

Epic Journey: Composer Eric Allaman shares what it takes to bring biblical tradition to the big stage

It's no small feat, composing an original ballet. And when your subject matter is a well-known story that is at the heart of an age-old faith tradition, you take artistic license at your own risk — if at all.

But for Pacific Festival Ballet Artistic Director Kim Maselli and Eric Allaman, a music composer with scores of film, television, and theatre credits to his name, no challenge short of epic will do when it comes to creative collaborations.

The pair first teamed up three years ago to mount *The Sea Princess*, an original fairytale ballet that debuted to critical and audience acclaim at The Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Bank of America Performing Arts Center in 2007. This time, they've turned their attention to the story of a man who fashioned an ark from the raw materials of faith and fear and compassion — and saved the world along the way.

Noah's Ark, a multimedia performance that fuses traditional ballet with modern dance, aerial work, film, and special effects premieres on Saturday, May 22, 2010 at the Civic Arts Plaza's Fred Kavli Theatre. When the performance opens, it will mark the end of an undertaking that was two years in the making, and the beginning of a future for the ballet itself that, like Noah's own journey, is uncertain.

To experience *Noah's Ark* in all its glory will require a seat in the theatre [link to ticket info here for online version?]. To tide you over until the ballet débuts, writer Pamela Schott sat down with the ballet's composer, Eric Allaman, who shared his version of the making of a ballet from a musician's point of view.

PS: As with all good stories, the ones that are most memorable resonate with us when the language they're told through begins and ends with music. Ballet is an especially challenging storytelling medium, however, because it relies solely on the score and the dancers' movements to carry the narrative. What inspired you to collaborate with Kim Maselli for a second time to bring *Noah's Ark* to the stage?

EA: After watching the staging of our first collaboration, *The Sea Princess*, I was inspired to write another ballet with Kim for a couple of reasons. First, the story worked. I witnessed this with the children's viewing of the production on a matinee performance one day. I observed first hand how fourth and fifth graders bussed to the theater understood the characters and what was at stake in the story of *The Sea Princess*. During the evening performance, I experienced how

an adult audience responded to the piece. The protagonists, antagonist, and secondary characters were easily identified and the plot was easy to follow (and believe me, it is no easy gig telling a story without words!). Second, I now had a better grasp of the medium and I was inspired to move through the process again.

So it was sometime during the summer of 2008 that Kim and I decided to create another show. She had this idea in her back pocket for a long time about doing a show based on the story of Noah's Ark. I thought it was an exciting choice that would lend itself to vastly different characters, setting and story than our first ballet.

Kim laid out the story as she saw it. We spoke about the various characters and the general arc of the story. We both decided we wanted the flood to happen at the end of Act I, as this would allow us to create a second act that most people wouldn't be familiar with while providing us with some creative license for the second act.

PS: We all know the story of Noah's Ark. No matter what faith tradition you've been brought up in, this is a familiar story. It's part of our shared narrative. So how do you take a story that's as old as the hills and make it fresh and interesting?

EA: One thing I told Kim was we had to have a love story. In my opinion, this is where ballet excels, and I didn't want to compose an entire ballet without the most compelling aspect of dance, the *pas de deux* between lovers. So we created a love story between Noah's son, Japheth, and a young woman named Lydia early in Act I. This way our audience could see and feel the story told from both Noah's perspective and from our young lovers' position.

PS: Share with us the process of composing a score for a ballet. Where do you even begin such an undertaking?

EA: After we had blocked out all the story elements of both acts, I began to compose the ballet in sequential order. Kim would drop by the studio every week and I would play her what I had composed during the last week. This was our routine for close to six months. During my process of composing, I would need to orchestrate the pieces to a great extent so both Kim and I could have an idea of what the piece felt and sounded like and how it would feel for movement. Every week we discussed tempos, meter and the emotive sweep of the piece to ensure the music was telling the story. Basically, I was scoring the story without the visuals like in a film.

I finished the score in June of 2009 and that was the time to bring aboard my orchestrators. My Ukrainian orchestrator, Alex Klepov and I had worked on several films together and he had worked with me on the orchestrations to *The Sea Princess*. So Alex took over at this time assisted by my French orchestrator, Remi Dapere. Those guys worked on finessing the orchestrations for a 60-piece ensemble.

PS: You manage to weave the score with many intangible elements reminiscent of the ark itself, so that it is replete with a variety of things that one doesn't often throw together. Like Noah inviting two of every kind of animal on a long journey, then shutting the door and praying it works, your music in *Noah's Ark* pairs instruments and instrumentation in an unconventional way. Was this an artistic gamble?

EA: Early on Kim and I decided we wanted to have some authenticity to the instrumentation from the general vicinity of where the ark was built, which was in southern Turkey just north of Syria and Iraq, according to archaeological finds. So I included various ethnic instruments from the area, things most audiences here wouldn't necessarily be familiar with, along with traditional orchestral instruments. In the end, you have a score that features instruments that are native to Noah's part of the world, like zuduks, balabans, bansuris, sornas, ouds, lautos and zithers, as well as your more traditional woodwinds, brass, percussions, and strings.

It sounds like a gamble, but when it all comes together — music, dance, costumes, set pieces — it feels like it was the only choice that could possibly have been made in service of the story.

PS: And then you went to Moscow to record!

EA: That's right. Alex and Remi continued the orchestration process and eventually did all the copying, too. Once they were finished, I was off to Moscow to record with the Russian State Symphony Cinema Orchestra and Sergei Skripka, the conductor.

We recorded about 113 minutes of music in six, four hours sessions. Upon finishing, I spent 120 hours mixing the music with Gary Tharp. At that point, I could now officially pass the baton to Kim, knowing that, from here to the finish line, she would have to run the anchor leg of the race.

PS: It must feel like a leap of faith, what you've been through so far, and what's to come once the ballet has its premiere in May.

EA: As in all theater, one never knows how successful one's efforts are until it is performed in front of a live audience. Any show, musical, or ballet can look good and sound good on paper, but until it is on its legs and evaluated by a paying audience, one doesn't know the outcome. That outcome for us will be determined on the weekend of May 22nd.

PS: But it's not about just that one weekend in May for the two of you, is it?

EA: Kim and I hope our new show will make a contribution to the dance world. As in all forms of entertainment, it is imperative to have new shows to inspire and entertain new generations of dancers, choreographers and the paying public. We hope our shows will have a life of their own and make a small, humble contribution to the general repertoire of ballet works. It was our intention from the "get go" to make sure the shows were crafted to entertain an entire family. It is my wish and desire that *The Sea Princess* and *Noah's Ark* will be a source of inspiration for young people to dance, participate and visit the ballet.

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Noah's Ark premieres Saturday, May 22, 2010 at The Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Bank of America Performing Arts Center at 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. Tickets are available now through www.ticketmaster.com, or in person at the Civic Arts Plaza Box Office. Box Office information can be obtained by calling 805.449.ARTS (2787). For more information about Pacific Festival Ballet, please call 818.707.3267 or visit <http://californiadancetheatre.com>.