

ARTS

Campus Arts • Reviews • Community Culture

MUSICIAN
FINDS JOY
REVIVING
JEWISH
CLASSICS*Historian, violinist
Yale Strom loves
European 'oldies'*

BY ALFONSO JULIÁN CAMACHO

Musician Yale Strom enjoys playing oldies but goodies.

Like 4,000 years old.

A charismatic singer and violinist, Strom put on an uplifting concert of Jewish music at the PAC featuring his transcendent musicianship and charming personality. Much of the music had roots in the 19th and 20th centuries, though some may have its genesis in the times of David and Solomon.

Strom, a second generation American whose parents fled Eastern Europe, is working to resuscitate Jewish music largely lost to the Holocaust. The Shoah took the lives of nearly 6 million Jews and an estimated 75 percent of Europe's talented Jewish musicians.

Trained as an ethnographer, Strom has music in his blood and bloodline. Raised in Detroit and San Diego, his family practiced Jewish traditions and holidays. His father's Hasidic Judaism influenced Strom's musical upbringing.

"Singing is part of how we express ourselves," he said.

Young Strom had planned to attend law school until the evening he stumbled upon a bar where 12 musicians played Jewish instrumental folk music typically heard at weddings and parties. Smitten, he approached the band about joining but was turned down.

"If you can't beat them, form your own band!" he said.

His passion ignited, he was motivated to learn and improve. He bought a one-way ticket to Eastern Europe to search for his musical heritage, combing archives and seeking out older Jewish musicians. Then he went 75 more times. His exhaustive research helped him create a vast reservoir of traditional Jewish music.

"It opened my eyes up to this world that still existed in Eastern Europe," he said. "When I came home I formed a band with (great musicians) that I still play with today."

Holocaust survivors were his best sources for traditional Jewish songs. In the town of Košice, Slovenia he met Eli, the caretaker of the synagogue. As they chatted, Strom found a violin on top of a cabinet. He asked Eli if he knew any songs he could share. Eli recounted that his father taught him the musical prayers and songs he sang at the synagogue, and his mother sang folk music. Eli said his mother often lost herself in the music to the point of burning the ironing and dinner. The last time Eli saw his parents, he said, he turned left and they turned right to their death at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland.

Strom said he and Eli cried, then Strom sang a lighthearted folk song about potatoes he had learned from his grandmother. Eli laughed along with Strom because he knew the song.

"That is a story that will stay in my memory forever," he said.

Jewish culture is at least 4,000 years old and its music pre-dates the Old Testament.

"Klezmer is a Hebrew word," Strom said. "*Kle means utensil or tool, and zmer means music.* This music generally comes from Eastern Europe (mostly) east of the Danube."



PHOTO BY MIGUEL NICOLAS / STAFF

■ REVIEW

MOJALET DANCE
TROUPE MAKES
EDGY ELEGANT*A San Diego County institution, Faith Jensen-Ismay's team embraces the weirdness of our world*

BY MIGUEL NICOLAS



eird can be hard to watch.

Or it can be the foundation of boundless creativity.

Mojalet Dance Collective weaponizes weirdness by embracing it to create compelling performances that are a thing of devious beauty.

Faith Jensen-Ismay brought her talented team to the PAC for a wonderfully weird master class in the possibilities of expressive dance. Its trio of long-form dances were far-out fun.

"Radio Hour" tuned into the collective's experimental vibe and its talent for dialing the routine into the sublime. Inspired by radio advertisements from the 1940s-60s, overt and expressive dancers transformed past into pallet, painting their own colors over the black and

white era of Eisenhower. "Radio Hour" was extravagant, edgy and lovely as a homecoming queen with a few too many tattoos.

"It has nostalgia and a little bit of absurdity," Jensen told the audience. "It's funny and a little witty. I found an album of radio commercials that is a montage of spoken text and music, and that's really fun."

Extra credit awarded for finding the fun in a radio message about what to do in case of a nuclear attack. Rather than hide under their desks, the Mojalet dancers found beauty in the unthinkable, frolicking in the fallout.

