

Timeless

Karen Gabay

KAREN GABAY is tired of men in tights. After almost three decades with Ballet San Jose, the dancer thinks the conventional male ballet "prince" just doesn't cut it for her anymore.

That's why Gabay made sure that 2-2 Tango, the piece she choreographed for Ballet San Jose's "Hidden Talents" program, keeps her male performers clad in manly tango pants.

"I wanted to show men as men," explains Gabay, who was raised in San Diego and moved here from Ohio with her now 7-year-old daughter after the Cleveland Ballet's collapse. "We have such great Latin dancers in the company, all men. So, I wanted to show them off as well, because they have this machismo kind of attitude. It's so far from your typical guys in tights prancing around."

With Gabay's youthful looks, one can hardly believe she has danced with Ballet San Jose and its predecessor, the San Jose Cleveland Ballet, for 29 years. Walking around the ballet's mirrored studio instructing her dancers, a fringed sarong tied at her hips, Gabay uses her energy and easy smile to overcome the inevitable fatigue of a long rehearsal. Despite her small physical stature, Gabay fills the room with her enthusiasm. "I can remember when I was the youngest dancer in the company, and now I'm the oldest," Gabay says, reflecting on her tenure, which has taken her past the physical limits of most dancers. "I've seen a couple generations already pass through. I've been very fortunate as far as injuries; I've just had good luck with longevity."

Gabay originally developed 2-2 Tango as a small tango piece for Pointe of Departure, a not-for-profit troupe that she and her ex-husband, Ballet San Jose dancer Raymond Rodriguez, operate during the summer in Cleveland. Expanded from seven to 21 dancers, 2-2 Tango offers a theatrical compilation of tangos, performed on pointe instead of in the traditional tango heels. Gabay has brought Rodriguez, who co-starred for years with her in Romeo and Juliet performances, back for a post-retirement tango, the only time Gabay appears onstage in the 35-minute piece.

"I always loved watching [tango]," Gabay says. "There is such intensity between the people dancing it, and I've always loved the dramatic roles. I like how people are in a relationship with each other onstage, so that's what I wanted to convey."

Passion and romance dominate 2-2 Tango: "It's about the different kinds of various loves that you have. You have jealousy, you have that never-ending love, and the love where somebody wants something from somebody. It's about the different temperaments of different relationships."

2-2 Tango is also a valentine to Gabay's parents, both of whom she recently lost. "They were married for 61 years. They had all the passion and romance, and all the ups and downs as well. I think you just don't find that kind of relationship anymore," says Gabay. "They were always so supportive of me. They used to fly to Cleveland to see the shows, they'd always come here every year to see my performances ... so, I'm dedicating this as a little belated valentine to them because, you know, it takes two to tango, and they tangoed for many years."

