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Karole Armitage fuses the cerebral and the sensual

By Susan Reiter

The force behind Armitage Gone! Dance brings the troupe to Long Beach's Carpenter Center.

Reporting from New York -- Karole Armitage is having an intensely busy first week of March, and the stress is showing.

She's a few days away from the opening of an ambitious retrospective -- revivals of several of the barrier-smashing dances that, a generation ago, put her on the map. It will be at the Kitchen, the venue where a number of them premiered. She's shuttling between that downtown space and the uptown world of Broadway, making final adjustments to her choreography for the much-anticipated new production of "Hair."

The week also will bring her latest honor from the government of France: On opening night at the Kitchen, the French Embassy's cultural counselor will confer upon Armitage the insignia of commander of the Order of Arts and Letters. And at some point, she may find time to celebrate her 55th birthday.

But the projects on Armitage's plate actually represent detours. Since returning to New York after a lengthy European sojourn and forming the troupe known as Armitage Gone! Dance in 2005, she has been creating a series of intriguingly cerebral yet coolly sensual new works in which she once again puts her own stamp on classical dance. It's two of those works -- both featuring scenic design by her longtime collaborator, the artist David Salle -- that her company will bring to the Carpenter Center in Long Beach this Saturday.

Armitage, who first came to the dance world's attention as a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company from 1976 to 1981, was a high-profile, cutting-edge figure on the New York dance scene during the 1980s. "Drastic-Classicism," a fierce and at the same time playful work set to a painfully loud punk-rock score by Rhys Chatham (one of the works on the Kitchen program), toyed with and extended the possibilities of the classical vocabulary, making it relevant and exciting for a new audience. Her daring, high-tech dancing -- she cut an edgy, sly figure with her spiky blond hair, long legs and pointe shoes -- anchored a string of works that generated audience excitement and lots of glossy press coverage.

"I first wanted to be a choreographer because I wanted to communicate things about my generation. I was putting ballet and modern technique with rock 'n' roll energy and that kind of visceral experience," Armitage says as she sits in the Kitchen's office space while her dancers take company class. She has the same lean, tensile figure that she did in her dancing days (a daily 7:30 yoga class is part of her regimen), and her blond hair remains fashionably short if less spiky.

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Although her recent focus has been on composers such as Béla Bartók and György Ligeti (the two represented on Saturday's program) rather than rockers, her allegiance to music has been a constant. The Merce Cunningham aesthetic -- a composer would create a score that the choreographer and dancers never heard until just before a dance premiered -- held no fascination for her.

"I've always been interested in dancing to music, because for me it's a more satisfying experience," she says. "It's about communicating with someone else in that very entwined way -- with the music, with the lights, costumes. That seamless working together is what interests me."

"With Karole I really see and feel an incredibly sophisticated musicality -- which was already there in 'Drastic' in 1981. The way in which the steps work with the music is something that still amazes me and that I find very generative for my own process," says Salle, who has known the choreographer for 25 years and worked on projects with her since a 1986 commission from American Ballet Theatre. When the two recent dances coming to Long Beach -- "Time is the echo of an axe within a wood" and "Ligeti Essays" -- were performed two years ago in New York, Salle even provided a program note about her approach to music: "Armitage is very investigative in her musicality: She doesn't illustrate the music so much as excavate its deeper structures."

Despite her influence as a performer and the level of attention she received (she was tapped to choreograph music videos for Madonna and Michael Jackson), Armitage always struggled to get funding and touring engagements in this country when she was leading her own company in the '80s. Europe, however -- and France in particular -- was taken with her work from the beginning and offered continual opportunities. She had already been commissioned by festivals there before making her first choreographic splash in New York.

"I've never gotten any [government] funding here, and I never expected to," she observes with mild exasperation. Her funding sources are "all private -- it's mostly done by co-productions with Europeans -- and New York patrons, and the generosity of artists."

