

Beyond ballet

Dancers now need to be multi-faceted artists, says choreographer-director Graham Lustig

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ARTS REPORTER

BRITISH dance choreographer Graham Lustig still remembers begging his parents to send him to ballet school when he was four years old.

"It took me six months to convince them it was a serious wish and at 5½ years old, I was sent to dancing school," he tells *Life!* in between rehearsals at the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) premises.

He has not looked back since. The 52-year-old is now artistic director of the prestigious American Repertory Ballet and the Princeton Ballet School, and has danced with the Dutch National Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

He is in town to oversee the staging of *Evening* which, together with Finnish choreographer Jorma Elo's *Glow-stop* and American choreographer David Dawson's *A Million Kisses To My Skin*, make up *Continuum*, a dance show at the Singapore Arts Festival.

Dance fans will be familiar with his work as he has been here nine times since 1993, when he first premiered *Appassionato* for the SDT's fifth anniversary celebrations.

Complimenting its dancers on their versatility, he says: "The good thing about dancers here is that they can take on many different choreographers' styles. It has grown so much as a company in 20 years, and has a world-class international repertoire."

Evening is set to British composer Benjamin Britten's *Serenade For Tenor, Horn And Strings*. Written in 1943 during World War II, it is made up of a selection of six poems about the onset of night by British poets such as John Keats and William Blake.

"This piece works on two lev-



PHOTOS: ALBERT SIM, SINGAPORE DANCE THEATRE

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Graham Lustig (above) on *Evening* (left)

els. It depicts the time of the day when the sun begins to set and the shadows are long, but also explores the evening of Man's journey through life, before he moves on to the next stage," says Lustig.

"I think it has a beautiful, lyrical romance and a spiritual element to it. It challenges the dancers to disguise the technique to create the poetry and lyricism."

He adds: "As I always tell my dancers, there are many things in ballet which are technically demanding, but no one wants to know that. They want to see poetry and beauty, not a circus showcase."

His advice to younger dancers

would be to stay balanced and be open to other art forms, to keep their focus broad.

"My parents were non-theatrical people, and that kept me balanced. Don't just look at ballet, but immerse yourself in books, movies, plays. What is required for dancers now is to be multi-faceted artists, they have to act, to improvise, to be able to perform on a big stage or an intimate space."

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> *Continuum* is on at the Esplanade Theatre today and tomorrow at 8pm. Tickets from \$30 to \$80 are available from Sistic (tel: 6348-5555 or visit www.sistic.com.sg).