

arts & culture



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Modern Dance Company Returns To The Villages

Jon Lehrer Dance Company's show is at 7 p.m. Saturday at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND  
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Jon Lehrer Dance Company is back with a whole new set of graceful and gravity-defying stunts. The company recently made a stop in West Palm Beach, where the dancers did a show at Bak Middle School of the Arts. "It's a great way of getting the community to know about us, especially the students," founder and artistic director Jon Lehrer said. "If the school has a dance group, we try to get young performers to open the show." Lehrer plans on doing the same in The Villages. During JLDC's upcoming performance at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center, dance students from The Villages High School and The Villages Middle School will open the show. Most school dancers either cheer for the local sports team or do competitions, Lehrer said, and most parents tend to think of dance as a sport or hobby.

Watching and performing in a JLDC production exposes the younger generation of dancers to the world of professional dance, which they may not have experienced before. It also shows parents what their children are working so hard to achieve, what they could be and can become. "It's very eye opening," Lehrer said. "It shows them that dance can be powerful as well as artistic." Despite his emphasis on

education, Lehrer got into dance later than most professionals. He took his first dance class at 19 years old while attending the University at Buffalo. Lehrer was dating a dancer at the time, and he teased her about how easy it must be to get an A in a dance class. She dared him to try a beginning level modern dance class. He took her up on it. "I couldn't walk," Lehrer said. "I was so sore." That single dare changed the course of Lehrer's life. He ultimately received a bachelor's degree in dance from the University at Buffalo. Before he discovered dance, Lehrer was studying business. He was also quite an athlete, rowing on the school team and playing baseball. After the dance revelation, he switched majors.

Lehrer worked for 13 years as a professional dancer, touring all over the U.S. and the world with Giordano Dance Chicago, an award-winning jazz dance company. In 2007, he founded JLDC in Buffalo, New York, to both national and international critical acclaim. Now based in New York City, the company continues to travel all over the world, showcasing Lehrer's choreography, which fuses jazz and modern dance into what he refers to as an "organically athletic" style. "I wanted to have a signature style that was immediately recognizable," he said. "I took my background in sports and combined it with dance, so the company became known for its mixture of athleticism and artistry." Aside from cultivating a distinctive style, Lehrer also aimed to make dance more accessible. That way, he said,

it can be enjoyed by anyone, from amateur to aficionado.

Lehrer's style fills the stage with an explosion of kinetic physicality and geometric patterns. Dancers are constantly moving across the stage, gracefully contorting their bodies and achieving seemingly impossible athletic feats. "We do that with what we call 'bodies in space,'" Lehrer said. "We do it without sets and dance that is eye popping." Unlike most ballets, which stick with one consistent narrative piece, JLDC's show at The Sharon will have seven separate vignettes. Each contains its own story and is meant to evoke different emotions. The only through-line is that they are done in Lehrer's style. "We do a lot of comedy," Lehrer said. "We also do romantic works, serious works and jaw-dropping works." JLDC does 30 or 40 shows annually and tours all over the world. The company's European tour takes place every three to two years. The next one is slated for 2026.

Every year, Lehrer and the company's instructors put together 10 to 12 works for the upcoming season. They choose which ones to perform based on the specification of the individual theater. For The Sharon performance, they have prepared all new acts, including a world premiere. "This will be our fourth year coming to The Villages," Lehrer said. "Never has a dance group come back four years in a row before. We're so grateful for our audience in The Villages, so we made an even bigger show than last year, which was already pretty big. We hope they like it enough to invite us back again next year." JLDC's show is at 7 p.m. Saturday at The Sharon. Tickets are \$35 and up. Go to thevillagesentertainment.com. Senior writer Taylor Strickland can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5334, or taylor.strickland@thevillagesmedia.com.

