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February 10, 2016 5:39 AM MST



Grand Rapids Ballet and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa bring the sensual story of lies and betrayal to life in dance.
Photo Courtesy of Grand Rapids Ballet

Ballet is so much more than a set of beautifully executed movements. It also can tell a story and convey emotion through the choreography and dancing. These elements are very important to Grand Rapids Ballet's new production of "Dangerous Liaisons," and they are a specialty of world renowned choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. The ballet is based on classic novel "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos and the popular 1988 movie that showcased the steamy battle of wills between Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil as they play a complex game of seduction and betrayal. The world premiere of Grand Rapids Ballet's "Dangerous Liaisons" by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa opens on Valentine's Day weekend, premiering on Friday, Feb. 12. Get to know Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and her artistic vision for "Dangerous Liaisons."

Choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Colombian-Belgian choreographer **Annabelle Lopez Ochoa** studied dance at the Royal Ballet School of Flanders, Belgium, and danced for 12 years with the Sapino Ballet. Since 2003, Lopez Ochoa has worked exclusively as a choreographer, and has created works for ballet companies all over the world. She has created works for companies such as the Dutch National Ballet, Ballet National de Marseille, Ballet Hispanico, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Whim W'HiM, Ballet Manila, Grand Rapids Ballet and Jeffrey Ballet.

Lopez Ochoa is known for her inventiveness and versatile expression. She creates works with strong classical ballet and contemporary techniques that are both award-winning and critically acclaimed. In addition to creating works for dance companies, Lopez Ochoa crafts works for musical theater and opera.

As an award-winning choreographer, Lopez Ochoa's work has been recognized internationally. Her awards include the first prize for "Replay" at the International Choreographer's Competition of Bornem, and the "Best Classical Choreography" for "A Streetcar Named Desire" given by the Circle of Critics of the National Dance Award UK. She was also selected to participate with the New York Choreographic Institute in 2007. Her work, "Cylindrical Shadows" was praised by Dance Magazine Us as one of the highlighted perform of 2012.

'Dangerous Liaisons' Ballet

The story of "Dangerous Liaisons" is a drama that can be romantic, sensual, cruel, tragic and entertaining all at once. The complex relationship between Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, who play a dangerous game of seduction, drives the story in both the scandalous 18th century novel and the famous movie. The powerful 1988 movie starring Glenn Close, John Malkovich and Michelle Pfeiffer won Oscars. **Grand Rapids Ballet** and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa teamed up to create a ballet that would be true to the story and the characters.

Lopez Ochoa hopes her choreography will bring the story of "Dangerous Liaisons" to life on the stage and give the audience something to think about. When she created "A Streetcar Named Desire," she wanted to create a narrative ballet that presented real characters dealing with serious issues relevant to modern audiences. She sees "Dangerous Liaisons" as a good story that examines human emotion and the consequences of betrayal.

"With "Dangerous Liaisons," I was wondering what it would be like to give the audience of classical ballet a story with real people, with real drama and a bad (tragic) ending. I wanted to convey a story to an adult audience about the harshness between two human beings. I wanted the story to be relevant to today," says Lopez Ochoa.

This production will unfold the classic tale of love, lies and revenge with a more modern approach that makes the 18th century story relevant to today's audience. It blends classical ballet with contemporary movement. Dancers will wear denim with pointe shoes. The music will be a mix of classical music and techno trans music, and will play a role in the drama.

She talks about the production, "I chose a modern look because it fits the Grand Rapids Ballet's young dancers well. It contains a lot of contemporary movement. The ballet is used as a facade of the French Court. To the outside world, they have to behave. Emotions are shown with more contemporary movement. The classical music will emphasize the outer beauty and beautiful costumes, and the techno trans music will show the ugliness inside."

Lopez Ochoa describes her version of the famous story, "It is more contemporary than classical. I want the emotions to be relevant to today, like it could happen today. The movement is contemporary infused with classical ballet. It's very theatrical. The story is important. I don't like long party scenes that lose track of the story."

When people see the show, Lopez Ochoa hopes the audience will enjoy it and see it as a cautionary tale. She discusses her hopes for audience reactions, "I hope that they feel like they shouldn't play with love. That what comes around, goes around. The two main characters are really evil people that carry the story and use their powers to manipulate people. In the end they lose. I want to convey a story about real people to an adult audience. Sometimes in classical ballet, the stories infantilize the people. Why are we not talking about real people in 2016?"

Lopez Ochoa's Choreography Style

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa considers storytelling and emotion very important to her work. She is known for her talent for creative choreography and getting the audience to connect with the story on an emotional level.

"I have worked a lot in theater and worked with many actors. I have a lot of respect for the process. For me, it is very difficult to choreograph steps if I don't know what it is about. Once I know what the scene is about, I can make a scene very quickly, like one hour. But it is not real yet. It needs to become real people. They have to transcend the technique and the movements. I want them to really follow the story. It is an amazing story and I want to share it," says Lopez Ochoa.

When she works on a new choreography, Lopez Ochoa likes to collaborate with the dancers. She comments on her approach to choreographing, "People think I come very prepared. But I don't prepare steps. I like to come completely open. I have the music, and then I start improvising, and people learn my steps. Then I start looking at them and it becomes an exchange on what works. Like high fashion, I put it on their bodies and they have to express it. Then I start changing my choreography to the people I have in front of me. That's why all my pieces look very different."

She finds the greatest challenge in choreography to be in believable storytelling. She talks about this challenge, "In the beginning of every narrative ballet, it is very difficult to tell who is who and what their relationship is before the drama starts. "Dangerous Liaisons" is a very intricate story. For me, the challenge was managing to tell the story and have people emotionally follow the story and the drama. Sometimes, in narrative ballet, the steps are less important than how the people look at each other and the intentions of the steps."

Lopez Ochoa discusses the importance of inspiration in choreography, "There is some kind of special magic in each piece. I often look at a piece later, and wonder how did I come up with that? You need inspiration and it comes in different ways. Sometimes it is a coincidence, or it will be a step that a dancer does, or even a mistake a dancer makes, and you know it is right for the piece. I still don't know how to make a choreography. I'm still learning the best way to reach the audience. My main aim is to reach the public, not to make interesting movement. What inspires me most to create a new work is the need to tell a story. The urgency of my theme has to be more important than the music."

Grand Rapids Ballet's 'Dangerous Liaisons'

Grand Rapids Ballet will present the world premiere of "Dangerous Liaisons" on Friday, Feb. 12, at Peter Martin Wege Theatre at 341 Ellsworth SW in Grand Rapids. Six shows will be performed during the weekends of Feb. 12-14 and Feb. 19-21. Evening shows on Fridays and Saturdays begin at 7:30 p.m. and matinee shows start at 2:00 p.m. on Sundays. Due to the mature nature of the storyline, parental discretion is recommended. Tickets can be purchased online at **TicketMaster**, or by calling the Grand Rapids Ballet Box Office at 616-454-4771, ext. 10. Connect with Grand Rapids Ballet on **Facebook** for current details on the show.

The Saturday, Feb. 13, show has already sold out. Grand Rapids Ballet shows tend to sell out. The combination of the intriguing plot of "Dangerous Liaisons," Grand Rapids Ballet talented dancers and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's inventive choreography promise another hit. Ballet fans should secure tickets as soon as possible so they don't miss out on "Dangerous Liaisons."

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