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Julia Erickson and Nurian Abougaleiev in "Nine Sinatra Songs," one of the pieces slated for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's Wolf Trap performance.

Music and Motion in the Moment

By LISA TRAITER
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"Jazz is there and gone. It happens. You have to be present for it. That simple," jazz pianist and composer Keith Jarrett once said. The same holds true for dance, which disappears before one's eyes, never to happen again in quite the same way. Not surprisingly, an implicit understanding frequently surfaces among jazz and dance artists, both of whom thrive on creating in the moment.

Dancer and choreographer Dwight Rhoden says he feels a kinship working with jazz artists. "The blues and jazz are born out of gospel, and that's a genre I'm familiar with. I like to think I understand jazz because of that," says Rhoden, an Ohio native. On Tuesday at Wolf Trap's Filene Center, the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre will dance Rhoden's contemporary jazz ballet, "Smoke 'n Roses." The work, which pays tribute to that city's jazz community, will feature Al Dowe, his band and vocalist Etta Cox performing seven jazz and blues numbers that Rhoden selected. The piece, perfect for an outdoor venue, conjures up a smoky jazz club where music and dance sizzle in the steamy heat.

The ballet company will also perform George Balanchine's glittery homage to his Russian classical roots, "Theme and Variations," and the sleek and sexy Twyla Tharp work "Nine Sinatra Songs."

Rhoden, who lives in New York City, choreographs for his own company, Complexions, and contributes to the repertoires of troupes as diverse as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, New York City Ballet, Philadanco and the Washington Ballet. He didn't set foot in a formal dance class until he was 17: "I was always a mover but never had any formal

Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre

Wolf Trap Filene Center
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Tuesday



BY RIC EVANS

Christopher Rendall-Jackson, above, in the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's "Smoke 'n Roses," choreographed by Dwight Rhoden, left.



training until a friend took me aside and said I should pursue this as a profession," Rhoden says. "I didn't even know that [dance] was an option as a profession." By his second month of classes in Dayton, he was in the company as an extra pair of hands to lift and support the female dancers.

Terrence Orr, the Pittsburgh Ballet's artistic director, brought Rhoden and Cox together, and the pairing proved fruitful. "I like to work with jazz because of its fractured struc-

ture movement. I feel that jazz music or the blues gives me that opportunity."

Cox's first musical language is classical. Trained as an opera singer, she didn't discover jazz until well into her career. But she hasn't looked back: "I found a freedom there that I didn't have in singing classically," she says. "[But] I practiced for two years by myself before I would scat sing." She credits much of her jazz education to Pittsburgh trombonist Dowe, who broadened her horizons and her ear by passing on a multitude of jazz recordings.

In her collaboration with Rhoden, Cox selected two dozen songs she liked, many of which she had never sung. Among them are the work's opener, Nancy Wilson's "The Greatest Performance of My Life," and one of Cox's favorites, Horace Silver's "Filthy McNasty."

Although improvisation defines jazz, Cox, Dowe and the band (Tony Campbell on sax, Jeff Mangone Sr. on bass, Scott Anderson on keyboard and James Johnson Jr. on drums) have discovered a happy medium that enables them to work with Rhoden's set choreography.

"Everything is set rhythmically, and we have to make sure that the meter is always the same," Cox says. "But the solos are never the same. . . . It might be close, but there's always improvisation. Dwight has the dancers doing some very intricate [movements], so I have some highs and lows to hit that the dancers listen for. But my scat singing, that's purely improvised."

It couldn't be any other way, just as another jazz legend, Louis Armstrong, advised: "Never play anything the same way twice."



Jazz broadened singer Etta Cox's horizons.