



Nahat rehearsing soloist Catharine Grow in *Carmina Burana*

“I like to see people coming to work ready to work.”

—Dennis Nahat

Technique, however, isn't everything. In auditions, Nahat also scrutinizes what he calls a dancer's "ethics," by which he means professionalism. "What do they look like when they walk into the studio? Are they in leotards and tights? Or are they arriving in cut-offs and sloppy shirts? They must have respect for what they are doing. I like to see people coming to work ready to work.

"Dancing," Nahat adds, "is not like anything else. It's human contact every single day. We are a visual artform. We practice how to look fantastic. The mirror in the studio isn't there because we adore ourselves. It's there to correct us."

At Ballet San Jose, company class is mandatory. Nahat believes his policy is instrumental in preventing major injuries, of which Ballet San Jose has been relatively free. He maintains firm ideas on what class should be—and not be. "Nothing should feel good. If you're not uncomfortable, then you are probably doing it wrong. I have nothing against massages, but they should happen before class. Take it from me; I've been through it."

Where production is concerned, Nahat refuses to compromise in using live music. He feels the effect on the dancer can be electrifying. "You're on a cliff, your nostrils are flaring, your eyes are open," is how he describes the sensation. "It makes you a more responsive artist, and it keeps audiences on the edge of their seats." Ballet San Jose's repertoire balances Nahat's plotless dances and the full-length classics (*Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *Coppélia*, *Romeo and Juliet*) with one-acts by Balanchine, Tudor, de Mille, and this season, Tharp.

As Nahat prepares Ballet San Jose's season opener this month, he ponders his wish list for the coming years: "A stable financial era in which the community rallies around the arts, and a theater, school and city known for dance. This may not all happen in my lifetime, but at least I can lay the foundation." ■

Allan Ulrich writes on the arts for a variety of publications here and abroad.

Building a Vision

Ballet San Jose's Dennis Nahat defies the odds

By Allan Ulrich

Whether they're making microchips or running ballet companies, they think innovatively in Silicon Valley. Consider Ballet San Jose, the primary dance organization in Northern California's largest city. Founding artistic director Dennis Nahat has defied the fundraising odds this season. Despite the recession, he is expanding programs, extending runs and hiring more dancers. They will take modest weekly pay cuts, but their contracts will include more weeks of work. Everyone wins.

"Sure, the economy sends a chill down my spine," says Nahat, "but if we don't use our training in order to perform, who are we?"

Nahat has posed that question to the community since the company arrived in 1985, the West Coast component of a co-venture with Cleveland Ballet (which Nahat co-founded with the late Ian Horvath in 1972) called San Jose Cleveland Ballet. Plagued by civic indifference, the Cleveland wing closed down in 2000. Yet Nahat has flourished in California. That has not been easy in a town not known for its ballet culture, but

Nahat, a former Joffrey Ballet member and principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre, has brought a career's worth of experience to the task. The international character of Ballet San Jose's roster (all three of the company's principal men hail from Latin America) attests to the troupe's increasingly global profile.

For Nahat, the task of directing a company begins with the audition process. He spends weeks on the road every year seeking recruits, and his standards are high. "I look for talent. I don't care about their size or their shape," he says. "They need to be real dancers, to possess musicality, to understand épaulement, so that when I say, 'Croisé,' they know what I mean. If a dancer knows vocabulary, it saves time in rehearsal."

at a glance

Ballet San Jose

Number of Dancers: 44

Contract Length: 32 weeks

Starting Salary: (2009–10 season): \$876.88 per week under AGMA contract

Performances per Year: 45