

INSIDE ARTS

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VOICE

BUZZ THRILL

What do you get when you mix a jigger of midcentury Hollywood glamour with a double shot of formal training in ballet, a splash of costume design, and a twist of intoxicating music? Ballets with aTwist — a New York-based company that leaves audience stirred, not shaken. Over the course of two decades, choreographer Marilyn Klaus, along with her collaborators, Grammy-nominated composer Stephen Gaboury and costume





designer Catherine Zehr, have developed a menu of 25-plus highly nuanced dance pieces shaped by Klaus' childhood in Los Angeles.

"It was really just a hotbed of inspiration, between the post-war interest in Sinatra, the Rat Pack, going to Las Vegas with my parents," says Klaus, whose parents introduced her classical ballet, tap, ballroom and hula dance. She went on to study ballet with Carmelita Maracci. "I came to New York when I was 18, and I was very, very influenced by the whole Busby Berkeley milieu. I arrived at the apex of the Post-Modern movement, and I was very surprised, but I just kept doing my thing."

As it turns out, her thing was "cultural cocktails," starting with the James Bond-inspired *Martini* and moving on to the *Margarita*. From there, she mixed up the

Zombie, which she describes as "a sci-fi pool splash" that plays on Cold War fears, and the *Sputnik*, set to a Rockabilly score.

"It was a very long incubation period. I finally made so many cocktails I was able to do the Cocktail Hour show in 2009," she says.

Since that debut, Klaus and her colleagues have created an experience that keeps audiences and presenters coming back for another round.

At some venues, presenters use the event to build community and participation by bringing in a local mixologist to serve up custom cocktails. At others, they customize the experience accordingly, such as a costume-focused show at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Klaus and her crew often arrive a few days early for pre-show media tours to build buzz and attendance.



“We think [marketing] is our job,” Klaus says. “We try to support the venue. It seems more and more that they need it. We want to come back, so if we can be a part of an article or interview that goes out at the right time to boost ticket sales, that’s really important.”

Another important element? Involving members of the local community in the production. In Cleveland, that meant having a 50-piece high school marching band come on stage to perform the score for *Brandy Alexander*. At Ohio Northern University — located in a dry county — that meant serving up virgin drinks and incorporating college students into the performance. In El Paso, that meant recruiting young dancers from a local studio to dance the pony role in *Mint Julep*.

“When we work with performing arts centers, we often hear that audiences are getting smaller, so this seems like a good way to excite people, knowing that they or their kids are going to be part of an event,” Klaus says.

Despite the show’s decidedly cocktail-centric theme, it’s by no means a 21-or-older event. Often, children come with their parents and grandparents (the lineup even includes Shirley Temples and Roy Rogers). For Klaus, whose inspiration knows no bounds, the experience isn’t about the spirits, but rather the spirit.

“For me, it’s putting a nightlife experience on stage like the ones I attended with my family,” she says. “Between the classic entertainment and the modern pop influences, we have it going on.” **LA**



Ballets with a Twist

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