

BY RACHEL F. ELSON

FINE LINES

Alonzo King's company
digs into the mysteries of
movement with
boundary-breaking
collaborations, including
his latest work, a
reimagining of Fokine's
Schéhérazade.

When LINES Ballet takes the stage, what you see is never simple. Choreographer and founder Alonzo King's textured work synthesizes diverse influences, creating entangled, explosive movements that have a sinuous grace. The dancers pirouette, crawl and then collapse on each other; shapes are both sculptural and emotional. The dancers themselves, meanwhile, seem fierce and supple, precise yet powerful.

Tall, too—even the women. "I do have a bias for height," King says, chuckling a bit. "There's just...more."

That pursuit of "more" goes beyond height. King displays a voracious cultural appetite—collaborating with everyone from martial artists to African tribes. Most recently, he studied historical texts for a new version of *Schéhérazade*, Michel Fokine's celebrated 1910 creation for the Ballets Russes. King's piece premiered in December as part of the Monaco Dance Forum's centennial celebration of Diaghilev's groundbreaking company, and had its American premiere at Duke University in late January.

King's reimagining of this Fokine masterpiece concludes a year-long, worldwide homage to Ballets Russes. It proved particularly fitting that this closing ceremony of sorts included King, whose work follows Diaghilev's tradition of teaming up with artists of various genres and backgrounds. For *Scheherazade*, King hired Indian tabla musician Zakir

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Corey Scott-Gilbert in
Scheherazade



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King rehearses *Scheherazade* with Ricardo Zayas

Hussain to rework the original score using ancient Persian instruments. “Diaghilev revolutionized ballet with impressive collaborations,” says King. “I wanted to honor him by re-energizing those forms.”

King began creating dances even before he started his dance training. During his performing career with Donald McKayle, Santa Barbara Ballet and a number of European companies, he found himself creating work on colleagues, and then for other companies. He founded LINES in 1982 to have “my own kitchen,” as he puts it. When the company expanded seven years later, he created the San Francisco Dance Center in a cavernous building at the gritty edge of downtown San Francisco.

LINES has become known for King’s boundary-slicing, cross-pollinated work. In *The People of the Forest*, he layered sculptural pointework over music and dance from the BaAka tribe of the Central African Republic. And in the acclaimed *Long River High Sky*, King worked with Shaolin monks, weaving acrobatic tumbles around knife-edged grand battements.

Although that broad vision speaks to both King’s palate and his modern sensibility, his dancers also possess the rigorous discipline of a ballet education. Whether the work is on or off pointe, King makes sharp use of their precision and technique. The men and women of his company have graduated from the Joffrey Ballet School, The Ailey School, Pacific Northwest Ballet School, the Kirov Academy of Ballet in D.C. and the Paris Opéra Ballet School, among others.

To King, ballet is essentially a physical vocabulary. “When people think ‘ballet,’ they think of a style,” he says. “But it’s a science of movement. It can be trained with complete misunderstanding because there’s a lot of cloning that goes on. But if you’re well-trained, you can do anything.”

King is always on the lookout for new dancers, auditioning potential company members whenever LINES is on tour. He is drawn to dancers who understand “all the intricacies and possibilities” in both the upper and lower body. “A lot of training focuses on the hips down, and I love that,” he explains. “But I



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also look for what’s happening from the waist up. Some schools just ignore the upper body.”

King expects his dancers to have a point of view—to be “highly thinking, highly feeling people,” who can partner with him to develop a work. “I’m drawn to people who understand the mechanics of movement, so that they can play with it. Then I can tell them, ‘Take this structure and play with it.’ ”

“They’re not automatons. They’re bringing their life experience into everything,” he says. “Dancers who come to you like an empty cup...” he trails off, shrugging. “Who wants to work that hard?”

The company members work hard enough. They perform about 90 times a year, and the rest of the time adhere to an intense training schedule: Company class each morning, then five hours of rehearsal. “It’s pretty nonstop,” says King: “There’s no lunch, really; we just take breaks. We used to work six days every week,” he adds, “but the dancers revolted. Now we only work one or two Saturdays per month.”

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