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Present Company Included



Above, Frances Chiaverini and Adrian Danchig-Waring rehearsing "Bacchae," which was choreographed by Luca Veggetti, below, in rehearsal with Gabrielle Lamb. The work will be presented Tuesday by the dance company Morphoses at the Joyce Theater.



By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

ONCE upon a time, in the magical land of ballet, a company was born. The brainchild of the hottest choreographer of the day and a charismatic former ballerina, the fledgling troupe burst onto the world's grand stages, promising to haul classical ballet into the contemporary realm.

And then, well ... then, things didn't go quite as planned for Morphoses/The Christopher Wheeldon Company. In 2010, just three years in, Mr. Wheeldon resigned as artistic director amid a public he-said, she-said with his co-founder and executive director, Lourdes Lopez. So long, star dancers. So long, big stages. So long, fund-raising advantages that go with having Mr. Wheeldon's name attached to your organization.

But not, as it turns out (and as many people speculated), so long, Morphoses. The charismatic ballerina stuck around, and on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, Ms. Lopez, a former New York



Lourdes Lopez, executive director of Morphoses, is seeking a sustainable framework for generating new work.

City Ballet principal, will present the first offering of the reimagined company: the premiere of "Bacchae." This multidisciplinary, evening-length work is by Luca Veggetti, an Italian choreographer with a bent for collaboration and a pared-down, dramatic aesthetic that owes more to the likes of Jiri Kylian than George Balanchine. Hello, Morphoses 2.0.

"It was horrible: like walking on quicksand, everything you knew and had planned for changed," Ms. Lopez, an utterly unconvincing 53, said with a weary smile, referring to the split with Mr. Wheeldon. (He did not respond to a request for comment.) She spoke over a late lunch after a rehearsal at the Joyce's Midtown studios. "No way in hell was I even going to survive if I tried to put something together similar to what it was before."

A dance troupe truncates its name and changes its vision.

What it is now is something of an experiment. Ms. Lopez does not intend to hire a permanent replacement for Mr. Wheeldon. Instead, she sits alone at the helm, operating under a curatorial model of sorts. The plan is to rotate in a new resident artistic director each year, with each tenure revolving around a single, collaborative project. (The Swedish choreographer Pontus Lidberg is to follow Mr. Veggetti and will create a live companion piece to his 2010 dance film "Labyrinth Within"; Ms. Lopez is in talks with two theater directors for the third year.)

This new approach reflects Ms. Lopez's desire to find a sustainable framework for generating new work. But whether the company will develop a viable or truly innovative alternative to established models remains an open question, as Ms. Lopez readily acknowledges.

The support and excitement engendered by the first Morphoses (pronounced MORE-pho-zees) is notably muted now, and the company's long-term outlook remains uncertain. Its annual budget is a little under \$500,000, down from \$1.2 million during Mr. Wheeldon's final year, and the company still needs to close a \$275,000 gap for this year. There are no gigs booked beyond the Joyce, though Ms. Lopez said she is in discussions with several European festivals.

The makeup of the company reinforces the shift to the curatorial. The dancers will audition for each project and be chosen by Ms. Lopez and her current resident choreographer; Morphoses will no longer be tethered to a classical — or even ballet-specific — aesthetic. In addition to the flutist Erin Lesser and the puppeteer Candice Burrige "Bacchae" has 11 dancers. Aside from the New York City Ballet soloist Adrian Danchig-Waring, none are officially affiliated with companies. (The first Morphoses was also a pick-up troupe, albeit with stars like Wendy Whelan and Alina Cojocaru borrowed from major companies.)

"That sense of attack, let's say, that some of them have, is engendered by the fact that they are confronted, and often by choice, to be in a situation that is ever changing," Mr. Veggetti said. He pointed to two of his dancers, Gabrielle Lamb and Frances Chiaverini. "They could be in compa-

nies, they're good enough. But they don't want that. It's very interesting for me to work with dancers that have that curiosity."

Once "Bacchae" and subsequent works are completed, the goal is to license them to other companies. Beyond generating income for Morphoses, this allows for the projects to have a life outside of a short New York run. It also bolsters the repertoires of other companies that are seeking to attract new audiences but can't or won't take the full financial risk of generating less traditional, interdisciplinary projects.

"Everybody wants to do new work at this point," Ms. Lopez said. "That's de rigueur. I wanted to go further."

Whether or not Morphoses makes good on its ambitions, there is a palpable sense of frustration in the ballet world with doing business as usual.

Mr. Danchig-Waring, who also worked with Morphoses before Mr. Wheeldon left, pointed to signs of change within the big institutions, like City Ballet's creation of Moves, a small touring group.

"I definitely perceive a shift in how ballet companies are orienting their energies," he said, likening Morphoses to Moves. He added, by e-mail: "They're both making dance more accessible — quite literally bringing dance to these audiences. I wouldn't be surprised if City Ballet started commissioning more chamber works specifically for their Moves tours. I like the idea of making new work and then showing it around. It breathes life into ballet."

The Thursday performance of "Bacchae" will be live-streamed free to an East Village bistro, Zaitzeff, and to the Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education, a community organization in the South Bronx, to make the company accessible to a larger audience. Ms. Lopez said she felt strongly about this effort, despite criticism from colleagues.

"I've gotten a lot of flak: 'This is not sports,' or 'If you're offering it for free, people won't come to the show,'" she said. "I'm really tired of people talking about how fragile dance is. It's powerful. Where would I be as a Cuban immigrant if I hadn't found it?"

Ms. Lopez, who was born in Havana, stressed the importance of the social aspect of dance in

Cuba, where audiences are accustomed to mingling with artists after shows, drinking and chatting instead of sitting through mediated discussions. The Morphoses dancers are expected to make themselves available for such informal gatherings after the Joyce performances.

Ms. Lamb said that while there were still details to be hammered out regarding Morphoses' structure, the effort was urgently needed. "The model of the big dance companies is not working as well as it did when it was first established," said Ms. Lamb, who was previously a soloist with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal and danced with Morphoses during Mr. Wheeldon's tenure. "The work companies were doing 30, 40 years ago, if you look all over the country, it was a bit more adventurous for its time. Companies have gotten trapped into trying to sell tickets by making 'Aladdin' and 'Dracula.'"

She added: "Even the big companies in New York are becoming museums. The dancers are still wonderful but could be more challenged by the work they're given. These companies are huge dinosaurs, and the structures don't really allow for much risk-taking."

Ms. Lopez, for her part, stressed that Morphoses' core mission was always to get younger viewers. "Dance doesn't have to have a big audience," she said. "But I'm not so fond of the fact that when I go to the theater everyone there has seen me dance. And I stopped 15 years ago."