

Van Ryzin: Ballet Austin dancers create works for the off-season

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By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#) - American-Statesman Staff

Jennifer Hart looks at the silver rectangle of plush carpet that stretches over part of the stage in Ballet Austin's studio theater.

"It needs to unwrinkle a bit," she says.

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Ballet Austin dancers Edward Carr, Ashley Lynn, Nicole Voris and Oliver Greene-Cramer rehearse "On Truth and Love," a new contemporary ballet ... [Read More](#)
Dancing ballet on carpet is hardly typical. But for "On Truth and Love," Hart's short work set to music by Arvo Pärt, the carpet is as much its own character as a prop, she explains.

"It's metaphoric for the spaces we create within relationships — the boundaries in relationships that we have to negotiate, move into and out of all the time," she says.

At a recent rehearsal, however, the carpet-as-metaphor wasn't lying flat, the result of having been in storage since Hart — who is an instructor and curriculum leader for Ballet Austin's Academy — had a chance to workshop "On Truth and Love" a couple of summers ago.

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Ballet Austin dancer Nicole Voris rehearses “On Truth and Love,” which will premiere June 13 and 14.

“I guess I like to make things more complicated,” Hart says of the carpet.

Then again, being an independent choreographer is plenty complicated.

Concerts on Friday and Saturday, “Ignite: Three Works,” mark not only the first full-evening presentations of Hart’s work in Austin, but also signal the launch of Performa/Dance, a project-based company Hart has co-founded along with Ballet Austin dancer Edward Carr.

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From left, Ashley Lynn, Edward Carr, Oliver Greene-Cramer, Jennifer Hart and Nicole Voris rehearse “On Truth and Love.”

Performa/Dance formalizes an artistic collaboration that extends back for several summers.

Summer is, after all, a time for many ballet professionals to explore independently. Like those in many regional professional companies, Ballet Austin dancers have nine-month contracts, leaving summers open for freelance engagements — or starting your own dance company.

“A little break is nice at some point in the year,” says Carr, who joined Ballet Austin’s professional company in 2008 after spending a season as an apprentice. “But you always want to work — you always want to dance. And you want to share what you do.”

A few years ago, Hart staged one of her dances with Califa, a part-time company that other Ballet Austin dancers kept going for a few summers. And Carr was willing to work with Hart on private studio performances of her work here and there.

But restless and wanting more, the friends decided to go big.

“I said, ‘Let’s just do it,’ and so we did,” says Hart. “There’s not as much of an independent dance scene in Austin as there could be, and we want to help cultivate one.”

Carr and Hart recruited seven Ballet Austin dancers to perform this weekend at the company's Austin Ventures Studio Theatre. In addition to "On Truth and Love," Hart will premiere "Variations on Surrender," which is a more theatrically influenced piece that use music ranging from the Beatles to Bach, a departure from her typically ballet-centered modern dance style.

A native of Minnesota, Hart trained at Minneapolis Ballet and San Francisco Ballet, then danced professionally for years while also nurturing her ambitions to choreograph.

Her dancemaking credits include a full-length production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" for Minneapolis' Metropolitan Ballet Project and short works for Ballet Nouveau Colorado.

Hart moved to Austin seven years ago to take the Ballet Austin Academy job, a position sweetened by the fact that company leaders are open to and flexible with Hart's independent choreographic endeavors, including asking her to create dances regularly for Ballet Austin II, the apprentice company.

Hart's "Wavemakers," created during a New York City Ballet fellowship and performed by Ballet Austin II, was nominated for an Austin Critics Table Award last year.

And for next season, Ballet Austin has commissioned Hart for a new short ballet that will premiere in March at the Long Center.

Working at Ballet Austin has an additional perk for an independent choreographer: the chance to befriend professional ballet dancers eager to explore new work.

After all, if a painter can easily gather the brushes, canvases and paints to produce a new picture, a choreographer's essential artistic material is the human body. But those bodies come with lives and schedules of their own as well as the need to make a living. Finding — and paying — dancers willing to be your artistic implements continually proves a challenge.

Hart and Carr launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise \$4,000 for production costs. And they're counting on ticket revenues to augment the \$150 honorarium they've paid to each dancer for the past three weeks of work.

The collaborators plan to operate their company on a project basis — not setting a formal season, but staging performances as they can raise money, find venues and gather together dancers and other choreographers.

Says Hart: “We’re really just getting started.”