Creating Work That Matters: Memphis Choreographs to the Soul of a City

Dorothy Gunther Pugh, artistic director of Ballet Memphis, describes how a pivotal moment in Memphis' history made its way into her company's repertoire. She recounts the true story of Tom Lee, an African American river worker who rescued 32 people—white engineers and their families—from the riverboat M.E. Norman, which had capsized off the shores of the Mississippi in 1925. Lee, who could not swim, not only saved the survivors but also made several trips in a small wooden boat to retrieve the bodies of those who drowned. As Pugh explains, this fragment of local lore captivated her imagination as a child and inspired her as an adult to shape Lee's story into a full-length ballet:

For about six years I have thought about telling this story through ballet. It's a story I grew up on… As conservative as my upbringing was, there was a way that people spoke about Tom Lee, and I could tell it transcended the idiocy of black and white barriers. [The story] seemed like it had the ingredients for a good ballet because it evokes a moment of human transcendence … There's action and a hero who does something incredibly admirable. And he didn't stop to think when people were drowning—it wasn't a question of color but a question of human beings and how he could save them.

This Memphis tale of a common man's uncommon valor found expression in the February 2004 premiere of "The Rescue," a five-part ballet presented as part of The Memphis Project, Ballet Memphis' multi-year effort to create a body of new choreography that highlights the cultural, historical and musical heritage of Memphis and the mid-South. Choreographed by associate artistic director Karl Condon and set to the music of African American composer William Grant Still, "The Rescue" brings to life Lee's story and spotlights his abiding respect for humanity in the face of economic and racial adversity. As Pugh sums up the ballet's overarching theme in her program note: "This heroic act took place because this man, like many great people in the world, humble or not, famous or not, knew that we all matter."

Creating work that matters forms the leitmotif of Pugh's artistic vision for Ballet Memphis. Through the Memphis Project,

By Lynn Stern

she champions new repertoire that is compelling and relevant for all Memphians:

I keep finding myself thinking that I want to do work that matters. I know the work has to matter to me because I'm supposed to be the visionary setting the tone at this organization. But the work needs to matter to other people, too. It matters that we enter the consciousness and daily lives of people and help illuminate what they are thinking of, what they are happy about, and what they are wrestling with.

For Pugh, Ballet Memphis' pursuit of artistry in the service of "bringing people together to be touched and thoughtful" is an important justification for the company's very existence. As Pugh puts it, "Why wouldn't a creative institution look at what people are wrestling with and weigh in on it somehow? If we don't fill a role in people's lives, then why should we be here?"

Pugh is not alone in her endeavors. Alongside the classical canon, regional ballet companies increasingly produce dance repertoire that speaks to local values and identities. In doing so, they imbue ballet with new relevance for contemporary audiences and, more broadly, advance the role of the regional ballet company as a vital voice for its community.

THE BIRTH OF BALLET MEMPHIS: ARTISTIC LEADERSHIP THAT CONNECTS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Building a professional ballet company in a city where dance was never a prominent feature of its cultural landscape has not been easy, though Pugh can't imagine having done otherwise. "I wanted very much to stay involved in a world of honest expression, and that's what [ballet] always was for me growing up," she explains. "Ballet was the avenue for me that seemed to have something that was physical, emotional and thoughtful, all balled up into one entity. I'm one of those people who needs to be expressive or reflect the things that they see outside of themselves and respond to it inside of themselves—whether it's a book or a poem, a painting or a ballet, or building a ballet company or some other nonprofit."

Propelled by her passion for dance, Pugh founded her ballet troupe in 1986 with two professional dancers and a budget of $75,000. As Pugh describes it, the troupe's formation came at a propitious moment in Memphis' dance community, one marked by the demise of the city's only two professional dance companies. The city's local arts council and several private funders began to take notice of the young company's work and the quality of its children's performances. They encouraged

Pugh to consider building a professional ballet company. "They asked me what I would do to build a professional company, so I thought about it and told them what I would do," remembers Pugh. "Then they really started throwing some real money at me, saying 'We believe you're the right horse to back.'"

