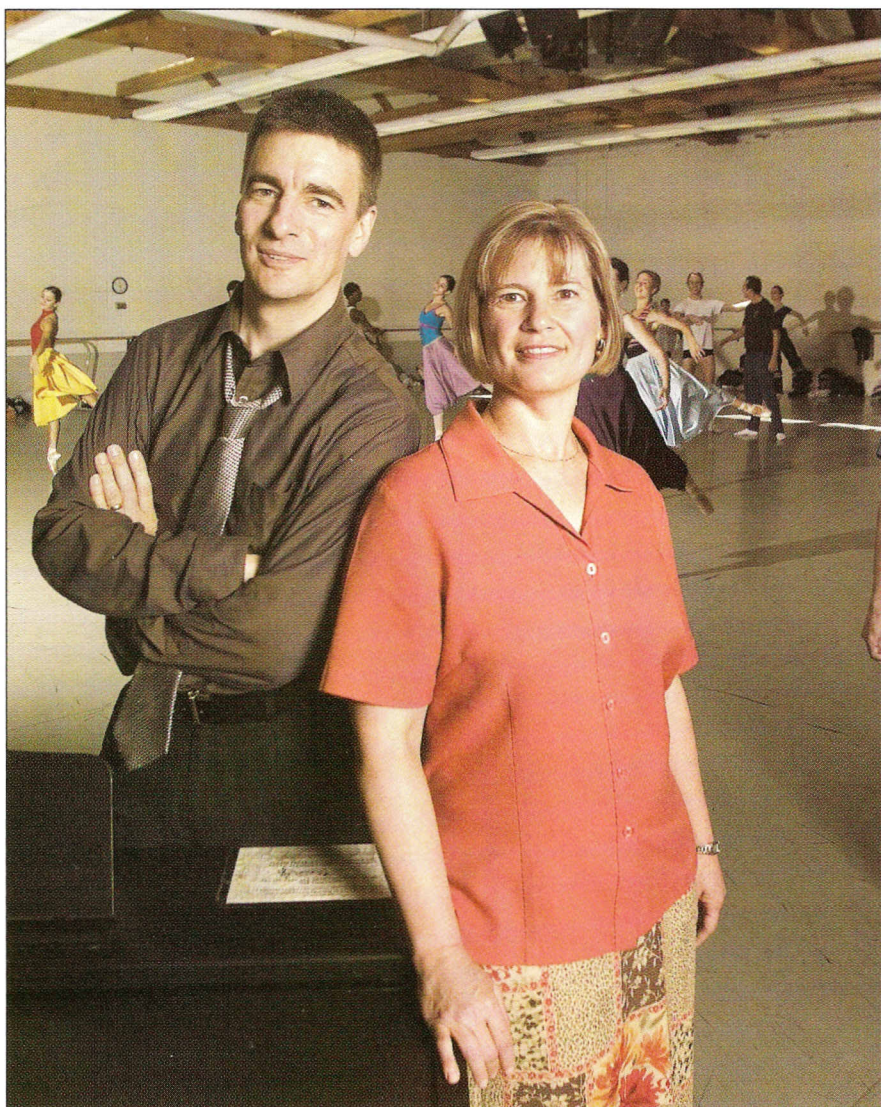


A test for BalletMet

The company has proved it can make it in New York. With the Rockettes on their way, the question is whether they can make it in Columbus.

BY SUSAN
WITSTOCK



MICHAEL A. POLEY/RFCUS ASSOC.

When BalletMet made its Manhattan premiere at the prestigious Joyce Theater, most of the audience was seeing the company for the first time, providing an opportunity for artistic director Gerard Charles to indulge in a little anonymous eavesdropping.

"They didn't know who any of us were, so when I was walking through the halls you could hear people conversing and they were all saying such incredibly positive things. 'That's the best show I've seen all year!' 'Where have they been?' 'Who are they?'" Charles says. "To get that kind of genuine enthusiasm was very rewarding."

