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Above: Paige Melvin practices the piece “Off Your Rocker.” Below right: Natasha Carlitz choreographed the program in part as a tribute to her father, Michael.

Moods in motion

Dance program mixes grief, courage and whimsy

by Rebecca Wallace

Three dancers sit with their backs to the audience. They all cast long looks over their shoulders, then gradually turn away.

This is the point when Natasha Carlitz always gets choked up. Her choreography is often light-hearted, but this moment in her program “time flies (when you’re having fun)” makes her think of her father, longtime Palo Alto resident Michael Carlitz, who recently died of cancer.

“It’s like you’re looking for someone, but they’re not there,” she says. “So you slowly look away.”

Much of the program, which the Natasha Carlitz Dance Ensemble will perform in San Francisco next weekend, is a tribute to its creator’s father. In a way, it’s also a salute to her first dance teacher, Grace Butler, and her years growing up dancing in Palo Alto.

Carlitz says Butler, who ran a local YMCA program for many years, helped her become not only a strong dancer but also someone with a penchant for movement of all kinds. Carlitz enjoys improvising and mixing styles; she could be inspired by a mathematical formula or by equipment swinging on a construction site. She’s less into heavy layers of meaning and more into playfulness and musicality.

Take, for example, her 2006 work “Off Your Rocker,” part of the “time flies” program. Carlitz puts four dancers in colorful unitards and sets them in motion atop IKEA toys — curved pieces of plywood that serve as minimalist rocking horses. Meanwhile, two pieces of music overlap: a bright British composition by the Penguin Cafe Orchestra, and a moodier piece by Japanese musician Shin Terai.

“It’s hard for the dancers because they are two different tempos,” Carlitz says during an interview, her hands describing the rocking motion. “I wanted something wacky,

maybe circus-y.”

With its whimsy and color, “Off Your Rocker” is Carlitz’s piece that was most directly influenced by Grace Butler, she says. Her dance vision has also been shaped by other teachers and dancers over the years, including Judith Komoroske, with whom Carlitz studied in Menlo Park after graduating from Amherst College in 1992. She also did workshops with Jonathan Wolken, one of the founders of inventive dance troupe Pilobolus; and worked for several years with the Bay Area collaborative group High Release Dance.

With High Release Dance, Carlitz was able to work on all aspects of producing a show, such as marketing, organizing rehearsal schedules and securing performance spaces. She found the experience invaluable, and three years ago decided to strike out on her own.

The Natasha Carlitz Dance Ensemble is based at The Ballet Studio in San Francisco, where most of the group’s dancers live. Carlitz lives in Menlo Park, balancing running a dance troupe with life as a web designer at Google.

In “time flies,” Carlitz won’t perform, which is unusual for her. But she wanted to focus on choreographing and directing, taking a big-picture view of the show.

The program is a mixture of moods and music, with many works dealing with the theme of time and how we use it. Two pieces, “Time. Running. Out” and “Tempus Fugit,” are the most about Carlitz’s father.

In May 2007, Michael Carlitz was diagnosed with liver cancer and given six months to live. Instead, he lived until September 2008, and his daughter said he made remarkable use of the time. She often felt like a “time bomb” was hanging over the family. But she also saw how her father appreciated every day: his friends, his relatives, the weather.

Carlitz set “Time. Running. Out”



to pulsing techno sounds from the German film “Run Lola Run,” music that her father particularly liked. She calls her choreography here “edgier,” filled with the anger and desperation she felt. She stands up to demonstrate some of the piece’s sharp moves: a hand hitting a leg, her neck held at an angle.

In contrast, “Tempus Fugit” is set to two movements from Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in D Major. The slower part, a relatively minimalist work, is about “remembrance, looking back,” and contains the moment that always makes Carlitz choke up. She just finished crafting this section a few weeks ago.

Then there’s the faster part, which she dubs “Movement in Present Tense.” It’s a joyful section filled with jumps, saluting her father’s courage. That upbeat mood closes the show.

Carlitz points out that the Beethoven piece has a third movement. “To be complete, I guess I would have a movement about the future.” She smiles wistfully. “But I’m not there yet.” ■

Info: “time flies (when you’re having fun)” is at 8 p.m. Jan. 9 and 10 in the Cowell Theatre at Fort Mason in San Francisco. Tickets are \$24 general and \$14 for students, with \$4 off advance purchases. Call 415-345-7575 or go to www.carlitzdance.org.