



"Ballet companies are like big families," says Christopher Stowell as he unfurls a caricature of himself given to him by fellow dancers at the San Francisco Ballet. He performed with the troupe for 16 years.

PHOTOS BY TORSTEN KJELLSTRAND

For OBT's Christopher Stowell, art rules the loft

By Helyn Trickey

Late-afternoon light spills through Christopher Stowell's north-facing window, glances off gilded picture frames and book spines, illuminates a trio of delicate red glass light fixtures before pooling in the middle of his condo in the Pearl's Irving Street Lofts. But Stowell doesn't notice.

At the moment he's sitting cross-legged on the floor sifting through pieces of art he's collected but has yet to mat and frame. He rifles through one pile, jumps up, excavates another shelf in a wall-size closet and pulls something out from a cranny.

"It should go in the bedroom," he says, unfurling what appears to be white butcher paper. "They gave this to me when I retired from the San Francisco Ballet," says Stowell, 42, who's been the artistic director of the Oregon Ballet Theatre since 2003.

What he unveils is a large black-and-white caricature of himself in full performance mode: Arms flung into the air, hands relaxed, graceful; his dancer's body nearly leaping off the margins in a leotard and tights. A crowd of scribbled signatures fills the white space around his sillier alter ego.



Stowell likes the Pearl's vibrancy and can watch the community's comings and goings through his loft's wall-size window.

A cardboard cutout of opera star Maria Callas, a tongue-in-cheek gift to Stowell from friend (and Mayor-elect) Sam Adams, stands sentry next to his couch.



The caricaturist has, of course, taken liberties with scale, so Stowell's penciled head floats big and bobbly above a much smaller athletic body and his hair is blown up to suggest great speed.

In real life, Stowell's noggin is normal size, as is his ego.

"He's really funny," says Damara Bennett, a longtime friend and → director of OB T's school. "If there's anything to find funny about a situation, Christopher will do it. The dancers love him."

Bennett and Stowell met nearly 25 years ago in San Francisco when they performed together in a show called "Endangered Species" but that the duo privately dubbed "Endangered Feces," so sure were they that the production would flop.

"But it was a huge hit," says Bennett, laughing. The like souls cemented an important friendship, and in the late '90s they become neighbors, sharing an Edwardian house that had been halved into apartments.

"My place in San Francisco was very traditional," Stowell says. "It had stained-glass windows, built-in bookshelves, lots of nooks and crannies for everything." He sits casually on a deep red sofa in front of the loft's wall-size window. His extroverted cat, Olivia, sits on the sofa arm; a more reserved feline, Sydney, is out of sight. "Moving to a more industrial space was a challenge," he says of his transition to Portland's Pearl District. "There was no place to put anything."

But what could've been a negative — lack of a defined living and decorating space — helped Stowell's eclectic artistic sensibilities blossom. His walls morphed into giant canvases where disparate pieces of art — each with an interesting back story — hang together harmoniously.

For instance, two elegant 19th-century prints of ballet dancers that were handed down to him by his parents (both his mother and father are influential ballet dancers and artistic directors) hang near a modern black, white and red canvas that Stowell picked up at an auction in Moscow. On an opposite wall,



Stowell says eclecticism is important to him, professionally and personally. "I'm not much into what art means," he says.

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Living in a loft gives Stowell two things he appreciates: high ceilings and plenty of wall space to show off his growing art collection.

four prints from old fairy-tale books are framed and grouped next to a brimming bookcase flanked by two art pieces he was given for a dance performance in Tokyo — delicate pieces of paper precisely cut and attached to netting and then mounted, one to red paper, the other to green, and framed.

"The Boot," by San Francisco artist Ben Prince, hangs in Stowell's bathroom.

The story goes like this: Stowell was at a party in Prince's studio when he spied the canvas featuring a melodramatic breakup story written across a green background. Stowell loved the quirky piece that reads left to right and then right to left and upside down, making the tale readable only if you're willing to sprain a neck muscle. Prince, on the other hand, hated the piece and would give it to Stowell only if he kicked a hole in it first. Stowell countered: He'd happily deface the artwork if he could wear the artist's protective boot. Prince agreed, and Stowell kicked a mean hole in the center. It turns out, though, that Stowell liked the piece better with Prince's boot hanging out of it, so Stowell bargained for and won the artist's boot as well.

Just as his artistic tastes run the gamut from traditional to zany, so, too, can his social life.

Every Christmas, despite a dizzying number of "Nutcracker" performances, Stowell never fails to throw a party, complete with tree-trimming. As he plies his friends and family members with treats (he is a fabulous cook, Bennett says), he pulls out an old, battered suitcase that he's had since the early '70s and in which he stores an array of tree ornaments. Stowell encourages his guests to decorate his tree anyway they see fit.

"He always waits until the last minute to get lights, so he ends up having to buy those huge hedge lights and draping those over his Christmas tree," Bennett says with a laugh.

"The holidays are so busy," Stowell admits. "But I think it's the beginning of the end if you don't have a Christmas tree. It would feel too much like I was giving up something big in my life." ■