

## THE BACKSTORY OF FABLES & SMALL STEPS, TINY REVOLUTIONS

**Q: What's more magical than a child's imagination?**

**A: A child's imagination that is open to adults, too.**



This question will be answered and illustrated by centipedes, jellyfish, tree bugs and other magical shapes, colors and characters on January 15 and January 17 at Zoellner Arts Center. On that afternoon and morning Rioult Dance New York will perform family-friendly contemporary dance adaptations of five of Jean de la Fontaine's fabled animal fables (based on those made famous by Aesop), including *The Crow and the Fox* and *The Grasshopper and the Ant*. All set to music composed by Lehigh University professor Paul Salerni and performed by the Monocacy Chamber Orchestra.

*Fables* will be followed by *Small Steps, Tiny Revolutions*, which the Rioult company premiered in 2008 to celebrate Zoellner's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Professional dancers will join young, local amateur dancers in the story of a boy's quest to dance against the wishes of his father, and the father's quest to regain his son's trust by traveling through the boy's imagination. Based on a poem by Deborah Sacarakis, Zoellner's artistic director, the piece also features an original score by Steven Sametz, director of the Lehigh University Choral Arts.

The performance culminates weeks of creative interaction with local children by the dancers and members of Zoellner's staff incorporating artistic storytelling at Holy Infancy and Cleveland Elementary schools, dance residencies, and workshops. All are part of the center's community engagement programs, which include the Zeek! children's series, school shows and a musical alliance with Broughal Middle School. The show also extends the educational mission of its primary creator, Pascal Rioult.

Pascal Rioult grew up in France, where de la Fontaine's fables have long been teaching tools. He insists the Aesop-like animals taught him everything from spelling to poetry to morality. For *Fables* he's made the characters more athletic and adventurous, qualities one would expect from a choreographer who performed in track-and-field events and danced in Martha Graham's company.

The vain crow in Rioult's version of *The Crow and the Fox* is obsessed by the beauty of his body, which makes it easier for three female foxes to pluck his feathers. The nasty creatures in *The Animals Sick of the Plague*, who blame and punish their weakest peer, bear a closer resemblance to school bullies. This message should be clearer during the January 17 performance for school children.

*Small Steps, Tiny Revolutions* revolves around a milder brand of oppression. The story germinated in the late 1980s during a conference of performing-arts presenters. Sacarakis, then Lehigh's director of programs and outreach, suddenly imagined a life of regret for a man in a wheelchair. A line popped into her head: *He always wanted to dance*.

That line became the through-line for Sacarakis' poem. *Don't Go Too Far* was further inspired by her memories of kids dancing joyfully, parents criticizing them for dancing joyfully, and her own joyful dance lessons. Even today Sacarakis can't help moving along with dancers, both professional and amateur. The slightest shift of a shoulder will make her shift a shoulder.

Shift to 2006, when Sacarakis and other Zoellner staffers decided to celebrate the center's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary by creating a new work with a guest artist. Sacarakis proposed her poem as a touchstone to Rioult, whose company had galvanized Zoellner that year with an all-Ravel program, including *Bolero*. The choreographer says he signed up because he liked Sacarakis' message about the healing power of imagination. He decided he would create his first family ballet, and his first true narrative piece, around the touching story of a father trying to recover his son's love by sharing the boy's mental playground.

*Small Steps, Tiny Revolutions* began with small steps. In 2006, Sacarakis and other Lehigh educators held creativity/movement workshops at elementary schools in Bethlehem and Easton. Youngsters read *Don't Go Too Far*, then wrote and drew pictures about the poem. They entered the chain of creativity by reading the Russian folktale *The Firebird*, listening to a recording of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* and watching a video clip from the Rioult company's *Firebird*.

The 2007 workshops were more ambitious. This time Rioult's dancers taught choreography to elementary schoolers. Impressed by the youngsters' movements, Rioult proposed casting local children as characters in Shapeland, the name for the protagonist's imagination. "You know, Deborah," he said to Sacarakis, "why don't we go all the way?"

Youngsters were auditioned from across the greater Lehigh Valley. Thirteen elementary and middle schoolers were cast as jellyfish and centipedes, shapes and colors. Not only that, students' pictures shaped the production's sets, costumes and movements.

Rioult knew he was in special company when the parents of his young performers allowed him to rehearse their kids past their bedtime. He knew the show was special when he met a male spectator, a non-dancing parent, moved to tears.

The 2012 version of *Small Steps, Tiny Revolutions* is bigger than the original edition. Since then, the ballet has been performed in various locations across the United States and is about to premiere in France. The number of community dancers has nearly doubled to 25 and the show is paired with *Fables*, Rioult's second family ballet.

*Small Steps, Tiny Revolutions* is a key component of Zoellner's community-engagement program. The work is also a staple of the Rioult company's educational repertory. Sacarakis is amazed that professional dancers present her dream-child in New York City's five boroughs. "It's beyond my wildest dreams," she says. "To me, that's crazy."

-- by Geoff Gehman

*Geoff Gehman is a former arts writer for The Morning Call.*