Pugh attributes the city's early backing of Ballet Memphis to the vision she shared with civic leaders of artistic leadership that combined a passion for excellence and a strong desire to connect with the community. "Community leaders here wanted someone with whom they could communicate," says Pugh. "They understood that I cared about the community and that I was well-positioned to be a connector and a communicator in this city." Pugh also credits her Memphis heritage as another quality that appealed to the company's early backers: "I think that's another plus for me—this is my town, this is where my grandparents and parents lived. I know instinctively the territory and the culture. I'm cut from the same cloth as much of the constituency that I have to depend on."

LOOKING WEST ON I-40: TULSA BALLET AS A MODEL

As Pugh contemplated what form her professional company would take, she looked to other mid-size regional ballet companies as models."Before I hired our dancers," recalls Pugh, "I looked around to see if there were any cities similar to Memphis with community-spirited people who had built a ballet company in their own hometown." In the Tulsa Ballet, Pugh found a sister company in close geographic proximity that was birthed in a community of comparable size and character to Memphis. "Tulsa Ballet was on the same parallel in terms of latitude —you just have to get on I-40 and drive west seven hours," remembers Pugh. "And I knew that Moscelyne Larkin, who is a Tulsa native and former Ballet Russe dancer, returned there to found the company."

For Pugh, the similarities between the two companies and two cities were striking and inspiring. As Pugh recalls her thinking at that time, "Here's a group that is also committed to its community. They're in a mid-size city of a certain culture out in the middle of nowhere, like Memphis is. And Tulsa was a one-industry town, which is the way you could look at Memphis today: the major industry we have here is transportation and distribution; Tulsa had oil."

For a time, Tulsa Ballet's administrative and artistic staff formed a mentoring relationship with Ballet Memphis. Says

Pugh: "We sent some of our better, upper level kids to do workshops with them, and their executive director came to talk to our board about what it was like to run a professional company. When Tulsa Ballet performed here, they put all our upper level kids in their production so that everyone had the experience of being around a professional dance company. I felt that Tulsa Ballet already had a lot of expertise, so if I could associate our folks with theirs, it would be an eye-opening experience."

SEEDS OF THE MEMPHIS PROJECT

Putting down roots in a community with no previous tradition of a professional ballet company posed its own unique set of challenges for Ballet Memphis. To build audiences who may not be familiar with ballet's classical canon, Pugh followed her own personal passion for Memphis' local culture and heritage and her strong desire to connect ballet to what Memphians knew and loved. "Before we even hired our first paid dancers, we did an all-Memphis music night," recalls Pugh. "The program included a jazz piece, selections of W.C. Handy, and Elvis Presley's music." The company also performed "At the Peabody," a new piece inspired by Memphis' legendary hotel, which gained national notoriety in the 1940s for its big band music radio broadcasts. "We just started doing things that people knew," explains Pugh. "People didn't know 'Coppelia;' they knew the Peabody Hotel."

Inspired by the success of these early pieces, in 1999 Pugh contacted Trey McIntyre, a young choreographer whose star was rising in the ballet world, to discuss creating "Memphis," a work that would draw upon the city's popular music heritage and become a signature piece for the company. In researching "Memphis," Pugh was reminded of the powerful cultural phenomenon that transcended geographic boundaries and the city's history of racial and class divisions. "Because of the music that came out of Memphis, clothing changed, all kinds of things changed," explains Pugh. "Black music and white music got pulled together over at Stax, Sun, and other smaller Memphis recording studios, and the world was transformed." It was emblematic of the kind of role she hoped Ballet Memphis could play in the city's civic life, by linking ballet to Memphis' musical and cultural heritage:

The very city where Martin Luther King Jr. was killed was also the city where art bypassed color in all these incredible musical forms—blues, rock n' roll, soul and gospel music. It's a metaphor for putting behind the things that divide us and finding the

things that unite us. And if I can be involved in something that can do that, which is what art can do, I'm all for it. If we can start waking up people to what our capacities can truly be as human beings, singularly and together as a community, then I am a woman with a mission here.