Charles didn't really need to catch praise on the sly, though. BalletMet's late-May run at the Joyce was met with a number of positive press reviews. "The company's openness to new currents is refreshing," wrote the *New York Times*, also referring to the dancing of Hisham Omardien

Basking in the afterglow, facing a constant struggle: Artistic director Gerard Charles (left) and executive director Cheri Mitchell in a BalletMet studio.

and Sonia Welker as "a mesmerizing tour de force." *DanceView Times* wrote, "It's hard to believe that this Ohio-based company... has never been seen in Manhattan until now," and commended the dancers' "powerfully focused and committed performances."

On July 13, the phone rang with more good news: BalletMet was invited to present the closing performance at a Joyce-sponsored event Sept. 12 in Battery Park, joining the Boston Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago and the American Ballet Theatre of New York.

Saying yes was easy for Charles and Cheri Mitchell, the company's executive director.



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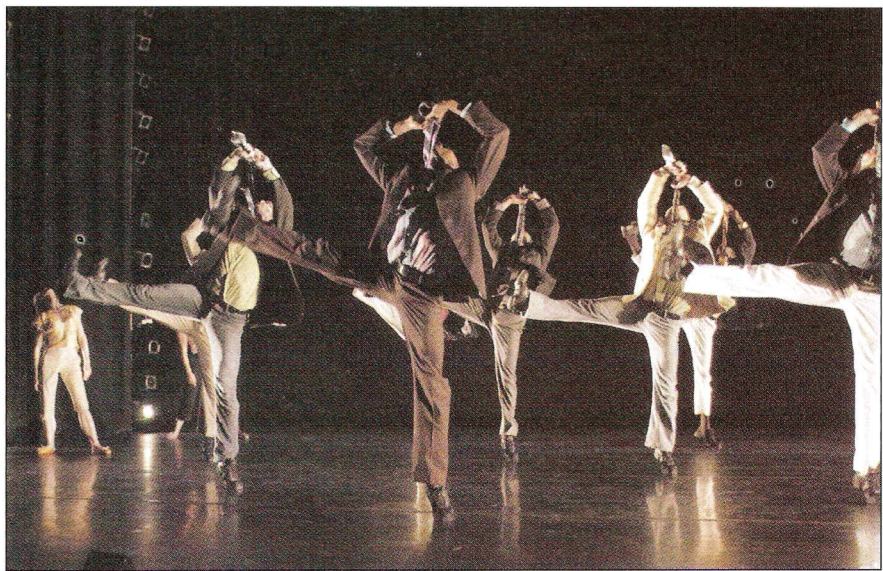
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A scene from *Play*, which BalletMet performed in New York at the prestigious Joyce Theater and at Battery Park, in an event sponsored by the Joyce.

"They were excited by us, by the work, the choreography, as well as by the dancing," Mitchell says. "I think we knew we were good, but I think that caught us by surprise, by them saying, 'Come back!'"

BalletMet, now in its 27th season, is basking in the afterglow of national attention, but there's no such thing as a honeymoon. The company, like so many of its local and national arts brethren in a post-9/11 economy, faces a constant struggle to keep its budget balanced.

That challenge is likely to be heightened this year; its traditional cash cow, *The Nutcracker*, faces potentially lethal competition from the Rockettes, who are high-kicking into town in late November for 37 performances of the *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. The Rockettes' impending Columbus debut has the folks at BalletMet fearing that seasonal audiences will opt for novel entertainment over a familiar hometown favorite.

BalletMet successfully finished its 26th consecutive season in the black, although the accomplishment required a last-ditch effort to persuade donors to help the company avoid debt. "It certainly has been a challenge," Charles says. "We had some wonderful supporters who rallied around us. This has been no secret to anyone in any business. This has been a hard financial phase on everybody."

Every penny of the company's \$5.3 million budget must cover the expenses of producing six annual productions, running the nation's fifth-largest dance academy and sponsoring numerous outreach projects—not to mention salaries and compensation for up to 100 people at a time, including dancers, instructors and administrative and artistic staff. BalletMet is among the 15 largest companies nationally and provides 36 weeks of work for its 28 dancers.

"It's important for us to maintain our artistic integrity while we're having to make unfortunate cuts," says Charles. "Maintaining the standard is the most important thing in that whole balancing act. You don't want to take away something that causes you to lose what your product is, which is the reason we're all here. It's not just the performances, although that's a huge public perception of who we are, but there's also the academy and the instruction we provide."

