

# dance

## Back in the Studio

Oregon Ballet Theatre's founding artistic director creates new dances as an independent choreographer

by Rebecca Ragain

**W**hen James Canfield resigned from his position as artistic director of Oregon Ballet Theatre in 2002, he told Gia Kourlas of *The New York Times* that his next move might be to sell suntan lotion in Maui. Kourlas couldn't tell if he was joking.

Turns out he wasn't.

After leaving OBT, Canfield did move to Maui for a year. He didn't peddle suntan lotion, although he did sell duct tape wallets made by the folks at Portland's own DB Clay in Maui's markets.

"Those guys are friends of mine, so I went to the marketplaces and sold [their wallets], just to get into the local culture...that was a lot of fun as a way to meet people," says Canfield.

After 13 years at OBT—and six years as a principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet before that—Canfield needed some time to regroup before moving on to the next stage of his career.

He had spent a month in Maui a few years earlier, to celebrate his 40th birthday. Every year thereafter he made brief visits to the island, which he describes as a "magical" place.

So Canfield decided to live there for a year so he could be anonymous and do some soul-searching. Upon returning to Portland, he enrolled in massage therapy school at East West College of Healing Arts and spent the next year and a half studying. Today, he is a licensed massage therapist with his own practice.

Canfield didn't step entirely out of the dance world to focus on massage therapy. He traveled around the country on dance business, mostly consulting and teaching.

In 2006, he was invited to participate in the Portland-based Northwest Professional Dance Project by the program's artistic director, Sarah Slipper. NWPDP is headed by Slipper and Steve Gonzales, artistic director of the Jefferson Dancers. The 4-year-old program connects young professional and preprofessional dancers with leading dance makers from around the world. For three weeks, the students take classes and workshops and learn original choreography created for them by the guest artists.

Slipper and Canfield were acquainted from their OBT days. In fact, it was Canfield who hired Slipper to be OBT's ballet mistress in 1997 and who commissioned her to make dances for the company. So when Slipper invited Canfield to work with NWPDP as a guest artist, it was a bit of a switch.

"Now she's not sleeping at night, and I am," quips Canfield, referring to the tremendous amount of time and energy that goes into running a dance organization.

Canfield accepted Slipper's invitation. Last year, he taught class for NWPDP students and created a trio called "BAM," which the young dancers performed as part of the end-of-session public performance called *Showing by Dance Makers*. In an *Oregonian* review, Bob Hicks described the work as "vintage Canfield" and called him "a dance maker to reckon with."

Originally, Canfield got involved with NWPDP because he believes the project is fulfilling a vital role in the dance world. Because

many companies today perform mostly from a repertoire of proven works, young dancers might not have the opportunity to work on a new piece with a choreographer.

Both as a dancer himself and as a longtime artistic director, Canfield believes the collaboration between choreographer and dancer is "the ultimate experience" for a dancer. And it is that experience that NWPDP offers its students.

This year, another crop of NWPDP students will have the chance to work with Canfield, who is creating an original dance for them to perform at *Showing by Dance Makers*.

When *Just Out* spoke with him, it was too early in the creative process for the choreographer to say much about the piece. It didn't have a name yet, and the dancers had not been selected. However, Canfield did promise that the dance will exhibit characteristics of his signature style, such as sensuality or an exploration of relationships.

Those two stylistic characteristics certainly apply to "Broken Sparrow," a new dance that Canfield choreographed for NWPDP's latest endeavor: *Innovative Visions*, a one-time public performance by a company made up of nine dancers who previously attended NWPDP. Five dancers from the company, four men and one woman, performed "Broken Sparrow" on July 14 at Newmark Theatre.

Amanda Phillips-Bosshart convincingly portrayed a plaintive soul who searches for companionship but doesn't know where to find it. She pushes one dancer's face away from her and is embraced by another for a moment before she sinks to the floor. She builds a deeper, tender connection during a duet with Brittain Jarrett Jackson but is separated from him in the end.

The dancers were accompanied by live music from local artist Adam Hurst, who played haunting cello and guitar solos from a dimly lit, raised platform near the back of the stage.

Some choreographers create the bones of the dance first and choose the music later. In contrast, Canfield collaborated with Hurst, whose music he first heard at Last Thursday in the Alberta Arts District, for nearly a year before making "Broken Sparrow."


Although *Innovative Visions* was a one-night-only affair, Canfield says "Broken Sparrow" is now part of the NWPDP repertoire, so it may be performed again in the future.

In addition to NWPDP, Canfield has an upcoming choreographic gig at a biennial event called Emergence. The project, a collaboration between the Nashville Ballet and Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music, will bring choreographers and composers together to create new work this fall.

Canfield has other irons in the fire as well, although he can't



James Canfield (inset) promises his new original dance will exhibit characteristics of his sensual signature style.

share any details at this time. He is, however, perfectly willing to share the fact that he enjoys his current role as a roving guest artist: "You get to go in, inspire dancers, and make new work. That was always my first love." 

The Northwest Professional Dance Project's *SHOWING BY DANCE MAKERS* will include James Canfield's latest, as-yet-untitled work, along with dances by five other choreographers, 8 p.m. Aug. 10 and 11 at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall, 1620 S.W. Park Ave. Tickets are \$22-\$25 from [www.nwpdp.com](http://www.nwpdp.com).

REBECCA RAGAIN recently returned from the American Dance Festival, where she was a fellow with the National Endowment for the Arts Journalism Institute for Dance Criticism. Contact her via [www.rebeccaragain.com](http://www.rebeccaragain.com).

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