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ENTERTAINMENT

Annenberg Center has cutting-edge new season

New artistic director adds film, and hopes to attract a younger audience.

By Tirdad Derakhshani
STAFF WRITER

The Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts sent up a flare last year with the announcement that it was replacing Mike Rose, its venerated artistic director, after nearly 20 years.

It was a bold move, considering Rose was only the second person to lead the ivy-covered institution on the University of Pennsylvania campus since the mid-1970s. Even bolder, in that the board didn't replace Rose with an in-house candidate — or anyone from Philadelphia.

A new kid on the block in more ways than one, incoming programming chief Christopher A. Gruits this week announced Annenberg's new season, an impressive program of dance, theater, music, and something new, film, designed to appeal to (dare we say it) younger audiences while maintaining Annenberg's consistently high bar of excellence.

The season opens Sept. 22-23 with a Fringe Festival tie-in featuring a site-specific performance by Philly's acclaimed Pig Iron Theatre. It continues through May 2018 with performances by the Mark Morris Dance Group, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, the Philly hip-hop-inspired dancer and photographer Raphael Xavier, the Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra, the Peking Acrobats, and an extended Cuban arts festival likely to be the envy of the region.

Gruits, 39, comes to Annenberg from his job as vice president of presentations at the renowned and massive Interlochen Center for the Arts in Michigan. He said his overriding goal has been to return the University City arts center to its original mission, introducing avant-garde works.

"If you look back at Annenberg's history ... particularly during the '70s and '80s, we really were the presenter that was more on the cutting edge, that was more innovative, that was bringing a lot more international theater and international dance to Philadelphia," he said in a recent interview. "We were bringing a lot of innovative theater and music ... [including] compos-



Christopher A. Gruits, new artistic director of the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, hopes to return the center at Penn to its original mission, introducing avant-garde works. CHARLES FOX / Staff Photographer

ers like Philip Glass and Steve Reich, when they were still unknown, but were coming down to the Annenberg on a regular basis to premiere new pieces."

As an example, he mentions this season's artist-in-residence, Mark Morris, whose dance ensemble will perform Feb. 9-10. Morris is one of the country's best-known and most innovative choreographers. "But he hasn't been to Philly in 14 years," said Gruits, "and this is despite the fact that he's one of the great choreographers of our time, and he happens to live just 90 minutes away in New York."

Gruits, who studied arts management at Michigan State University before earning an MBA from the University of Edinburgh, said the season would include several programs that cross disciplinary lines. In addition to his performances, Morris will curate a program of early Hollywood musical films. Xavier (Nov. 4) will present a new dance piece and will exhibit a collec-

tion of his photography and painting. "He's an amazing, amazing talent who came out of Renie Harris Puremovement," said Gruits. "He comes from the beat dancing tradition, and he's an artist who is just exploring all kinds of different forms of art."

Gruits, who helped develop a new-media strategy for Carnegie Hall, says he's working hard to draw younger audiences. That will include a series of informal concerts by the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia. "We'll create a very nontraditional performance space," Gruits said. "The seating will be three-quarter round, and the audience will be encouraged to talk to the musicians in between pieces. It'll be a relaxed atmosphere. People will walk in and out, get drinks." It may sound like sacrilege to contemporary classical music aficionados, said Gruits, but "this is the way music was seen for centuries."

Gruits is especially excited about a series of performances

(in March and April) by Cuban artists, many of whom have never toured America. "I've been looking around Philadelphia to see if anyone was bringing in Cuban artists [now that] there has been so much change there with ... the opening up of Cuba to Americans," he said. "I was really keen to find out what are the new sounds coming out of Havana? Because, when you really think about it, Cuba has been a country and a culture we've been cut off from for so long."

Gruits was surprised to find a dearth of Cuban programming. So he has created a mini-festival of his own. "We will have emerging artists like Daymé Arocena [April 6], who is making her first American tour," he said. "In dance, there's DanzAbierta [March 22-23], which is the finest modern dance ensemble out of Havana. And there are more familiar acts, like Chucho Valdés, who has been to Philly many times."

The 2017-18 Annenberg Center season:

* Philadelphia premiere
** World and Philadelphia premiere

- ▶ Sept. 22-23: A Period of Animate Existence.** Symphonic theater by Philly's Pig Iron Theatre Company.
- ▶ Oct. 6-7: BalletX.
- ▶ Oct. 11: Black Violin. Hip-hop violin duo.
- ▶ Oct. 20-21: Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.
- ▶ Oct. 27-28: Haruki Murakami's Sleep.** Stage adaptation of the Japanese master's tale of a woman with a double life.
- ▶ Nov. 4: Raphael Xavier.
- ▶ Dec. 9: Irish Christmas in America.
- ▶ Dec. 10: Canadian Brass Christmas.

2018.

- ▶ Jan. 12-13: L.A. Dance Project.*
- ▶ Feb. 9-10: Mark Morris Dance Group.
- ▶ Feb. 17: Birdland All-Stars.
- ▶ March 9-10: The Peking Acrobats.
- ▶ March 17: Téada. Irish traditional music.
- ▶ March 22-23: DanzAbierta.*
- ▶ March 24: The Pedrito Martínez Group.
- ▶ April 5: The Alfredo Rodríguez Trio.*
- ▶ April 6: Daymé Arocena.*
- ▶ April 16: The Chucho Valdés Trio.
- ▶ April 13-14: Sancho: An Act of Remembrance. One-man show about the life of a slave painted by Thomas Gainsborough.
- ▶ April 29: Jazz Epistles. Legends of South African music reunite.
- ▶ May 17-19: Philadelphia Children's Festival.

For more information: 215-898-3900, annenberg-center.org.

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