In May and June of 2003, BalletMet reduced staff, changing several positions from full-time to part-time, including the company manager, marketing and development associates and a computer-support position. Four staff members left as a result, Mitchell says. "That's always difficult when that happens. You worry about the people left," she says. "I think all of us have sort of stepped up and taken on additional responsibilities and duties."

BalletMet's biggest financial challenge for the 2004-'05 season will be competing with the Rockettes. CAPA's decision to bring in a commercial juggernaut such as the Rockettes initially upset Mitchell and some BalletMet backers, who felt CAPA's support for the touring dance troupe amounted to hometown betrayal.

By September, Mitchell's and Charles's mood had evolved into one of grim acceptance. "Certainly, the anecdotal information and the hard facts that we have from other cities is that it has significant impact on the local *Nutcrackers*, 25 to 30 percent reduction in ticket sales," Charles says.

The company couldn't afford to ignore the possibility of reduced revenue for a production that raises 30 percent of its annual income. "Yeah, you've got to have a reality check on the *Nutcracker*," Charles says. "That money that comes from *Nut-*

RICHARD TERMINI/COURTESY BALLETMET

cracker sustains so many other events during the year.”

This summer, BalletMet promoted a “Christmas in July” offer, opening discounted *Nutcracker* ticket sales months earlier than usual. Perhaps to soothe hard feelings, CAPA partnered with BalletMet—and Broadway in Columbus—on a deal that allowed BalletMet subscribers to purchase tickets to Rockette performances as part of a pre-sale event, with a portion of each ticket sale getting kicked back to the dance company. A September press release promised “additional co-promotional opportunities.”

BalletMet also hopes to offset potential damage by presenting a new version of the *Nutcracker*, choreographed by Charles in collaboration with theater artist and Columbus native Robert Post.

Another pressing issue for the 2004-'05 season is whether the company will choose to remain in its Mount Vernon Avenue location. “This building is 100 years old and it would need significant work to stay here,” Charles says. “For a rented space, it raises the question of whether it’s worth it to make improvements.”

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BalletMet originally signed a 15-year lease in July 1990. About two years ago, knowing the original lease would end in 2005, the company began to evaluate its needs. Mitchell says the possibility of moving to a building designed for and owned by BalletMet is being explored. “We’ve been working with the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, the city and with architects, looking at what a building could be, what it would cost and what the time frame would be,” says Mitchell, who anticipated having official cost estimates available once Moody-Nolan Inc. completed architectural schematic drawings this fall. “And at the same point, we certainly are maintaining our option to be here.”

Building a new facility in the River South neighborhood (near City Center) might help revitalize downtown, move the



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company closer to the theaters it performs in and provide more visibility and access, Mitchell says.

But moving brings its own set of difficulties. "It's not only what do we need today, but also about what does this mean for the future? How much debt and responsibility are we saddling future generations with for this building, and are we helping our bottom line, potentially, by moving?" Charles says.

To perform at the Joyce Theater (think Carnegie Hall for the dance crowd), BalletMet went through a rigorous application process, making the cut as one of 18 companies invited out of 66 applicants.

"The Joyce Theater is not a place where you can just sort of go, 'I'd like to rent the theater this week, is it available?'" says Charles, perhaps making a comparison to the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, which made much ado about playing at Carnegie a couple of years ago although it leased the hall. "I think we had to be bold enough to do it. It's an awesome step for a company to make."

Linda Shelton, artistic director at the Joyce, credits Ray Hanley, president of the Greater Columbus Arts Council, for bringing the company to her attention. "He was the one who made the connection for us," Shelton says. "There are so many companies across the country that want to use our studios that you need an extra push, and Ray provided that push."

For the performances, BalletMet selected three new pieces choreographed specifically for them: *Colores de Alma*, by Deanna Carter; *Gazebo Dances*, by James Kudelka, and *Play*, a portion of *Evolution: Mozart to Moby*, by BalletMet's artistic associate Stanton Welch.

It meant a lot to the dancers to perform in New York. "It puts us on the map," says Angela Wetzstein, who is in her eighth season with BalletMet. "I hope we'll get to do more works by up-and-coming choreographers."

