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Sarasota Contemporary Dance in sync to grow

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The dance company gets in step with Reverend Barry and the Funk to expand its audience.

by: Klint Lowry | Arts + Entertainment Editor

They say reputations are built by the company one keeps. It's a principle by which Sarasota Contemporary Dance Founder and Artistic Director Leymis Bolaños Wilmott operates in more ways than one.

As the company begins its 14th season, collaborations with local musicians have become an SCD trademark. The practice stems from Wilmott's drive to constantly challenge herself as a choreographer and challenge her dancers to develop their talents in adapting to a variety of musical styles.

This year, SCD will bring on the funk when it teams up with one of the hottest bands in town, Reverend Barry & The Funk, for four shows Thursday through Sunday at the FSU Center for the Performing Arts.

Wilmott says the collaboration is especially exciting. For starters, it is the first time the company has worked with an eight-piece band.

That's an eight-piece band with three Grammy-nominated musicians and a tight, three-piece horn section. And the band is blowing hot these days. Reverend Barry & The Funk's fan base has spread after recently earning the No. 1 position on ReverbNation's Funk Charts following the release of its debut album, "SxyGdLuv."

Wilmott says one benefit in doing a collaborative show is that it is not only an opportunity for both the dancers and the band to try something new but also for the audiences to do the same.

In that sense, the show fits in with the theme for SCD's season, "Growing Larger," which can be interpreted a couple ways, Wilmott says. Big picture, it's an acknowledgement of how far the company has come.

"We're in our 14th season, and we have our own space," Wilmott says. "It's unheard of for a contemporary dance company to even be around for 14 years. It's more common in the ballet world. So in itself, it's a huge accomplishment."

And when the company got its own studio facility two years ago, it was a luxury.

"We have a home now," Wilmott says. "We can function. We can have all our rehearsals.

"I told my board we need to be able to have smaller performances in here for choreographers and be a place where local choreographers can come in and have a space to create work. We got funding to have lighting and blackout shades and stuff, so we can have performances."

"Growing Larger" is also something of a mission statement for SCD to foster creative growth. The way this show has come together is a perfect example, Wilmott explains.

The manner in which she selects company members is a little different than some other companies that look to fit a signature look and style.

Wilmott compares her approach to choreography to being like a painter with the dancers as colors. She likes working with a broad palette, with dancers of all physical types who have their own strengths and styles.



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For the upcoming show, she sat down with Reverend Barry & The Funk and went through one of its typical gigs. The band does a lot of funk covers along with original material, which is reflected in the show with a song list representing a funk timeline, from James Brown to Prince, and finishing with Reverend Barry & The Funk's music.

Coming up with a concept for each song often starts with what the song itself conjures up and then deciding which of her dancers are best suited for that idea.

Listening to the Rufus and Chaka Khan hit "Tell Me Something Good," for example, reminded Wilmott that roller-skating went through a popular phase in the 1970s. She came up with a solo routine for a dancer to begin with skates on her hands, and, one by one, they would move to her feet. The routine calls for a dancer with a high degree of athleticism, such as SCD's Melissa Rummel.



For Reverend Barry & The Funk, collaborating with Sarasota Contemporary Dance is one more way to expand its already-growing fan base. (Courtesy)

One song Reverend Barry wrote for his wife has a quiet, contemplative feel. Wilmott imagined a woman alone and lost in lonesome thought as she's doing some mundane chore. She decided to have the dancer sweeping the floor, so that as the woman falls deeper into her imagination, the broom becomes a dance partner of sorts. It's a piece suited for Xiao-Xuan Yang Dancigers, who is able to project a character's inner life.

Dancer Melissa Coleman Sperber, who has been with the company for seven years, says Wilmott will play to their strengths. "She will also play to our weaknesses to make us grow," she says. "I've never been bored here."

As with every musical genre the company works with, the aim isn't to dance in that style but rather to take the feel of that music and project it through the lens of contemporary dance.

Wilmott says what's exciting this time around is that when you think about that period during the '70s when funk came into its own, it was also a time of colorful, bold individuality — exactly what she encourages from her dancers.

By the time Dancigers and Rummel, along with Zoe Austin, Rachel Lambright, Jessica Obiedzinski and Monessa Salley, move into theater for final rehearsals, their performance will truly be an ensemble piece.

That's important because the dancers will only have four days during tech week to rehearse with the band, Wilmott says.

"Some of the magic is going to happen during production week," she says. Live music sounds different from a recording, and the dancers have been able to adjust on the fly.

"I think that's what I'm really most proud of my company and my dancers — it's that they are that versatile, and I have faith and confidence that they will make wise decisions in the moment," Wilmott says of the dancers taking ownership of the performance as it is developed.

"I think as a choreographer, you have to surrender. You have to let go at that moment and you have to trust."

Come opening night, this will be the one time that if they feel the audience is exiting the theater in a funky mood, they'll know they have done what they set out to do.

**IF YOU GO**  
Sarasota Contemporary Dance + Reverend Barry and The Funk  
**When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday  
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**Tickets:** \$10-\$45  
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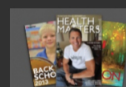
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