

'Gatsby' dance work comes to Harwelden Mansion

James D. Watts Jr.

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"Gatsby Redux," a site-specific dance theater piece, will be performed by Mixed eMotion Theatrix at Harwelden Mansion. Courtesy, Barry Weiss

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As a choreographer and director, Janet Roston believes her purpose is to create and share stories.

And for the Oklahoma debut of her company, Mixed eMotion Theatrix, she is taking on what some consider the greatest American story — the one told in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, "The Great Gatsby."

"Gatsby Redux" is a site-specific dance work that takes incidents and themes from Fitzgerald's classic novel of the "Roaring '20s" and combines them into an evening-length work that will be performed on the grounds of the Harwelden Mansion, which was built in 1923.

"We aren't trying to take audiences through the entire story," Roston said. "Instead, we highlight some of the most important and memorable moments in the novel, that deal with the ideas of wealth and power and class, as well as the futility of trying to hold on to the past, the romantic tangles of the characters, and that eternal hope that Gatsby had, holding on to his romantic dream, no matter the cost."

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Roston created the work in 2018, as part of an evening that had three dance companies create and perform works around the grounds of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, where Roston is based.

“We were given the run of the place, and I really fell in love with the beautiful gardens at the back of the theater, where they have this wonderful fountain and an outdoor amphitheater,” Roston said. “I thought it would be the perfect setting for a garden party, and the minute I thought of ‘garden party,’ my mind went to ‘The Great Gatsby.’”

Lavish, raucous parties are a major part of “The Great Gatsby,” as the title character hosts them in hopes that Daisy Buchanan, the woman on whom he’s had a crush for years, will one day come by to see what all the fuss is about.

The original production of “Gatsby Redux” consisted of only three scenes — one based on the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy arranged by Nick Carraway, another based on the tense meeting in a New York City hotel room, as Gatsby confronts Daisy’s brutish husband Tom, and a finale that evokes the high spirits of one of Gatsby’s parties.

“We only were given 15 minutes for our performance, but I knew I wanted to make this a full-length work,” Roston said.

The piece has been performed a few times at locations in southern California, including the Muckenthaler Cultural Center in Fullerton and the Brand Library and Art Center in Glendale.

Roston and her team visited Tulsa to check out Harwelden and figure out how to adapt the piece for this space.

“Some pieces can fit into any space and you just drop them in,” she said. “And because of the way piece is structured, we can adjust the sequence of the scenes so that it will work better in a given space.

“For example, the duet between Gatsby and Daisy was originally done in an amphitheater, so the audience was looking up at the dancers,” she said. “Harwelden has this wonderful hill, and so we’re going to have the audience looking down the hill at what is happening.”

The choreography itself draws from dance styles of the 1920s, but set within the context of a contemporary dance event.

“We’ll have some Charleston, some foxtrot,” Roston said. “There’s one sequence that evokes Josephine Baker, who first came to fame in the 1920s. We’re doing everything we can to evoke the feel and look of the era.”

That includes encouraging the audience to come dressed in their summer whites. And while the performance will take place on the grounds, the evening will begin with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres inside Harwelden.

In case of inclement weather on Wednesday, those with tickets for that performance will be admitted to the Thursday show. Should it rain on Thursday, the performance will be moved to the Living Arts Center, 307 E. Reconciliation Way.

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