"Tainted," on the other hand, cloaked itself in a darker tone. Lights faded, music quieted, and themes became somber like dusk in a dicey part of town. Atonal "music" teased emotion from the dancers who volleyed between loving embraces and throwing each other like discarded rag dolls. It was discomfiting but arresting, and audience members leaned forward in their seats, pupils dilated, hearts racing with expectation.

Robby Johnson, the assistant director and a lead dancer, said the piece is a reaction to world events and how conflict brushes even those of us on other continents.

"It originally started with politics and (expectations), then it gets all weird with corruption," he said. "You can become tainted."

Mojalet stands for (Modern Jazz Ballet), a nod to Jerome Robbins' athletic "West Side Story" innovations and Bob Fosse's snappy sensuality in "Chicago." Founded in 1991, Mojalet has been popular for four decades in San Diego County and has toured Switzerland, England, France, Germany and Mexico.

A grand show required a grand finale and an homage collage to the mid-century Las Vegas Rat Pack was just the right number, baby. Channeling the strutting spirit of Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford et al, the Mojalet team's emphatic "My Way" drove home the message that weird is where it's at, dig?

Jensen-Ismay, a valued adjunct instructor at Southwestern since 2020, has danced for 40 years and kicked up magical dancing dust on stages in our region for more than three decades.

"I think Southwestern has a really cool energy," she said. "I enjoy inspiring people, especially the students who train with me here."

Mojalet, her brainchild and passion project, demonstrated once again why it is an essential San Diego County dance company. Its boundary-pushing fusion of technical talent and emotional expression continue to blaze a way forward for young dancers ready to grow beyond their strip mall studios into a bold new dimension of creativity and connection.

STUDENTS SAY COMICS ARE STRESS FIGHTING SUPERHEROES

BY DIEGO HIGUERA

We all know by now that tonic for stress is exercise, nature, calming music and ... the Incredible Hulk.

It makes sense that the Comic Book Generation enjoys respite in their fave superheroes. Students and heroes have a few things in common, including stress. Superheroes, in fact, do some of their best work while they are stressed out to the max.

That is good news to the 91 percent of American college students who, according to a Harvard study, feel a great deal of stress at various times throughout a semester. Students who turn red when they feel stress coming on change colors just like the Hulk turns green and Mystique turns blue.

Southwestern College students and alumni reported that comics lower stress because they give good advice, are relatable, create a sense of community and provide comfort. They are fat free, drug free and non-alcoholic, though they may be addictive.

HAPPY FAMILY MEMORIES

Adonis Osiris is an SDSU alumnus with a degree in anthropology and an affinity for classic comics.

"Comics helped me make friends with literally everyone I know here in California," they said. "They've been pretty instrumental (in my adjustment to a new home). Watching characters go through situations I've been through has helped me process the awful things I've been put through."

Like some comic book heroes, Osiris had to overcome homelessness and despair to earn friends and a college degree.

"I got into comics when I was a kid," they said. "Teen Titans and the Young Justice shows were big in our household. My dad is a big comic book guy and always has been, so me getting into comics was bound to happen. Reading comics with my dad helped me feel closer to him, like he cared about me, my interests and my passions."

Osiris was 15, he said, when he had a favorite memory of their father, who used to read comics to Osiris as a child. Osiris read some new comic books to their dad. To them, this was a "full circle" moment. Father and child still buy comic books together.

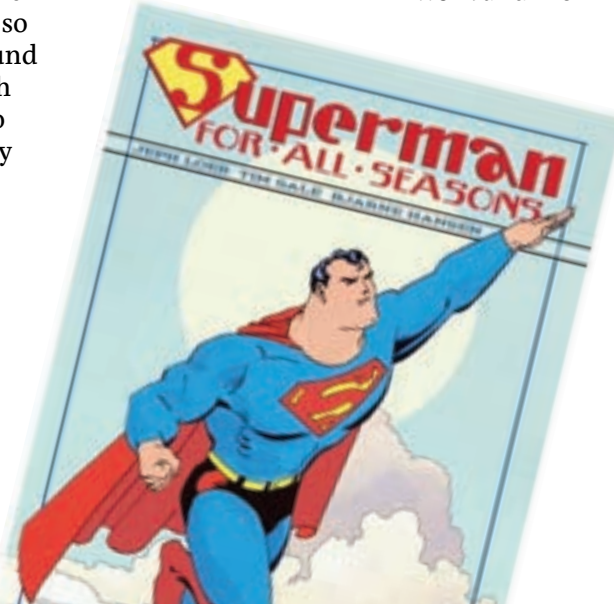
COMFORTING

Southwestern College alum Albie Ruiz said comics pulled him out of a dark place.