The Ohio troupe was greeted enthusiastically by New York audiences. "When a company comes for the first time, and they're not well known, it can be difficult," Shelton says. "I think they did very well."

Well enough that Shelton and others at the Joyce, in the middle of pulling together a lineup for the September Battery Park event, decided they needed to see BalletMet again. "We didn't have a really great closing piece," Shelton says. "We saw *Play* and thought that would be a terrific closer, and the company was great to work with. The dancers are really wonderful. You can't go wrong."

And so, for the second time in a year, BalletMet found itself facing New York audiences. On Sept. 12, the company danced

for about 4,000 spectators enjoying a balmy evening under the stars. Mitchell was a little star-struck. "There were some magnificent dancers on stage for this whole program," she says. "All the companies that danced before us were doing such a great job."

BalletMet held its own. "Everyone was there—all these dance people, from ABT, the Joyce," Mitchell says. "They kept coming up to us afterwards and kept thanking us for being there."

Play attracts attention. When BalletMet performed it Aug. 27 for the annual Rhythm on the River performance near COSI, the somewhat restless crowd actually hushed for 30 minutes while Moby's techno music throbbed from the stage and the 16 dancers threw themselves into the performance. It's surprising to see ballerinas with their hair down, swaggering in capris and Express shirts, looking like college kids strolling High Street.

Contemporary pieces by young choreographers such as Welch, who is a highly sought-after international choreographer, are a staple of BalletMet's seasons. "Part of our mission has always been to present new work," says Charles. For the 2004-'05 season, new works for the company include *Carmina Burana* by Dwight Rhoden and a version of *Firebird* by Welch.

But classics are still very much a part of the repertoire. "We have a mission to support the community's taste, so you know we have people who tend toward very traditional, classical ballet, and we have people who tend to like very, very contemporary work," Charles says. "From an audience point of view, that's a very rich diversity to get out of one group of dancers."

Welch, who is artistic director of Houston Ballet, has served as BalletMet's artistic associate since 2001 and usually creates a new piece or two a year for the company. "They really do take risks," he says, praising the acting abilities of BalletMet's dancers. "I know the group of BalletMet dancers I work with pretty well, so I know their strengths and weaknesses. I want to push them, but also make them look good."

While his demanding and intense instruction is respected by dancers, some believe Welch relies too heavily on favorites. Reid Bartelme is one of nine dancers who left at the end of last season. Bartelme, who now dances for Alberta Ballet in Canada, spent three years with BalletMet and has high praise for his former company, but counted Welch as one of the frustrations that factored into his leaving. "As a dancer in the company working for him, he has created a very divided, unpleasant working atmosphere," Bartelme wrote in an e-mail interview. "He generally used the same

group of dancers in all his work, leaving the others to pick up the slack as second cast or understudies."

Welch doesn't deny having favorites, but says it's normal. "In small companies, you tend to gravitate toward the same people," Welch says. "I want dancers who can say, 'I'm learning something I cannot yet do.' I think that's why they wanted someone like me to work with the company, to move it out of that small-town mentality."

Sometimes, your best just isn't good enough. The dance world is incredibly competitive, and most ballet companies operate with a constant revolving door. Dancers' careers typically last only 10 years, Charles says. "It's very natural for dancers after a number of years to say, 'I'm

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looking for the next step? Not that we're happy to see anyone leave, but we have to accept that as part of the life of the company," he says. "And nine is not an unusual number by any means. In fact, I went back this year, and saw that the year before last was an unusual year in that there were only three that left. But in previous years—nine, 10, 11, 12, seven, eight—they're all in that area."

The ability to change and be flexible is why BalletMet has survived for nearly 30 years, Mitchell says. The troupe's roots are in a student company, which was founded by a group of parents in 1974, incorporated as a professional group in 1978 and steadily grew into its current status. "We're always looking at what works and what doesn't," she says.

Charles and Mitchell hope the attention showered on BalletMet from the New York premieres will make it shine brighter locally. "Obviously, there are many people here that have supported us for years," says Mitchell. "But sometimes it does take that little outside recognition for others to appreciate what they have right in their hometown." ■

Susan Wittstock is a freelance writer.