Going overseas

She stopped performing in 1989 and for the next decade and a half worked primarily abroad. A steady stream of commissions -- from state-subsidized ballet companies and from opera houses, where she directed several productions -- gave her a chance to use larger groups of dancers. From 1995 to 1998, she settled in Florence, Italy, as director of the company MaggioDanza, and from 1999 to 2002, she was resident choreographer for the Ballet de Lorraine in Nancy, France.

"Around 1997, I felt that I was finally able to do what I'd always set out to do -- taking ballet and

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modern techniques and making a new language with an existential point of view, a philosophical outlook that made sense to me. It took that long to learn how to move in a new way," she says. "It's very hard to figure out how to make the same joints and muscles move with a different vocabulary, and to make it logical and coherent, and to make it appear absolutely natural."

Despite her Cunningham experience, Armitage's primary allegiance has always been to classical ballet, and she was strongly influenced by George Balanchine from an early age. A Kansas native, she studied as a girl with a former member of New York City Ballet and briefly attended City Ballet's School of American Ballet. Before joining Cunningham, she danced for three years in Switzerland with the Geneva Ballet, which performed many Balanchine works.

"As a kid I did Balanchine, and it's just deeper in me," she says. "Intellectually, Cunningham gave me a lot -- the idea that everything is a valid movement, that freedom to do anything -- but not in terms of specific movement."

Her time in Florence also deeply affected the kind of dance she makes. "Being surrounded by the Renaissance and understanding how thoughtful that work was -- understanding the depth of commitment the artists had as well as their aesthetic -- was a big influence on my feeling that I knew what I was doing."

Crucial to her recent works is the ongoing collaboration with her "team": Salle (to whom she was once engaged and who is chairman of her foundation's board of directors), costume designer Peter Speliopoulos and lighting designer Clifton Taylor. "The kind of collaboration I do is like a marriage. You have to be very generous, be willing to talk to each other and work through ideas and give up things that you may love -- for the common good," she says with a laugh.

Return to New York

"Time is the echo of an axe within a wood," first performed in 2004 and set to Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, marked Armitage's return to New York and persuaded her to form a new full-time company. "It was a very carefully laid-down plan that took five years," she notes. "I paved the way slowly: I worked on grants -- wrote them myself -- brought back patrons who'd been supporters before and found some new ones. In the meantime, I was doing a lot of work in Europe to support myself. But I just got sick of being on a plane all the time, never being in any one place. It just gets old after 15 years."

For the mysteriously haunting "Time is the echo . . .," which features glowing metallic costumes and décor, she recalls, "I was thinking a lot about psychological time rather than clock time. It's a piece that includes a lot about dreams, memories, nightmares -- images in the mind. It's not about day-to-day reality."

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"Ligeti Essays," set in a severe black-and-white environment, dates from 2007. "I was attracted to Ligeti not only for his mixture of classicism and innovation but also for the deep humanity found in these compositions," she says. "He is one of the most inspiring of contemporary composers -- so rooted in tradition, deeply architectural and with a wide-ranging imagination."

More recently, Armitage has been working with Lukas Ligeti, the composer's son, on "Summer of Love," scheduled to premiere in May in Catania, Italy. His band, Burkina Electric, combines music of Burkina Faso with Western club electronica. June will bring another premiere, in Naples. Preparation for these projects requires lots of early-morning phone calls and will mean she will be out the country on the opening night of "Hair." (She also had to miss her first Broadway opening, last year, when she choreographed the well-received art-rock musical "Passing Strange.")

But nightmare scheduling and grueling, long days are what she signed up for by recommitting to an American troupe. She is dealing with the realities all nonprofit artists confront stateside.

"In the U.S., you spend 85% of your time doing administration and fundraising and 15% of the time doing art," she says. "I had to go to Europe in order to really be an artist. Even though I'm in the studio 10 hours a day, even more time is spent on organizing and co-productions, getting money for the next project, strategizing. It's a ridiculous life."