"Comics might have saved my life during my teens," he said. "I was doing very badly in terms of mental health during my school years, and as corny as it sounds, watching The Amazing Spider-Man brought me so much joy and hope that it gave me strength to keep on living."

Ruiz said comics provided escape from problems as well as a more positive way to look at the world.

"Balancing school, work and life



was a constant struggle of fluctuating emotions," he said. "A character I related to was Spider-Man. He always does the right thing no matter what. He perseveres despite his struggles. I could relate to that."

COMMUNITY

Ermel Espenida, a UCSD cognitive behavioral neuroscience graduate, got his collection started early when their elementary school teacher gave him vintage 1960s issues 1-20 of "The Amazing Spider-Man."

"Comics gave me something to look forward to every week as well as something to talk to my friends about," he said. "Having comics during my senior year of college, which was also the first year of the pandemic, helped me to fill time away from school."

Immersion in the world of comics was Espenida's release during college and a challenging job search during the pandemic.

SUPERMAN BATTLES ANXIETY

The Man of Steel, Spider-Man and their allies may have mental health superpowers for wound up college students.

Image Courtesy of DC

"Comics became a source of comfort and helped maintain my mental well-being during the stressful times of academic pressure and the looming threat of COVID," he said.

Espenida said Superman was a character he could relate to because The Man of Steel always wanted to do the right thing. Superman influenced his decision to become a neuroscientist, he said.

In "Superman For All Seasons" by Jeph Loeb, there's a scene in the first issue where Clark (Superman) saves someone from a tornado that blows through Smallville, then returns to his parents' to make sure they are okay.

"I could have done more," he said to his father.

Espenida decided to do more.

Batman, members of the Justice Society of America, Laila Starr and Spider-Man would have all probably struggled as college students for one reason or another. They would also have made it through because they are persistent, purposeful, idealistic and smart. They conquered stress and did impressive things, just like Adonis Osiris, Albie Ruiz, and Ermel Espenida.

Heroes come in many forms.

CLASSICS

• CONT FROM PG 10

Classic Jewish folk songs captivate a new generation

In a polyglot of languages, music provided common ground in Europe, Strom said.

"The language of the people there is Jewish instrumental party music," he said. "It was generally happy music."

Western musicians struggle with old Jewish music, he said, which predates the European tonal scale used by most musicians today.

"You can't play this music on the piano," he said. "We play the gray notes (in between the piano keys). I am playing these quarter tones, notes that are not typical in the Western Scale. This music is older than the Abrahamic religions. It was music that people sang (and) prayed to. It was passed on generation to generation."

Strom and Joe McNalley opened with a "Doyle" that flowed into a melody titled "Svailava," Strom's violin transformed the room with incandescence reminiscent of Roma fire circles and festive gatherings. With McNalley keeping the rhythm beat in contrabass, Strom's music hung in the air as if suspended by spirit voices of Klezmer past. Playing songs of old sprinkled with his own compositions, Strom took the audience on a journey through pre-war Eastern Europe. When he sang in Yiddish his voice reverberated with the warbling style of a troubadour crooning tales of nights swapping wine for whiskey.

In "Kalarasher," a piece from Moldova, Strom's chiseling violin danced with McNalley's contrabass to invoke happy feet thumping on a party floor.

"The only reason Yale sounds good is because I am playing," McNalley said with a purposeful smirk.

The old friends burst into laughter.



PHOTO BY ALFONSO JULIÁN CAMACHO / STAFF

FIDDLER ON THE STAGE—Yale Strom, a professional ethnographer and passionate music historian, has made it his mission to track down and preserve traditional Jewish melodies and songs from Eastern Europe. Holocaust survivors, he said, have been a rich source of musical heritage.

