

avant-garde arts

By [John Fleming](#), Times Performing Arts Critic

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SARASOTA

What happens when new and radical meets old and conservative? The Sarasota arts scene is about to find out.

Sarasota has always been prized for its traditional approach to the arts. The opera is known for faithful productions of Verdi and Puccini, the ballet company's programming is centered on the classics, the Asolo Repertory Theatre has long relied on Restoration comedy and the dramas of Shakespeare and Shaw, and the Ringling Museum of Art is famous for its old masters.

But now this circus town turned arts center is adding something new to the mix that is bound to shake things up, or at least baffle loyal patrons. For five days in October, Sarasota will be home to an impressive collection of cutting-edge theater, dance and music in a festival organized by the Ringling and New York's Baryshnikov Arts Center, founded and presided over by ballet great Mikhail Baryshnikov.

The performances at the Ringling International Arts Festival will range from the latest work by legendary European director Peter Brook to an innovative staging of Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* to a campy diva called Meow Meow who describes her *Beyond Glamour: The Absinthe Tour* as "an explosive cocktail of obsessive love songs, minor multimedia, tired old tricks, gorgeous suicide laments and kamikaze cabaret."

"It's kind of a mini-Spoleto in a way," said Thomas Kriegsmann, festival director with the Baryshnikov Arts Center, referring to the springtime Spoleto Festival USA that put Charleston, S.C., on the map as a cultural destination.

Dwight Currie likes to talk about "interjections" when discussing the impact of the festival in Sarasota. "I see it as interjecting something new, something different in and amid more traditional forms and ideas," said Currie, associate director of programming at the Ringling and its point man for the festival.

The Baryshnikov Arts Center, which is devoted to emerging and mid-career performing artists, developed the programming for the festival. Now Currie is bracing for the reaction of the Sarasota audience to Meow Meow or the uncompromising modern dance of choreographers Aszure Barton and Deganit Shemy.

"I fully expect that people are going to come out of some of these shaking their head, possibly angry or annoyed," he said. "But to be honest, I sometimes come out of performances shaking my head or angry or annoyed because it was just the same old, same old."

Baryshnikov had been casting around Florida for a partner with whom to put on a festival. He has ties to the state through the White Oak Plantation, near Jacksonville, owned by the late philanthropist and arts supporter Howard Gilman, who built splendid dance rehearsal facilities there. Baryshnikov named his modern dance company after the plantation.

About two years ago, Baryshnikov met with Judy Lisi, president of the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, about possibly collaborating on something in Tampa, but nothing resulted. It was former state Sen. John McKay, a Bradenton resident, who brought the dancer and Sarasota museum together.

"I think Baryshnikov came here to look around as a favor, but once he saw the venues we have, he got interested in the possibilities," Currie said. The festival performances will be on the FSU cultural campus in the Ringling's Historic Asolo Theater and the Asolo Rep's Mertz and Cook theaters, all excellent venues.

Another advantage, from a production standpoint, is that the 200 or so performers in the festival will stay at four hotels within walking distance of the theaters. Each performance will be about an hour long and ticket prices are affordable at \$30 and less, except for the opening concert by the FSU Symphony Orchestra.

The festival scored a coup when it landed the U.S. premiere of *Love Is My Sin*, Brook's production of a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets by actors Natasha Parry and Bruce Myers. Brook, 84, a British director based in Paris, may be the most influential theater theorist of his generation, author of the seminal book *The Empty Space* and renowned for his direction of the classics and films such as *Lord of the Flies*.

"Yeah, that was a big one," Kriegsmann said of *Love Is My Sin*. "We got very lucky with this new piece. It is a 50-minute piece on Shakespeare's sonnets done in a very simple fashion. It has the extreme minimalism that Brook is after in his recent work, the purest aspect of the theatrical form that he can possibly get to. It took a lot of coaxing, because Peter Brook would never share a stage with another company, but we were able to convince him to do so."

With a budget between \$750,000 and \$1 million, according to Currie, the festival has been able to commission four new works: *The Sun Also Rises*, performed by New York's Elevator Repair Service, widely praised for its adaptations of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (called *Gatz*) and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*; a French horn trio by young American composer Mason Bates; *Busk*, choreographed by Barton, a Canadian; and a production of *Arena* by Shemy, an Israeli.

A late addition to the lineup was *Eight*, a play about young people in the United Kingdom by Ella Hickson, 24, that was a hit at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival. "It's totally the voice of teenage life now in the U.K.," Kriegsmann said. "We don't really know if there is a young vibe we can capture in Sarasota, but we'll find out."

Currie thinks Meow Meow, the Australian cabaret singer, will create the biggest stir. "She's a little naughty, a little bawdy," he said. "You take Bette Midler when she first hit the scene, and notch that up several degrees, and you've got Meow Meow. I think she's ready to explode on the international scene, and people will be able to say they saw her in Sarasota."

John Fleming can be reached at fleming@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8716. He blogs at Critics Circle at blogs.tampabay.com/arts.

Ringling International Arts Festival

Single tickets to the festival, held Oct. 7-11, range from \$10 to \$30 for performances in theater, music and dance. The opening concert by the FSU Symphony Orchestra is \$100. Venues are the Historic Asolo Theater, Mertz Theatre and Cook Theatre at the Florida State University cultural campus in Sarasota. (941) 360-7399; ringlingartsfestival.org. The festival lineup:

Theater

- *Love Is My Sin* — U.S. premiere of Peter Brook's staging of Shakespearean sonnets. Oct. 8-11
- *Eight* — Monologues by young Britons, from a single working mother to an Iraq vet. Oct. 8-11
- *The Sun Also Rises* — Hemingway classic adapted by Elevator Repair Service. Oct. 8-11

Dance

- Deganit Shemy & Company — The Israeli choreographer's troupe performs *Arena*. Oct. 8-10
- Compania Maria Pages — Flamenco virtuoso. Oct. 8-11
- Azure & Artists and OtherShore — World premiere of Azure Barton's *Busk*; *The Snow Falls in Winter* performed by OtherShore. Oct. 8-10

Music

- FSU Symphony Orchestra — Robert Spano conducts Beethoven (Symphony No. 5 and Piano Concerto No. 4, with soloist Pedja Muzijevic) and Steve Reich (*Nagoya Marimbas*). Oct. 7
- Meow Meow — "A parody of glitz." Oct. 8-11
- Chamber music — Anne-Marie McDermott, piano; Jennifer Frautschi, violin; Edward Arron, cello; Eric Ruske, horn. Oct. 8-11

Visual Arts

- *Louise Fishman Among the Old Masters* — Fishman's abstract expressionist paintings installed in the permanent collection galleries. Oct. 7-11
 - *Venice in the Age of Canaletto* — 18th century Venetian classics. Oct. 8-Jan. 10
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