In the wake of the critical and popular success of "Memphis," Pugh formulated the idea of the Memphis Project, which would tap choreographic talent within the company's own ranks and guest choreographers to create a body of Memphis-themed work. The project's launch coincided with the release of the Rand Corporation's study on the precarious state of mid-size performing arts organizations in the U.S. The study prompted Ballet Memphis' leadership to discuss ways in which it could differentiate itself among other regional ballet companies, and helped galvanize board support for the Memphis Project. "If we're a mid-size institution, we're either going to get gobbled up and vanish or we are going to have to find something that makes us singular," says Pugh. "So that's another reason why we've been working on the Memphis Project."

LOCALLY-THEMED PROGRAMMING THAT EMBRACES THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

While the depth of Ballet Memphis' commitment to the creation of locally-themed work through the Memphis Project is unique, Andrea Snyder, executive director of Dance/USA, observes that a growing number of regional ballet companies are mining the history and culture of their home communities in new work. She cites as an example Eugene Ballet, whose artistic director, Toni Pimble, created a new ballet inspired by Southwest Native American culture. "There have been a lot of 'Nutcrackers' built on local scenes," adds Snyder. "Charleston, Hartford, and Tucson have all re-crafted 'The Nutcracker' to reflect local values and local identities." Snyder also takes note of larger ballet companies, such as the Houston Ballet, whose artistic director, Stanton Welsh, recently created a whole evening of work on Texas themes. "So even at the higher level," says Snyder, "there's a real desire to provide work that reflects on stage what the people in the audience see and who they are."

With the Memphis Project, Martha Ullman West, senior editor and advisor at Dance Magazine, believes Ballet Memphis is breaking new ground in terms of making ballet relevant to people of all colors.

West attended the February 2003 premiere of the Memphis Project's "As the Spirit Moves You" program, which featured "Grace," a new work choreographed by Trey McIntyre and set to gospel music performed live by students of the Stax Music Academy and the LeMoyne Owen College Gospel Singers. "I think the company's responsiveness to the Memphis community and to the culture of the city is pretty unique," says West. "I was very impressed by the size of the African American audience at every performance." That level of audience diversity, says West, is not typical of most ballet performances she attends. "I have been in Nashville a couple of times to see the Nashville Ballet which is comparable in size to Ballet Memphis—it's a very different community, but there is a significant population of African Americans in Nashville, though I don't see many in that audience."

Creating new work that is compelling and relevant to Memphis' African American community is one of the goals Pugh hopes to achieve through the Memphis Project:

I think [the Memphis Project] has connected African American audiences to ballet somewhat. I think the African American community is starting to think, 'There really is a Memphis arts institution that cares about the community as a whole and our story here.' Changing demographics is another reason for us to look at who we are and what we do… This city is now over 50% African American, and so our white, European-based art form has really got to be shaken up.

Stax Academy artistic director Marc Willis, who collaborated with Ballet Memphis on "Grace," observes that many of Memphis' major arts institutions are beginning to re-evaluate their missions in light of the city's demographic make-up. A key imperative for them, Willis believes, is to develop programming that speaks to a broader diversity of Memphians in a genuine and sustained manner. Although the city's major arts institutions are moving toward becoming more inclusive in their programming, Willis considers Ballet Memphis in the vanguard of that effort:

Because of the diversity of the city, I think that arts institutions are in a position where they need to evaluate what they do…I think Ballet Memphis is trying to do that…Where I credit Dorothy is that she's embraced [diverse programming], and she's doing something about it. To some degree, she may be even upsetting some of her longstanding subscribers, and that's a little risky and daring since you've got to continue to get funding to do these kinds of things in a sustained way. My feeling is that Dorothy is on the cutting edge of [this trend].

Ballet Memphis board chair LeeAnne Cox points to the company's strong community focus as its defining feature among the city's cultural institutions and the key to its long-term viability. "We're trying to figure out what we need to become in order to stay viable" she says. "I think we're going to need to be nimble and to become a unique voice for our heritage and for the community."

THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL BALLET COMPANY: THE DANCE FIELD'S FLAGSHIP INSTITUTION AND THE COMMUNITY'S CULTURAL ICON

Ballet Memphis' evolution as a ballet company and "voice" of its community speaks to broader trends in the dance field that are reshaping the role of the mid-size regional ballet company in the U.S. "Clearly the regional ballet movement, which is now over thirty years old, is an extraordinary story of how local civic institutions created their own visibility and value," says Andrea Snyder. "From our perspective, they are the field's flagship institutions, particularly with regard to the public visibility they provide for the art form of dance."