Even after 30 years of playing together their comfortable camaraderie brought a festive spirit to their music.

Strom sang the classic "In Odessa" in Yiddish, caressing a melody about an evening spent with a lady of the night. Its notes swayed like the alluring hips of a beautiful woman drifting along cobblestone streets. Strom's voice captured the tantalizing atmosphere of the piece. Fluency in Yiddish was not required to feel the spirit of the song. Showmanship and skill created

magic as Strom coaxed his violin to sing out in what seemed like thin air during "Kolomevke," a song from Ukraine.

"(It is) one long horse tail hair," he said. "Jews would do it as a trick."

Strom took a moment to reflect on the war in Ukraine.

"Music, right?" he said. "That is what we need, more music! Miles Davis and Charlie Parker played Klezmer. If Klezmer is good enough for them, it is good enough for you."

Corina Morga, a student from Southwestern College, agreed.

"I liked how (this music) is different from what we are used to," she said. "It's interesting learning about music from different cultures. I enjoyed it. I was really impressed by the playing and history."

Angel Alvarez said she also enjoyed the performance.

"It was such a unique experience (learning) about culture and the history behind the music," she said.

D&D

• CONT FROM PG 11

Engaging table game can alleviate stress, help bring the best out in young people

"What could happen if I took the reins of a character based on me?" he asked. "That led to my character being a bard."

Kreator helps Claudio cope with stress and face down real-life demons, he said.

"My parents taught me to confront my problems, but I love that (creative) space (where) I can tap into my happy place," he said. "That's why D&D is

so special to me. It's another way of scratching that itch. It helped me to become a better person and to find my passion."

SC student Lydia Aldana said D&D made her a better person.

"I got into Dungeons and Dragons because some friends (said I) should check it out," she said. "It was a very enjoyable experience and I enjoy it to this day."

Dungeons and Dragons helped her to make new friends and to focus on the positive, she said.

"I definitely have one character that stands out for me," she said. "She is a half elf named Morgan. Half breeds are often seen as a negative thing in society. I wanted a character who felt like an outcast but had good intentions and wanted to improve as a person."

Playing D&D with friends makes her feel better, Aldana said.

"I've definitely had a lot of stress from life," she said. "(While) I play the campaign I become a different character. It is very therapeutic. I could have the worst day, but a few hours later I am ready to take on the world."

D&D has cast its magic on her friends, too, she said.

"I have seen people come in really grouchy or in a really bad mood," she said. "After the campaign was over they were in a completely different mood. They were socializing and happy. This game impacts people."

Four year D&D player Gavin Leavell is a U.S. Navy gas turbine specialist onboard the amphibious assault ship U.S.S. Tripoli.

"My Dungeons and Dragons adventure started as a high schooler

in Russellville, Arkansas," he said. "Making a character that interacts with the world in ways that can drastically change the outcome of a story piqued my interest. We strive to make a difference in our world. (Getting) a dose of that, even in a make-believe point of view, (is) inspiring."

Leavell said D&D helps sailors manage frustration in a productive manner.

"D&D stops people from doing things that could send them to the captain's mast (for discipline)," he said. "One of my friends was (disciplined) and stuck on the ship for a month. To pass the time a group of friends played D&D. It was the best way for him to vent his feelings. D&D can create bonds between people around the table."

A wise rabbit helped enlighten bored young navy men.

"One of my favorite D&D moments was playing a homebrew rabbit race I named Otis the Gray, who was a monk subclassed into The Way of The Sun Soul," he said. "My monk prioritized information and (serving) the greater good (to benefit) the world."

Otis represented the person Leavell believes he can be, he said. Otis tried to do the right thing. He often failed but kept trying. This taught Leavell to acknowledge regrets and strive to be better.

"That effort by Otis, despite his living in a semi-cruel world, inspired me," he said.

Leavell said Dungeons and Dragons is "home to millions of misfits" that inspires them to become better versions of themselves.

"They turn their fantasy into their reality."