Ballots Are In, Audiences Can't Stop Discussing 'The Vote'

The thought-provoking play runs from now until Oct. 19 at The Studio Theatre Tierra Del Sol.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND  
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The Studio Theater Tierra Del Sol opens its ninth season, "Longing to Belong," with a play as topical as it is entertaining. From award-winning playwright Bernardo Cubria and director Joshian Morales, follows Paola Aguilar, a 39-year-old university professor drowning in debt from years of unsuccessful fertility treatments. To fund her expensive visits to the sperm bank, she's reluctantly agreed to help "THE Political Party" better understand "the Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine vote" in exchange for a substantial paycheck. But as Paola struggles to help the political strategists understand the nuances of her community, she's faced with choices that may ultimately be more important than who controls the White House. "It's the kind of play that needs to be done," said John Vincent-Morrison, of the Village of Bradford. "At times painful, because the issues are painful, but that's why it's so important for this play to be done." "The Vote" uses a clever blend of farce and light-hearted, relatable comedy to tackle otherwise serious topics, such as intergenerational strife, the border wall, English fluency, citizenship, immigration and misogyny. It is at times intense and uncomfortable and is made more so by the directness of the dialogue, the acting, the lighting, fourth wall breaks and audience participation. Paola, played by Edmarie Montes, joins a diverse group of political strategists: Rebecca Feldman (Hannah Dubner), Bernard Robinson (Guillermo Jemmott Jr.), Nicola Ramirez (Dee Quintero) and Kaj Lutken (Nick Bublitz). Each individual, including Paola, has their own ideas and contrasting opinions on how to best reach the Latin American voter base. As they conduct their interviews, Paola and other members of the think tank keep hitting roadblocks as



"The Vote," starring Edmarie Montes as Paola Aguilar, runs until Oct. 19 at The Studio Theatre Tierra Del Sol.

they are confronted with the diversity of the Latin American population. Unlike some voter bases, there is no consistency of political opinion among Latin American voters, which frustrates each of the investigators and prompts fruitless circular arguments about what is racist and what is not, who is racist and who is not. All the while, Paola is still undergoing fertility treatments.

During the play, the audience not only bears witness to some of Paola's most intimate moments, it also serves as her own private council. She stresses over every aspect of the sperm donor selection process and often addresses members of the audience, asking them to weigh in on certain decisions throughout the play. The unpredictability of their comments adds another layer to the play's hilarity, especially the foot-in-mouth responses to Paola's questions regarding race and ethnicity. Paola's conspiratorial connection with the audience persists even when conducting interviews, sharing sidelong glances and funny faces with the crowd every time another character delivers an outrageous or offensive line. Village of Bradford resident Lisa Vincent-Morrison called the play's usage of fourth wall breaks and audience participation "innovative and engaging," and Patrick Daskol, of the Village of St. Catherine, said "it helped relieve the tension and the uncomfortableness at times." Much like "Cabaret," which was the last interactive play the theater staged, the audience was locked in heated discussions about the show's subject matter. "It's a little intense," said

one woman, while another called the play "entertaining and thought provoking." Despite the challenging nature of the show, the overwhelming response was positive. Many audience members expressed their appreciation for the show's timeliness and relevance, citing the looming Nov. 5 presidential election and the ongoing legislative debates regarding in vitro fertilization. Hill Simpkins, a Village of Osceola Hills resident, said the play could open new avenues of thought. His partner, Steven Denenholtz, applauded artistic director Whitney Morse for selecting the play. John Vincent-Morrison echoed the sentiment. "I wanted to go up and just say, 'Thank you, Whitney, for all you do for The Villages,'" he said. "That's part of why we are still here." "The Vote" runs from now until Oct. 19 at The Studio. Tickets are \$40 and up. Next week, the creative forces behind "The Vote" are opening up the stage to the audience. An in-depth playwright question-and-answer session will be held at 1 p.m. Oct. 12, with Morse acting as moderator. Cubria will delve into his repertoire of award-winning, politically charged plays, and Morales will share his directorial insights and explain how he came to helm "The Vote." Tickets for the Q&A are \$15 for general admission. To purchase tickets for "The Vote" or the Q&A, go thevillagesentertainment.com. Senior writer Taylor Strickland can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5334, or taylor.strickland@thevillagesmedia.com.

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