



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Verb Ballets performs Hernando Cortez' Polka Madness,' inspired by the song Who Stole the Keeshka' and Frankie Yankovic at Cain Park

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**Donald Rosenberg**  
Plain Dealer Dance Critic

No one knows the answer to that timeless question, "Who Stole the Keeshka?" And, frankly, no one really cares. Not when the famous polka tune is exerting its singular exuberance. The piece -- sometimes with the spelling "kishka" -- will fly as part of Hernando Cortez's "Polka Madness," the newest work by the artistic director of Verb Ballets. The Cleveland dance company performs the work tonight at Cain Park's Evans Amphitheater on a program that includes another Cortez creation and two works by the late Heinz Poll, founder of Ohio Ballet.

Cortez was inspired to go polka-mad after listening to recordings by Frankie Yankovic, Cleveland's polka king. Struck by sheer delight of the music and the silliness of the lyrics, the choreographer decided it was time for his dancers to let down their terpsichorean hair. "It's my first go in Cleveland with this type of novelty dance," said Cortez after a recent rehearsal. "It has the feel of good old shtick." The piece will be danced to nine songs and feature a band led by another polka king, Johnny Koenig, whose bona fide surname is German for "king." The 18-year-old native of Queens, N.Y., moved to Cleveland last year to soak up the aura of Yankovic and study emergency medicine at Cuyahoga Community College.

Koenig is already a veteran of the polka wars. He began playing accordion at 5 and soon was collaborating with his late father, who had a polka band. Cortez also brings polka experience to his new brainstorm. As a member of the Paul Taylor Dance Company in New York, he performed in the choreographer's "Pennsylvania Polka," a 1940s send-up set to tunes sung by the Andrews Sisters. So the new ballet is "my gift to the company," said Cortez of Verb. And "Polka Madness" wasn't easy to shape. "It was a task to try to make an entire dance and vary it," Cortez said. "It's essentially 1-2-3-and, 1-2-3-and. Only at the end is there a true polka circle. All of the sections are crafted dance. It's a hodgepodge. There's even a section that's a waltz."

But the polka will be authentic, especially with Koenig fanning the flame of his beloved art. The band will consist of accordion, keyboard, saxophone, banjo and drums, with Bob Kravos, a nephew of Yankovic, as one of the musicians. Koenig, who recently released his first CD, "The New Kid in Town," sounds like a kid in a candy store when discussing the polka. He points to its Cleveland roots in the Slovenian style that Yankovic started in the 1930s. "In the Cleveland style, you glide," Koenig said. "The Chicago style is a hop." Wherever he plays, Koenig said he tries to expand the horizon of the polka. "It's always been taboo," he said. "It's not mainstream, as compared to club dancing. I'm branching it out. I want to bring polka back to where it was 40 years ago." Cortez is delighted to have poked around the polka for his new piece. But he plans to get back to more serious business in the fall, when he sets a ballet to Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer." "That's what I like about our company," said Cortez. "We can do this and that. It's all good dancing."

By fall, it will be good dancing minus its most seasoned dancer. Mark Tomasic, who joined the Repertory Project -- as the company previously was called -- five years ago, will retire at the end of August to pursue a new life in San Francisco. "I'll take a couple of months off and decide what to do," said Tomasic, a Cleveland native who also performed with Cleveland Ballet, Dancing Wheels and the Tom Evert Dance Company.

But first things first, which means going keeshka crazy with Verb colleagues.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: [drosenberg@plaind.com](mailto:drosenberg@plaind.com), 216-999-4269