Over the last three decades, regional ballet companies have evolved into an essential and dynamic component of the dance ecosystem. They are now increasingly recognized as the field's "economic engine" and educational resource. Regional ballet companies have been and continue to be the major employers of dancers, to a much greater extent than modern companies or non-affiliated free-standing artists. "We see the regional ballet companies not only as repositories of history and of more traditional kinds of dance," says Snyder, "but as a great connector in the dance ecology because of their ability to hire and keep on the payroll a tremendous number of dancers." With fewer and fewer arts education programs in the schools, regional ballet companies are increasingly called upon to fill that educational gap. "Regional ballet companies have become the strongest educational resource for the art form in the community," says Snyder.

Snyder observes that regional ballet companies have also emerged in recent years as cultural icons within their communities. This new trend is particularly noteworthy, Snyder points out, because most mid-size regional ballet companies are not visible. They don't often own their own homes, and their seasons are short. Snyder credits their ascent to "cultural icon" status to the increased recognition by a broader public of dance as an important art form:

Dance has typically been dismissed as an art form—people see it as 'throw away' stuff. I think, by virtue of regional ballet companies rooting themselves so well in their communities, they're no longer discounted. Even the Ballet Memphis-sized companies, as opposed to the larger companies, are really considered valuable in their communities. They are important, and people understand that.

COMPETING FOR TICKET BUYERS AND DIMINISHING RESOURCES: REGIONAL BALLET TROUPES STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

While regional ballet companies enjoy greater recognition for their contributions to the dance field and their local communities, they are particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of the economy and increasing competition for Americans' entertainment dollars. In the funding arena, where competition for state and corporate dollars has intensified, the regional companies —the dance field's "middle class"—have had and will continue to have greater difficulty maintaining corporate and state support. "Just as we see the middle class in this country gets the bad end of both sticks, it's the same for ballet companies of this particular size," says Snyder. "The decline in state funding has significantly impacted the mid-size companies, more so than the larger institutions." Snyder also notes that corporations generally support large size ballet companies to get the most visibility for their marketing dollars. Regional ballet companies are increasingly dependent on individual donors, says Snyder.

According to Snyder, regional ballet companies also face fierce competition from major touring companies. "Regional ballet companies struggle more to stay on the radar screen when a blockbuster tour comes to town," says Snyder. "They have a harder time holding on to their ticket buyer base." Placing the struggle for ticket buyers within a broader context, Martha Ullman West observes that performing arts groups find themselves vying for audiences' attention with the ever-expanding avenues of popular entertainment, be it the Broadway blockbuster tour, professional sports teams or the latest gadget in home entertainment. "People don't like to go out anymore," says West. "It's true for ballet and modern dance…. We've got so many electronic toys to keep us in the house. One artistic director of a regional ballet company told me he thought his stiffest competition was the video game."

A NEW "HOME" FOR CHOREOGRAPHIC INNOVATION

One bright spot on the horizon for regional ballet companies is their increasing importance to the dance field as innovators

—a role not previously associated with regional companies. "Historically, regional ballet companies haven't necessarily been recognized for field leadership in the dance community," explains Snyder. "By virtue of their institutional base, which makes them slower moving in some senses, regional ballet companies aren't identified as the 'change-makers." Yet, the high production costs associated with full-scale ballets have made the creation of new work an economic necessity for many regional ballet companies. "Many mid-size companies are not able to do full length works in the same way as their larger counterparts because these productions are so expensive," says Snyder. "So they survive on the creation of new work. And that is where, hopefully, the voices of ballet artists will continue to grow and where there will be more invention of contemporary ballet and fusion of new forms." While ballet companies of all sizes are engaged in the creation of new work, Snyder believes the preponderance of new work is to be found at the mid-size level.

West agrees that regional ballet companies are playing a significant role as field innovators. "I think the role of regional ballets in advancing the art form is huge," she says. "The smaller companies are a testing ground for new work." West also points out that regional ballet companies are often better positioned than larger companies to provide a nurturing setting for young choreographers. "I think an ongoing relationship with a choreographer has everything in the world to do with the development of an emerging choreographer," says West. "The regional ballet companies give opportunities to young choreographers that larger companies might not."

