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What Works

A Dance of Relevance

Ballet Memphis leverages its understanding of local culture – Elvis, gospel, rockability, and African-American stories – to compete against touring Broadway blockbusters

By Jocelyn Dong

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COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

A Dance of Relevance

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For Dorothy Gunther Pugh, ballet has never been only about tutus and toe shoes – though it easily could have been. Growing up in an era when ballet represented something rarified and exclusive, the former ballerina could have allowed herself to be drawn into the world of the elite.

But Pugh was raised in Memphis, Tenn., born into a family that has called the city home for generations. Along with her ballet lessons, she witnessed the city's ongoing poverty and civil unrest. She also reveled in the legendary local music scene, absorbing the lively sounds of rock 'n' roll, soul, gospel, R&B, and rockabilly.

With that kind of background, perhaps it's no wonder that in 1985 Pugh founded Ballet Memphis, a trailblazing arts group that takes its inspiration from Memphis lore and history, in addition to traditional 19th century European tales. In 2000, the company's innovative approach caught the attention of the Ford Foundation, which awarded the troupe a \$1 million challenge grant. Ballet Memphis joined the San Francisco Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago as the only dance companies in the nation to receive the Ford honor that year.

For Pugh, ballet makes its greatest impact when it is art for and of the people.

"If you can't be there for as many people as possible, why be there?" she says. "If the riches of your creativity and labor are going to be some sort of narrow focus that comes down from the white European rich only, then you're losing out on a lot of exciting experiences and knowledge and the ability for new forms of movement to be created."

Local Market, Local Content

As a child, Pugh admired authors who wrote about what they knew. She's following in their footsteps, she believes, by conceiving of ballet works about the community that shaped her and that she knows like the back of her hand.

Her vision for a new kind of ballet first came into the public eye in the 1980s, when she commissioned new works drawing on the music of Elvis Presley, "Father of

the Blues" W.C. Handy, and a well-known local jazz composer, Donald Freund.

But it is the company's Memphis Project that has attracted the most attention. The multiyear choreography series highlights and explores the music, culture, and social issues of the city and surrounding Mid-South region.

"South of Everywhere," for example, based on the music of Mississippi native Kate Campbell, examined spiri-

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BALLET MEMPHIS

PASSION
POWER
PERFORMANCE

Ballet Memphis uses its local, Southern roots to its advantage.



tual and racial issues in the South, through the story of a Southern woman growing up during the civil rights era.

Last February, the troupe debuted “The Rescue,” which tells of the 1925 rescue of 32 white people from a riverboat capsized in the Mississippi by a local African-American man, Tom Lee. Though Lee couldn’t swim, he diligently piloted a small boat to retrieve both the survivors and the bodies of those who drowned. Pugh hired African-American composer William Grant Still to write the music.

The troupe strives to produce works of relevance to people of all colors, particularly important in a city that is 61 percent African-American and 34 percent white. In 2003, it premiered “As the Spirit Moves You,” which features gospel music performed live by students of the Stax Music Academy and the LeMoyne-Owen College Gospel Singers. Such works tend to attract significant numbers of African-Americans.

Tackling sensitive social issues in dance performances may be untraditional – even downright explosive – but Pugh believes it can help audiences understand themselves better and think about how they can live in harmony with one another.

“It’s good for people to have ‘aha!’ experiences and open their minds and use their brains better,” she says.

Ballet Memphis’ approach to its programming is the expression of an artistic director’s vision, but it could also be the company’s key to survival.

Throughout the nation, ballet companies have faced financial hardship for years; some have gone out of business. Nearly three out of four medium-sized ballet companies in the United States lost money last year, according to John Munger, director of research and information for Dance/USA, a ballet trade organization. Medium companies are defined as those having budgets between \$1.25 million and \$5.99 million. With a \$3 million budget, Ballet Memphis is among approximately 45 medium-sized companies in the United States.

A slowing economy has contributed to the problem, Munger said. Smaller companies tend to rely on state or county arts councils. When those funds shrink, so does a ballet organization’s share of the pie.

Fight Against National Brands

With the rise of other forms of entertainment over the

past decade – including touring companies of Broadway blockbusters like “The Lion King,” “Disney on Ice,” and “Beauty and the Beast” – traditional local performing arts companies that used to be the only game in town are feeling the pinch.

Audience statistics show the decline. The average attendance per show for a medium ballet company in 2000 was close to 1,400. By last year, it had slid to 1,045 audience members.

