



OBT dancers and Christopher Stowell (center) celebrate at the Dance United benefit.

Alive & Kicking

Oregon Ballet Theatre fought tooth and nail to reach its Emerald year.

With joy tempered by caution, Oregon Ballet Theatre celebrates its 20th anniversary this month. The company performs excerpts from their signature pieces, plus the OBT premiere of the “Emeralds” section from Balanchine’s *Jewels*.

Before the close of the fiscal year in June, a \$750,000 shortfall in the operating budget jeopardized OBT’s existence, though not for lack of audience support or artistic excellence. Christopher Stowell, named artistic director in 2003, has taken OBT to a higher level. Handsomely schooled dancers are performing both more Balanchine repertory, including his *Nutcracker*, and works new to the Portland audience by Robbins, Forsythe, Kudelka, and others. Stowell

added a fourth concert series to OBT’s season and in 2006, mounted his own *Swan Lake*. OBT also received critical praise for its performance of Wheeldon’s *Rush* in the Kennedy Center’s Ballet Across America festival last year, and everything looked rosy.

Reality hit in December when unusually bad weather meant sparsely attended *Nutcracker* performances. And while ticket sales have held steady, by spring the company’s contributed income was down 50 percent. In response, the 2009–10 budget was cut from last year’s \$6.7 million to \$4.8 million, about the same level as when Stowell arrived. Live orchestra was eliminated, there were layoffs and pay reductions among the staff, and

dancers’ contracts shrank from 33 weeks to a sliding scale of 15 to 31 weeks. When the shortfall made a bad situation desperate, dancers brainstormed ways to generate income when off contract. Encouraged by Stowell, they discussed new kinds of outreach and performances in informal venues.

With a 16-year performing career with San Francisco Ballet and enviable family connections (his parents are Francia Russell and Kent Stowell) on his side, Stowell quickly assembled Dance United, a one-night gala at the Keller Auditorium. On June 12, dancers from San Francisco Ballet, the Trey McIntyre Project, Boston Ballet, New York City Ballet, Ballet West, the Joffrey, National Ballet of Canada, and Pacific Northwest Ballet rode into town like the cavalry, volunteering their time and talent. They joined OBT and BodyVox, whose co-artistic director Jamey Hampton exceeded the evening. White Bird provided Minh Tran, while Linda Austin’s and Mary Oslund’s dancers performed in an unprecedented show of support from the modern contingent. By June 30, OBT had raised just over \$907,000, with \$157,000 left over for this season.

However, it’s not enough to restore live music or the dancers’ contracts, and OBT must raise \$1.2 million by June 30, 2010. But when many companies are shortening their seasons, theirs will proceed as planned.

The fall opener on Oct. 10 includes film clips of former artistic director James Canfield’s work, plus excerpts from choreography commissioned during his tenure. OBT is the result of the 1989 consolidation of Pacific Ballet Theatre and Ballet Oregon, headed respectively by Canfield (now head of Nevada Ballet Theatre) and the late Dennis Spaight. Live performances of slices from Spaight’s *Ellington Suite* and *Gloria*, plus excerpts from Stowell’s work and choreographers he commissioned (Yuri Possokhov and Julia Adam among them) reflect OBT’s past and present. OBT School students close the program in Stowell’s “Garland Dance,” representing the future.

Stowell remains hopeful that the cuts are short term and that within two years, OBT will move forward. “What we have to figure out,” he says, “is not how to be cheaper, but how to be better.”

—Martha Ullman West

Blaine Trutt Covert, Courtesy OBT