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The Des Moines Ballet: A Star in the Midwest

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THE DES MOINES BALLET:

Producing a professional ballet company in mid-America is by some conventional thought a peculiar enterprise. The luxuries of attention and financial support seem directed not to the heartland, but to the coastal areas. The Des Moines Ballet is convinced that the contrary is true. While the east and west coasts are accustomed to over-saturation and competition, a company in the Midwest has access to largely untapped audience and a lower level of competition for support. Des Moines is a highly prosperous city, based in an active insurance and banking business, and supports a symphony orchestra, an art center, in addition to the Ballet. The Company performs in a new \$9 million dollar theater that has been financed solely by private gifts and has much better-than-average rehearsal and teaching facilities. There is a certain amount of independence to be gained by working in the area. There are very few

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pre-conceived ideas about what the Company should look like or attempt to do. It is in such an environment that the Des Moines Ballet is thriving.

The Des Moines Ballet was founded in 1966 with the express purpose of providing training and performance opportunities for young dancers in the area. In 1978, the Board of Directors directed their attention towards a more professional presentation and retained Jorge Samaniego as Artistic Director and Kenneth MacDonald as Associate Artistic Director. The size of the performing body was trimmed drastically, presenting only the most able dancers and developing a new repertoire for their talents. One short year after the change in artistic direction, the Association elected to support professional dancers on a seasonal contract. The Company has remained chamber-sized to best facilitate touring.

Profile: Des Moines

In 1978, Des Moines, