

COVER STORY



San Francisco Ballet principal James Sofranko (left) works with SFDanceworks dancers Anne Zivolich-Adams (back), Dana Genshaft (white shirt), and Amber Neumann (right) during rehearsals ahead of the company's first season at ODC.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

S.F. Ballet's Sofranko set to open SFDanceworks' 1st season at ODC

By Mary Ellen Hunt

The tall and soft-spoken Tobin Del Cuore is working in mysterious semaphore and cryptic imagery.

"Scoop, little house, then gnome walk," he says decisively. Somehow the dancers translate this intelligence into quirky, appealing movements as they learn the moves of Alejandro Cerudo's whimsical "Lickety-Split." A barrage of densely linked steps ends with a tight line of dancers clustered in a caterpillar-like formation, and when a canon of head tilts goes awry, laughter erupts in the Upper Market studios of the Academy of Ballet.

It doesn't feel like the first day of a new dance company, nor does the run-through look like a crew of dancers who've never been in the same room together before. In fact, the atmosphere at the first rehearsal for SFDanceworks rings of the camaraderie of a troupe of practiced veterans getting the band back together again. But if a company's tone is set from the top down, then chalk the amiable vibe up to James Sofranko's own style: professional, yet relaxed. One might even say there's a family feeling.

Sofranko's wife, Cynthia Sheppard Sofranko, herself only recently retired from the now defunct Ballet San Jose, is taking photos and glancing over at their 3-year-old son, Jack, who is engaging in a little show-and-tell with dancer Anne Zivolich-Adams before announcing that he is ready to watch "Thomas" (and Friends), which he does with admirable concentration in the corner.

"It's a good thing it's my company," Sofranko says wryly.

The project has been two years in the making, and this weekend James Sofranko's new contemporary dance company launches its first season at ODC Theater.

The last few months in particular have been a juggling act for Sofranko, who is a much-beloved soloist with San Francisco Ballet and also co-produces Dance for a Reason, an annual cancer prevention benefit featuring dozens of artists from local dance troupes. He choreographed a work for San Francisco Ballet's Student Showcase last May, in addition to working on "Z," his premiere for SFDanceworks' inaugural season.

In March, Sofranko tore his plantar fascia while performing in Yuri Possokhov's "Swimmer" with the S.F. Ballet. On one hand, the injury disappointingly sidelined him for the rest of the season. On the other, it gave him time to concentrate on readying for the company's debut.

"Everything is pretty much going according to plan," he says. "Now it's more like a battle of logistics and details."

New dance company a veteran troupe

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Sofranko ready for 1st season at ODC

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The company, which, for now, is fiscally sponsored under the umbrella of the non-profit Dancers Group, took initial shape in 2014. Sofranko then spent much of 2015 marshaling his resources, the works he wanted to showcase, the dancers and importantly, the funding. In May of last year, he launched the company's first fundraiser at the Joe Goode Annex and by October, when he held a second "friend-raiser" and performance at a friend's home in Sonoma, he had pulled together 80 percent of his funding.

Sofranko has been something of a one-man band for the past two years, taking care of everything from contracts to marketing to making rehearsal schedules. In the past few months, he's gathered a team to help with the production tasks. S.F. Ballet assistant stage manager Jessica Barker is handling the technical details, and former Oakland Ballet dancer Mario Alonzo is overseeing costumes.

"I'm having to delegate more," Sofranko says. "It's been a bit of a letting-go process for me, but I have to not be a micromanager. I think I've gotten together enough highly talented and highly professional people that I could probably leave the country now and the show would still go great."

Assembling the dancers was, in some ways, the easiest part. Sofranko handpicked his company members for their versatility and experience with contemporary ballet. He describes the company laughingly as a reunion of people he's known from various places over his career, and the interconnections between the artists he's recruited are dizzying.

Dana Genshaft, Garrett Anderson and Kendall Teague all danced with Sofranko at S.F. Ballet, where he is still a soloist. Genshaft, now a choreographer in her own right, also has a premiere on the program, titled

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How they survived

From America's oldest ballet company to new contemporary troupes, here's how some Bay Area companies have survived, thrived — or succumbed.



Erik Tomasson

San Francisco Ballet

Founded in 1933 as San Francisco Opera Ballet

On the brink: The early-1970s recession drove the Ballet to near-bankruptcy in 1974.

How it survived: The dancers launched a "Save Our Ballet" campaign — including a 49ers half-time show — raising \$500,000 to pay the company's debts. Current Artistic Director Helgi Tomasson's savvy programming, pairing his own choreography with high-profile commissions, has helped keep the company in the black.

Oakland Ballet Company

Founded in 1965

Downfall: Founding Director Ronn Guidi, who retired in 2000, brought the company to international renown. Under his successor, Karen Brown, it shuttered in 2006 with \$129,000 in debt.

Revival: Artistic Director Graham Lustig is rebuilding the company by keeping a strict budget and attracting new audiences through outreach and updated repertoire.

ODC/Dance

Founded in 1971

Shaky ground: ODC's landlord evicted the company from its studio in 1979.

Gambling on growth: They borrowed a down payment for a permanent home at 17th and Shotwell streets, then gambled again by acquiring a nearby site for a school in 2004 — mid-bubble. Both facilities are now Bay Area institutions.

Lines Ballet

Founded in 1982

Well done: Since 1990, Lines has developed an international following through extensive touring from Romania and Italy to Brazil and Israel.

Lucky break: Artistic Director Alonzo King met the director of BNP Paribas' philanthropic foundation in an elevator in 2009, which led to BNP sponsoring Lines' tours and local community programs.



Contraband

First performance in 1985

Well done: Sara Shelton Mann's avant-garde collective broke ground in dance, music, contact improvisation and performance as activism.

Ripple effect: Financial troubles led to Contraband's 1993 demise, but its legacy continues in the careers of Jess Curtis, Keith Hennessy, Kim Epifano and others.



Chronicle file photo



Michael Macor / The Chronicle 2014

Diablo Ballet

Founded in 1993

On the brink: Artistic Director Lauren Jonas feared the company wouldn't survive the 2001 and 2007 economic downturns.

How it survived: Jonas boosted fundraising and educational outreach, and fostered audience engagement with post-show Q&As and receptions, resulting in an expanded donor base and enough ticket sales to sustain the company.

Robert Moses' Kin

Founded in 1995

Solo effort: Moses handled choreography and fundraising himself for the first decade, but needed to delegate in order to grow.

Productive partners: Grants, donations and press increased when Moses brought on his first administrator in 2004 — but the Bay Area economy makes it difficult to hire staff at a competitive salary.

The Foundry

Founded in 1998

Working together: Alex Ketley and Christian Burns collaborated on cross-disciplinary projects under the Foundry banner.

Working apart: They went their separate artistic ways in 2003; Ketley still uses the Foundry name while Burns choreographs as BurnsWork.

Imagery

Founded in 2004

Growing pains: Artistic Director Amy Seiwert felt stuck in a perpetual loop of fundraising, production and administration, with too little time for creativity.

Reaching out: A grant from the Rainin Foundation allowed her to hire a full-time managing director, freeing her to focus on choreography.

Post:Ballet

Founded in 2009

Well done: Robert Dekkers launched his company with appealing branding that blends visual design and verbal wit.

Post:Puns: After-show gatherings are Post: Parties, fundraising mixers are PB:Jams, works have names like "Do Be" and "Four Plays."

Menlowe Ballet

Founded in 2011

Financial risk: In 2015, Menlowe went all in to produce "It's a Wonderful Nutcracker," a new, signature version by Artistic Director Michael Lowe.

The payoff: The 500-seat theater sold out for seven out of the eight performances, rewarding the company's investment and bringing in a wider audience.

— Claudia Bauer

Ballet San Jose

Founded in 1986 as San Jose Cleveland Ballet

On the brink: Infighting left finances in a shambles and led to the ouster of founding director Dennis Nahat.

Downfall: The company never attracted meaningful support from Silicon Valley, beyond a couple of major donors. With no endowment and facing legal action against a board member, it folded midway through the 2015-16 season.

Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company

Founded in 1988

Big loss: In 2005, three of Cai's six dancers left the company unexpectedly.

Surprising gain: Rather than hiring Galileo High School students, her go-to talent pool for 20 years, founder-director Cai sought professional, university-trained performers — and elevated the company's artistry.



Jana Asenbrennerova / The Chronicle 2009

Smuin Ballet

Founded in 1994

On the brink: The company reeled after the sudden death of founder Michael Smuin in 2007, just weeks ahead of its spring performances.

How it survived: The media converged on the Smuin studios — where the dancers wept through rehearsals — and publicized the board's announcement that the season, and the company, would continue. Audiences and donors rallied, and Smuin now performs and tours 60 to 70 dates a year.

COVER STORY

DANCE

What it takes to be successful

By Claudia Bauer

Hard work. Financial discipline. Artistic vision. Dancers and choreographers need them in spades — and so do dance companies. “Persistence, persistence,” adds Brenda Way, artistic director of San Francisco’s ODC, the modern dance company she co-founded in 1971. “Did I mention persistence?”

Robert Moses concurs. “You run a company to create the art on your own terms,” he says, “but sometimes you’re just pushing.” Moses founded his contemporary outfit, Robert Moses’ Kin, in 1995. Like most dance companies, his is a nonprofit. As such it is reliant on donations, grants and limited government support — and extremely vulnerable to the vagaries of the economy. “We’ve got to figure it out again every year,” he says.

Artistic directors want to focus on making dances. But to generate the funds and audiences to support their ambitions, they have to become savvy networkers. “You can’t just stay in your studio,” says Way. “In order to do what I wanted to do, I had to overcome my reluctance to talk about myself. I also had to talk about money, which I found very difficult.”

Companies must also create dance that’s worth fighting for. “The most important thing is the quality product that you

“You can’t just stay in your studio. ... I also had to talk about money, which I found very difficult.”

Brenda Way, ODC co-founder

put on the stage,” says Smuin Ballet Artistic Director Celia Fushille. “There has to be a reason for the patrons to keep coming.”

A former San Francisco Ballet and Smuin dancer, she took the helm in 2007, immediately after founder Michael Smuin’s sudden death. Her strategy has been to combine Michael Smuin’s archival repertoire with new works by noted dance makers like Helen Pickett, Jiri Kylián and choreographer-in-residence Amy Seiwert. “No one else in the Bay Area is doing that,” she says.

Smuin has also built a broad base by perform-

ing in San Francisco, Mountain View, Carmel-by-the-Sea and Walnut Creek, and welcoming audiences to post-show meet-and-greets. “You get to know (the dancers) as people,” Fushille says, “and then you feel more invested in what they’re doing.” Smuin’s emphasis on approachability has paid off in a large and loyal following, but she readily adds that “we’re all working to attract a younger audience.”

Oakland Ballet’s part-time artistic director, Graham Lustig, has spent the past six years courting a wider demographic and tuning the classical company to current tastes — and pinching pennies. “It’s thinking within certain guidelines, and being true to that,” he says. In 2015, he collaborated with members of Oakland’s Turf Feinz on “Turfland,” a mix of ballet and street styles; the 2016 program “Our Bodies Sing” paired local choreographers and a cappella singing groups. Thanks to these efforts,

Josie G. Sadan in “The Invention of Wings” in 2015 by Brenda Way and KT Nelson. ODC co-founder Way says persistence and networking are key to success.



Peter Earl McCollough / Special to The Chronicle 2015

Robert Moses founded Robert Moses’ Kin in San Francisco in 1995. The nonprofit dance company relies on grants and donations every year.



Andrew Weeks photography 2015

the 50-year-old-company, which folded in 2006, is returning to life; Lustig will lead it full time beginning in September.

Michael Lowe, who danced with Oakland Ballet from the 1970s through its 1990s golden era, has taken a similar tack with Menlowe Ballet, his 5-year-old company based in Menlo Park. Lowe has settled on a mix of classical, contemporary and “cultural” dances with international themes because “we are reaching out to our audiences, and that’s what they like.”

