

# STRIKE UP THE BAND

**A**t a recent Arcos Dance company rehearsal, artistic director Curtis Uhlemann asked the performers, clad in sweat pants, socks, and leotards, to grab their props. They came back waving shiny sabers and wearing military-style band hats, complete with chin straps and ostrich-feather plumes. The rehearsal continued.

The costumes are for Uhlemann's new piece, *The March*, set to *Bólero*, the relentlessly building, drum-dominated orchestral piece by Maurice Ravel. The work premieres at the National Dance Institute-New Mexico Dance Barns on Friday, Oct. 26. Also on the program are *Heights by Half Past*, with music by Charles Mingus; *The Uncommon Self*, set to music by John Adams; and *One of Five*, a duet performed by Uhlemann and Erica Gionfriddo, the company's associate artistic director, to music by Sigur Rós.

The concert marks the first performance of Arcos as a professional dance group. Uhlemann and Gionfriddo started the ensemble as a performing outlet for advanced student dancers two years ago (the company had its



Arcos Dance

Photos Mark Garrett

premiere in 2011) but, according to the directors, the intention was always to evolve into a professional group. Now they have both — a professional touring company and A2, a group made up of students.

Uhlemann's *The March* was inspired, in part, by the choreographer's experiences as a member of two different drum and bugle corps in upstate New York from the age of 11. After a few years, Uhlemann began traveling three hours each way to rehearse every weekend in Rochester, where he appeared with the nationally ranked Patriots Drum & Bugle Corps. He specialized in synchronized rifle tricks.

As a professional dancer and choreographer, Uhlemann has kept his hat, so to speak, in the world of drum and bugle corps. He still works as a choreographer for The Cadets Drum & Bugle Corps, 10-time world champions, based in Allentown, Pennsylvania. "I get to make modern dances for 150," he said.

Drummers, bugle players, and flag-bearing soldiers once accompanied armies into battle, but just as warfare has evolved, so has the drum and bugle corps. Think marching bands without clarinets, flutes, or trombones, offering entertainment on football fields at halftime, along with uniformed dancers (called the color guard) running around with flags, sabers, and rifles. Three of the male dancers traveling to perform with Arcos are former Cadets who, like Uhlemann, went on to study dance in college. Making the segue from marching to dancing wasn't as unlikely as it sounds, Uhlemann said. "Drum corps are like well-oiled machines. I learned how to organize, how a rehearsal goes. These people work all day on hot fields in 100-degree heat, all summer long." That type of work ethic is something he was proud to be a part of. "It's what I wanted to bring to a dance company."

A year ago, Uhlemann invited Gionfriddo to help create movement for *The Cadets*. "It was surreal — it is its own world," she said. "I gave them movement, and then Curtis had to move them from the corner of the field to the 50-yard line in 16 bars of music. It's a different way of working."

"They're used to learning fast; they pick up details quickly," Uhlemann said. "It's easier to train a kid from a drums corps than to break the old habits of someone who has been studying dance for years. They have a raw quality. I can get them low and wide. Contemporary dancers tend to be stiff and quick."

"Everything makes sense now," Gionfriddo said of her experience watching Uhlemann at drum corps rehearsals. "Now I understand why he schedules rehearsals like he does, why he enjoys making patterns on stage."

In the years Gionfriddo and Uhlemann have been creating

dances together, they have moved from a place of large, sweeping movement to something Gionfriddo described as "more quirky, intimate things. I come from a visceral, internal, asymmetrical place. It's a good contrast to Curtis," Gionfriddo said. "We're not into pretty per se. We like raw physicality."

"I love it when a female dancer is as tough on stage as a man," Uhlemann said. "I tell the women, move bigger than guys, and be just as strong — you're just as powerful."

Uhlemann said that *The March* came about after years of fantasizing about choreographing to *Bólero*. The music, commissioned for a ballet with choreography by Bronislava Nijinska, had its premiere at the Paris Opéra in 1928. It was used to comic effect in the 1979 movie *10* featuring Bo Derek, and as a soundtrack for British ice skaters Torvill and Dean for their gold-medal-winning performance at the 1984 Winter Olympics. "I always have a collection of songs hanging in the back of my head," Uhlemann said. "Things I would like to choreograph to. Every year I pull them out and see if any of them would be right for the group I have right now. Things locked into place for *Bólero* this year. I've been listening to it in my car nonstop. I wanted to have a balance of military-style movement as well as abstract dance. It starts with one performer in front of the curtain, alone with a saber. It starts simple and gets crazier. I'm trying to resist the tendency to always work with the blocks and divisions of this repetitive music."

In addition to the three former Cadets — Evan Turner, Ethan Warren, and Mark Willis — Arcos includes local dancers Katie Hopkins, Kelsey Paschich, Kaitlin Innis, Phylicia Roybal, Elle Jansen, and Wes Jansen. The students are learning company choreography during their technique classes and have been standing in for missing dancers during rehearsals. At the various dance schools where the two directors teach and barter for rehearsal and performance space, Gionfriddo said everyone sees the benefit of having a working company and its directors and dancers interacting with their students. "We saved money from last year knowing we wanted to evolve," she said. "The goal was always to move into a touring company." Arcos appears in the McCallum Theatre Institute Choreography Festival in Palm Desert, California, in November, and in evening-length multimedia performances at Santa Fe's Center for Contemporary Arts in February, in addition to touring in the U.S. and Germany. ◀

## details

- ▼ Arcos Dance, mixed repertoire
- ▼ 7:30 p.m. Friday & Saturday, Oct. 26 & 27; 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 28
- ▼ National Dance Institute-New Mexico Dance Barns, 1140 Alto St.
- ▼ \$20, discounts available; reservations at 473-7434 and [www.arcosdance.com](http://www.arcosdance.com)