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Memphis Ballet gracefully dances into Carrollton audiences' hearts

By Danielle Davidson

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January 26 buzzed with excitement unprecedented in Carrollton. Ballet Memphis, a professional ballet company, danced in University of West Georgia's very own Townsend Center for the Performing Arts for a full house that included Dr. Beheruz Sethna and Mayor Wayne Garner.

The company's 21st season introduced a touring group of 16 professional dancers performing "the South's cultural legacy through dance, production and training."

Founded by Artistic Director Dorothy Gunter Pugh, Ballet Memphis has performed in Paris, New York, and now the prestigious Carrollton.

The show opened with a classic piece called "Allegro" featuring Crystal Brothers and Rafael Ferreras in a traditional ballet format full of ripples and graceful arms.

The applause following was well earned, and the audience settled in for a stunning performance.

They were not disappointed. Trey McIntyre's "In Dreams" mixed several songs by Roy Orbison and Sam Phillips with a modern form of ballet.

Straight arms and flexed feet, the piece developed a sense of primal rhythm not experienced in traditional ballet. The dancers accommodated the different form wonderfully, performing very dynamically with choreographed clapping and explosions of jumps.

At the intermission, everyone chatted about what could possibly come next while little girls danced in the aisles. Maddie Campbell, age 10, commented, "It was good... I like it when they throw the girls in the air."

The second half began with a modern version of Ray Charles' "Georgia on My Mind" with a sensual twist. Crystal Brothers and Travis Bradley engaged in an intrinsically

beautiful duet that seemed to strike a chord with the audience. After the couple glided offstage, more than a few handkerchiefs were brandished about.

The last piece, "Short Trip Home," tied all the previous music and styles into an energetic folk performance. With an unmistakable Southern twang, a banjo and violin played while eight dancers spun themselves into dance.

The experience was beyond captivating, as each of the dancers was just as passionate as the next. The modern movement appeared alongside the traditional pirouettes with surprisingly good results. The program ended with a solitary couple embracing each other in a spotlight: an uplifting and clean resolution for such a brilliant mix of work. After a few seconds of stunned awe, the crowd rose to their feet and gave a standing ovation.

Later, select audience members attended a cast party honoring both the company and the sponsors. When asked about her goals in ballet, Director Pugh stated, "I want to make new work significant and let it resonate with the audience...there's an impulse in ballet that believes we can all strive for something beautiful and enlightened. That's why little girls are drawn to it... to reflect the human story is to reach a person's heart and expand their experience."

Mayor Garner agreed, "In Carrollton, we have really been focusing on the arts... [this] ballet performance, the symphony, the art gallery, those are the things that will posture this town to be great... We're not only excited, but committed as well."

Arranging the performance required an alliance between the community and UWG. A year's worth of raising funds and coordinating schedules resulted in one night of high art, none of which would have been possible without the community volunteers.

P.J. Hovey, in particular, dedicated many hours and huge amounts of effort to the cause, along with Michelle Morgan. Dr. Andrew J. Leavitt extensively thanked the volunteers, adding that they plan to bring a professional artist or troupe to Carrollton annually.

"[The performance] was wonderful and it's so great to bring such things to Carrollton. We are fortunate to have a community so supportive of this kind of activity. Our vision is to build a destination university where people want to go...hosting national level ballet performances so people interested in a broad spectrum will want to attend," stated Sethna.

From the student perspective, Austin McGehee, a graduate in Secondary Education, remarked, "Coming from someone who knows nothing about dance, for me there was enough classic style with a good mix of modern... [it was] more appealing to the normal person. I would definitely come again."

The final statement goes to Karl Condon, the Associate Art Director for the company: "Thank you so much. Carrollton, UWG, and the host committee have treated us just wonderfully. Our dancers are excited to be here, and we hope we'll be invited back."