The challenge for Menlowe, and other

companies that strive to reach larger audiences, is to maintain artistic integrity while meeting audience demand, and invest in outreach while adhering to an often meager budget. The not-so-magic formula is creativity, grit, unwavering focus and a willingness to take risk after risk, says Menlowe Executive Director Lisa Shiveley.

“You have to be kind of fearless, and believe that success is inevitable,” Shiveley says. “Or you just don’t do this.”

Claudia Bauer is a Bay Area freelance writer.

Timeline

June 2000: James Sofranko graduates from Juilliard and joins San Francisco Ballet.

June 2007: Sofranko is promoted to soloist rank at SFB. SF Ballet spotlight on Sofranko at <http://tinyurl.com/zgu4rv5>

June 2012: Together with Garen Scribner and Margaret Karl, Sofranko co-founds Dance for a Reason (then called Get in Front), an annual event benefiting cancer research that features dancers from many Bay Area companies. His choreography is featured on that first program.

2014: SFDanceworks applies for fiscal sponsorship under Dancers Group, an umbrella organization that offers administrative support and financial resources for dance artists.

November 2014: SFDanceworks makes its first appearance at DanceFar, sponsor of the benefit, with a work by Penny Saunders titled “Berceuse.”

Learn about DanceFar at <http://tinyurl.com/z5t6cja>

May 2015: Sofranko officially launches SFDanceworks with a performance fundraiser at the Joe Goode Annex, raising three-quarters of his initial budget goal of \$40,000.

October 2015: Sofranko continues to build support for SFDanceworks with a “friend-raiser” at a home in Sonoma, stretching his goal to \$60,000 to ensure the fledgling company’s continuity. At this event, Sofranko announces a debut season that includes works by Lar Lubovitch and Alejandro Cerrudo, as well as premieres from Penny Saunders and Dana Genshaft.

June 23-26, 2016: SFDanceworks will present its inaugural season at ODC Theater.

— Mary Ellen Hunt



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Garrett Anderson (left), SFDanceworks founder James Sofranko, Ben Needham-Wood and Kendall Teague work on a dance.

SFDanceworks at ODC

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“Portrait.”

Anderson left S.F. Ballet in 2008 and wound up at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, where Cerrudo is the resident choreographer. Cerrudo’s “Lickety-Split” is being staged by Del Cuore, an original cast member of the ballet, who is doing double duty as a dancer on the SFDanceworks roster as well.

Del Cuore is also a Hubbard Street alum, and both he and former ODC dancer Zivovich-Adams have been friends with Sofranko since their days together at Juilliard. Add Joffrey Ballet’s genial Amber Neumann and Smuin Ballet’s indispensable Ben Needham-Wood, and you have a powerhouse cast of movers.

One of the three premieres on the program will be “Joe & Ida,” a new piece by Hubbard Street dancer Penny Saunders, who was a classmate of Sofranko’s at the Harid Conservatory. And rounding out the program is a duet from the classic Lar Lubovitch work “Concerto Six Twenty-Two.”

“There is such a wide world of dance out there, and I want to

SFDanceworks: Works by Lar Lubovitch, Alejandro Cerrudo, Penny Saunders, Dana Genshaft and James Sofranko. 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, June 23-25. \$20-\$45. ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., S.F. (415) 863-9834. www.sfdanceworks.org

A video preview of Penny Saunders’ “Joe & Ida”: <https://vimeo.com/167595915>

Video of Penny Saunders rehearsing with SFDanceworks: <https://vimeo.com/147566158>

San Francisco Ballet video profile of James Sofranko: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MIVd0ylbjM

show a variety of what it can be,” says Sofranko, who is already thinking ahead to his next season. “I’ve gotten good advice, that I should try not to worry myself with minutiae, but let myself focus on the bigger picture, which is great, it’s more fun. You get to dream and plan and imagine what could be.”

Mary Ellen Hunt is a Bay Area freelance writer.