-US Exchange in Dance, a program of the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project, the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States and FACE (French American Cultural Exchange), with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Florence Gould Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, a Small & Inspiring Grant from The Vermont Community Foundation and VPL's Creation Fund donors.

Niang has danced for choreographers such as Hela Fattoumi, Eric Lamoureux, Daniel Larrieu, Christine Gérard, Daniel Dobbels and Odile Duboc. He began to choreograph after returning from a trip to Vietnam as part of his fellowship with the Villa Médicis in 1993. Since 2000 he has been working extensively in theater and opera with world-renowned institutions including the International Festival of Opera in Aix en Provence, La Scala in Milan, the Monnaie and Les Tanneurs in Brussels, the Metropolitan Opera in New York and Le Théâtre de la Ville in Paris.

He offers courses and choreographic workshops for children and senior citizens and works frequently in schools, at-risk communities, hospitals, and prisons, bringing in other collaborators including writers, musicians and visual artists. Niang's choreography explores socio-political constructions and the various ways people live together.

Vermont Performance Lab is a Guilford-based non-profit arts organization dedicated to supporting artists in the creation and development of new work and bringing artistic experiences to rural Vermont communities.

MIFA's mission is to present the finest examples of contemporary practice in the performing, visual and literary arts for the purposes of educating, entertaining and enriching lives.



(L-R) Robin Wolf, Helen Hawes and Mimi Morton rehearse for "Du Printemps" a dance piece by French choreographer Thierry Niang. Niang is in the area for a three-week workshop and residency with 25 local participants ages 60-100. (Kayla Rice/Reformer)