TEN TAKES

Celesta Billeci on Music & Dance

BY D.J. PALLADINO  PHOTOGRAFHS BY FRAN COLLIN

IT TOOK 50 YEARS for UCSB’s Arts & Lectures series to come out of classroom annexes and into the heart of our community. Today, after 11 years with Celesta Billeci at the helm, it’s safe to say that the campus organization has become the most thorough purveyor of cultural offerings in town—from highbrow theater (The Old Globe) to lowdown blues like the popular Roots series. Dance troupes, comedy extravaganzas, films, renowned lecturers and world-class performances from every arena of entertainment followed where the music led.

Billeci, a former dancer turned events publicist at UCLA, came to town in 2000 determined to make a splash and kicked off her tenure with a live revue generated by Ry Cooder’s sociolo-rhythmic documentary Buena Vista Social Club, moving the big show from the confining quarters of Campbell Hall into the iconic center of Santa Barbara’s entertainment zone, Arlington Theater. More quickly followed, with amazing vocal range, from David Byrne and Elvis Costello to perhaps her grandest coup, the Vienna Philharmonic at the Granada last spring.

And in a traumatized economy, too. Billeci has found Santa Barbara audiences willing to follow her anywhere. “What amazes me now is how much easier it is to get people to come out and see something they don’t know, rather than buy big tickets for people they do.” Take the Big Easy series for instance. “Who ever heard of Trombone Shorty? People showed up. How about Carolina Chocolate Chip? We did well with them too.”

She’s perhaps proudest of nurturing audiences and even stars over time. “We brought Lang Lang when he was an unknown and then back as an international star,” she explains. Although her hardest sell has been the great jazz events, Billeci is very proud of how people turn out to see a bewildering variety of artists. For instance, Yo Yo Ma in four different configurations, including the Silk Road tour.

Billeci is nothing if not wildly eclectic. Her wish list for the future includes downright fantasies, but also intriguing possibilities—she would like to see Ry Cooder, Tom Waits and Bonnie Raitt someday, all unplugged. In the meantime, she’s aiming for the rich and deep schedule. “I think we try to have something for everybody,” she says. “But what I want is for people to be totally unable to say, ‘I can’t go.’”

Celesta Billeci and Édouard Lock, artistic director and choreographer of La La La Human Steps. At the Granada Theatre, January 28.