

## Ballet Memphis focuses on growing younger audience

By [Christopher Blank](#)

Sunday, July 13, 2008

ST. LOUIS — As a symbol of exploration and expansion, the soaring Gateway Arch seemed the perfect backdrop for Ballet Memphis in May, when the company brought a group of its performers to the new Spring to Dance Festival here.

For the first time, more than 30 troupes from the Midwest -- Dayton, Kansas City, Nashville and Cincinnati ballets among them -- performed in the same theater.



The many contrasts in style gave Dorothy Gunther Pugh, Ballet Memphis' founding artistic director, a fresh perspective on her philosophy that a regional troupe should reflect its community.

"I look at what some of the major companies are doing and then ask, 'What are we trying to say about ourselves?'" Pugh said. "I think we are more tuned-in to our culture than any ballet company in America."

That's not to say Ballet Memphis can rest on its laurels in its hometown.

Over the next couple of years, audiences will see major changes at the company, including a switch in

venues and more performances geared to its growing number of younger devotees.

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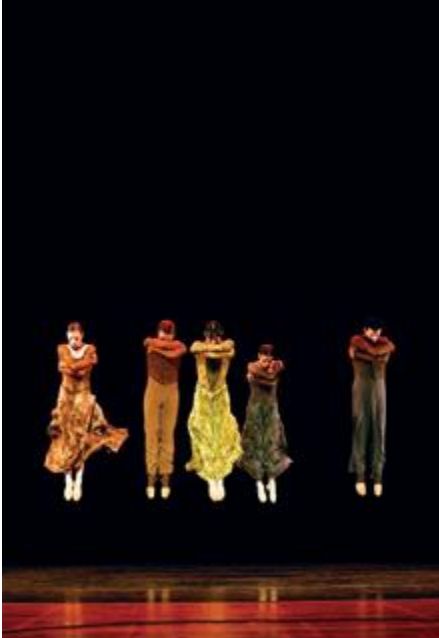
us," Pugh said. "And find more ways for us to get to know them."

### 'Tremendous dancers'



Michael Uthoff, founder of St. Louis' Spring to Dance Festival, left New York in 1972 because, he says, "I saw that the future of dance was in the provinces."

The former Joffrey dancer headed successful companies in Hartford, Conn., and Phoenix, Ariz., demonstrating through polished restagings of modern classics as well as his own choreography, that one didn't have to be a Mark Morris or a Twyla Tharp to give people meaningful work. Now Uthoff runs Dance St. Louis, an organization that brings national dance companies into the city.



"I think there is a tendency in big metro areas for companies to fall into a particular genre," Uthoff said. "Some companies get locked into a style or a time period. What people can take from Spring to Dance is an awareness of the wealth of dance that is out there."

He invited Ballet Memphis to perform "In Dreams," which he'd heard about after the company's lauded performance at New York's Joyce Theater last year.

"In Dreams," part of the company's "Memphis Project," was inspired by the music of Roy Orbison, who recorded some of his early tunes at Sun Studio.

"I am a great advocate of people trying to explore regional themes," Uthoff said. "The problem is that we tend to be snobs in the U.S. We think that everything is better in Europe. Or else everybody wants to be playing for the Yankees. But Ballet Memphis and the Nashville Ballet are both companies that have a lot of creativity. They reflect their communities, and they also reflect them well."

But regional ballet companies can work in isolation, creating programs that appeal to the tastes and pocketbooks of locals.

The Spring to Dance Festival was the first time Pugh had seen a performance by Nashville Ballet in about eight years, though both companies have similar missions and are within driving distance.

"You guys are really lucky to have two great dance companies in Tennessee," Uthoff said. "The quality of regional dance has definitely improved in the last 20 years. There are some tremendous dancers out there."

Figuring out what type of dance to bring to a major festival -- that is, choosing a piece representative of the company -- presents the same kind of problem that regional companies face when programming a season. Whether dancing classical, modern, contemporary or something in between, companies get their reputations and funding from the kind of work they create.

Thanks to a New York appearance and having several dancers -- Garrett Ammon and Dawn Fay among them -- advance to prominent roles elsewhere, Ballet Memphis is known nationally as an inventive, risk-taking company with a Southern twist.

But is that what Memphis wants?

### **'The Memphis voice'**

In the past three years, ticket sales have been on a roller coaster ride, prompting much soul-searching at Ballet Memphis.

In the 2006-07 season, the number of seats sold (including thousands of reduced-price tickets to school students) dropped from 18,000 to 12,000.

Unpredictably, ticket sales rose this season by 37 percent, to 17,000 seats filled.

New managing director Philip West says that some of the increase can be attributed to better marketing and more promotional activities, such as having open rehearsals Downtown. The solid reviews in New York also helped the company land a tour to Atlanta.

But longtime observers of the company will also notice that programming is evolving.

Ballet Memphis has determined that the age of big ballets at the Orpheum is coming to a close. While ticket sales to those performances have been stagnating, the shows in smaller, trendier venues such as the Gibson Lounge or the Memphis Zoo are attracting bigger, more enthusiastic crowds.

"I think these shows connect with the younger audience," West said. "They love the energy and the intimacy."

Pugh says that her growing audiences in funky venues have given Ballet Memphis reason to re-think the way shows are produced.

"It seems like for the last few years, people are more accustomed to seeing things close up and more casually," Pugh said. "They love being next to the physical energy of the performers."

Ballet Memphis recently reached an agreement with Playhouse on the Square, allowing the company to become artist-in-residence at its new theater on the corner of Cooper and Union in the fall of 2009.

Instead of mounting costly productions that run a single weekend in the 2,491-seat Orpheum, Ballet Memphis will be able to spread out the run of a show over two weekends in the 344-seat Playhouse on the Square, which has been slightly redesigned to accommodate ballet.

Pugh says three productions a year will be at Playhouse, several others in outside venues, and only "The Nutcracker" will remain at the Orpheum.

Beginning in September, the transition into a leaner, more populist company will be apparent in the programming.

This year's "Momentum" show -- very popular with the cocktail crowd -- will be held in the Cadre Building Downtown, where the dances will occupy two stages.

Another recurring concept, "Connections," combines dance with other artistic forms such as fashion, food and architecture. It, too, has been generating more interest each year. Next season there will be two pairings, one with fine dining and the other, in Spring, with puppets.

Pugh came up with the idea of "AbunDANCE" last season to start a discussion about religion by hiring choreographers of different faiths. She'll reprise the concept next season, this time by having choreographers take their cues from paintings in local museums.

For the first time, a \$5 ticket will be offered for the three Orpheum theater productions, including "The Nutcracker," where regular seats range from \$35 to \$70.

"It's just an out-and-out attempt to get people into the theater," West said. "They are not the best seats, but when you consider the current economy and the cost of gas, a \$5 ticket might make ballet an option for some people looking around for something to do."

Pugh thinks successful programming is a matter of "finding our strongest voice. You have to change, but you also have to be in touch with reality."

She added, "Part of the reason we've received acclaim at places like Spring to Dance and in New York is because our product is not hokey. It comes from a voice that is rooted here, and the Memphis voice finds listeners all over the world."