If regional ballet companies are becoming the home of ballet's future, then Ballet Memphis is on the cusp of that trend. "I want to push the art form beyond assumption because 'assumption' is probably a death knell," says Pugh. "I think creating new work is a necessity." Pugh also envisions Ballet Memphis as an incubator for young choreographic talent: "I would hope that I am contributing somewhat to nurturing choreographers who are very thoughtful about what they're saying and how they say it."

Trey McIntyre, who is currently choreographer-in-residence at Ballet Memphis, says some of his most rewarding experiences as a choreographer have been working with companies of Ballet Memphis' size. "In the larger companies there's a lot more competition among dancers," says McIntyre. "There's a lot less opportunity for the entire company to get to dance and there's more of a quest for

status. At companies the size of Ballet Memphis, everybody gets the chance to dance."McIntyre also observes that dancers at regional ballet companies have a greater appetite for working with a guest choreographer. "Dancers [at regional companies] have a limited choreographic diet so they have a greater hunger when new experiences come in," says McIntyre. "There are fewer choreographers working with them, so when I am there they just throw everything they have into the experience." One of the downsides of working with smaller companies is the limited resources available for new work. "I feel Ballet Memphis in particular does very well with the resources it has," says McIntyre, "but there are limits to what we can do from the technical and design side." McIntyre believes his ongoing relationship with Ballet Memphis has contributed to his development as a choreographer. "Where I am career-wise, there is an expectation that I will be seeking out artistic directorships, and I've certainly entertained that over the past couple of years," says McIntyre. "As much as I think some of the perks of that job would be enjoyable, I really just want to concentrate on the creative end of it. And this relationship with Ballet Memphis has afforded me that." McIntyre also values the opportunity to develop a deep connection with Ballet Memphis' dancers. As McIntyre describes it, the ongoing relationship he has developed with Ballet Memphis' dancers enables him to pursue new pathways for choreographic exploration and experimentation:

I don't have to teach the basics about what's important to me and the journey that I'm on. I feel like we can continually pick up where we left off and go to the next step. How can we push this further? There are a lot of things the Ballet Memphis dancers just know intuitively—especially the dancers that have been there over the long haul. I don't have to explain the finer points … Suddenly I'm opened up to how I can re-explore this, what new ways I can push this, what new things I can try in ways that I absolutely can't with other companies.

McIntyre recognizes that his relationship with Ballet Memphis is not the norm for most young choreographers. "There are not a lot of opportunities for choreographers to develop in this country," he says. "It's economically tricky, and it's harder for ballet companies to take risks with people who aren't proven in what they do yet." A unique aspect of McIntyre's relationship with Ballet Memphis, he says, is the creative freedom entrusted to him by Pugh:

Dorothy and I both share this need and desire to make work that is significant … work that is not merely decorative or entertaining. She's willing to go out on a limb in significant ways as long as she feels it's justified conceptually. She's been able to take lots of leaps of faith. And I certainly feel as a choreographer complete freedom to create the kind of work I want to create. I know there will probably be a very intense discussion with her about it, in terms of justifying it and understanding it, but I don't feel restricted in terms of what I can make for the company.

McIntyre hopes that other ballet companies might look at the Memphis Project as a model for their communities. "I think the Memphis Project is a great example of paying attention to one's own community and taking seriously the fact that you're the name company in the city," he says. McIntyre also notes that the Memphis Project has challenged him as a choreographer to listen to the Memphis community and question how his choreography has relevance and impact beyond the dance world. The future of ballet, suggests McIntyre, depends on choreographers that listen to the needs of the greater community:

How does my work relate to the whole world? And how does it fulfill something that's grander than just me? In the case of Memphis, I am challenged to focus on what this choreography means and how it impacts the community. How can it be more relevant? I think 'ballet for ballet's sake' becomes more and more obsolete as time goes on. It's not a part of American culture for sure. And we're going to evolve away from [ballet] if we don't adapt, grow and listen to the needs of the greater community.