Ballet Memphis development director Hillsman Wright readily acknowledges that the 2,000-seat Orpheum Theatre in downtown Memphis is typically not sold out, except per-

haps for the ballet’s four “Nutcracker” performances in December.

“Ballet is a hard sell in the South,” he says. “There’s not a generation-long tradition of doing these things. There’s still a bias against the word. Men in tights and women in tutus – it’s all a big snore, people think.”

Location, Location, Location

Hand in hand with more relevant programming, Ballet Memphis is experimenting with nontraditional ways of

building its audience. Through special events and programs, Wright says, the company hopes to demystify ballet, breaking down the wall between “the footlights and the audience.”

For starters, instead of requiring the audience to come to it, Ballet Memphis takes itself to the audience. In recent years, the company has performed in decidedly commonplace venues, including a bar, a rooftop, an alleyway, and a park.

The bar provided an intimate setting that allowed the audience to feel close to the dancers, Wright says. Instead of seeing the dancers as unapproachable, the audience members saw them as the real people they are.

For its “Momentum” series this year, the company performed in Handy Park, located in the city’s famed Beale Street nightclub district. Audiences overflowed for both performances, Wright recalls, with 300 people the first night and 500 people the second, all cramming into a space that only had 240 seats.

Not only did it offer nighttime shows, the company conducted rehearsals in the park all week that the public could watch for free. A critic for a local newspaper mentioned two teenage boys who bicycled up and became

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intrigued, watching for an hour.

The high point of the week for Wright came when two security guards who'd been watching rehearsals began enthusiastically hawking tickets to passers-by.

When the performances rolled around, "One brought his son, one brought his daughter," Wright says. "When we're fulfilling our mission, things like that happen."

Hipper Marketing

Ballet Memphis is also trying to reach new audiences through its fundraisers. Reaching a younger audience is essential for the company's future, Wright observes, and young professionals go to different social events than their parents and grandparents do.

One of the casualties of the drive for younger viewers was the ballet's traditional Nutcracker Ball, which had been held the first Saturday in December. It featured the typical sit-down dinner, silent auction, and a performance by the dancers.

When Wright came aboard a few years ago, he knew it would have to go. He figured that if he was tired of that kind of event, others were as well. "If I have to go to one more charity ball, I'm going to jump," he quips.

Instead, the company rented the Skyway Room, a restored Art Deco space atop Memphis' well-known Peabody Hotel. It became the stage for the "Coconut Club," a South Beach-style party with a cocktail buffet and DJ.

One of the more unusual, and culturally accessible, events the ballet sponsored was its "Sex in the City" party, in honor of the hit television series' final episode. It featured shoe contests – for best shoe, sexiest shoe, tackiest shoe – plus a silent auction.

"It brought a lot of people in," says Wright. "Our dancers modeled clothes from 'Sex in the City.'"

Reaction to the ballet company's community-friendly initiatives has been mixed, Pugh and Wright admit. The programming does seem to be reaching a more diverse audience. And like other ballet companies throughout the nation, Ballet Memphis is pulling in a younger audience than many opera or symphony groups.

But some of the ballet's older patrons wish the company would stick to the classics – and classical music. Their attitude seems to be that ballet set to popular music

is beneath their dignity, Pugh says. After hearing feedback that the trendy Coconut Club fundraiser had left some older fans behind, Wright is now planning a 1930s big-band party, complete with tap dancers.

Taking Risks

But Pugh strongly resists the idea that ballet should stick to the tried-and-true – and pretty.

"The whole exposition of the human heart and soul and spirit is not always pretty," she says. "We don't always act pretty and do pretty things. I really don't care to be a

community ornament on a shiny necklace. That's not why I get up and go to work every day."

Caught between their bold plans and often-discouraging lack of resources, Ballet Memphis staffers say they do what they do because they love the art form – and believe in its potential to bring about social change.

"Memphis still has that latent revolutionary attitude," says Pugh. "If our leaders could really acknowledge that, then get a sense of what makes us a real

city, we could take off in incredibly creative ways."

"There's still a disconnect here. There's a great deal of effort and success, but there's not enough talk and exchange with real creative thinking with a lot of creative people. I think it's going to happen and more of it is happening, but crossing over still has a way to go."

In an ideal world, Pugh says, her troupe would tour nationally and internationally, not just to boost Memphis' reputation, but also to share the kind of art she believes the world needs.

"The song of sorrow and the song of poverty and the song of joy that rock 'n' roll could sing, those are songs everyone in America and the world have shared," she says. "And there are always new ways to say those things and sing that song." □

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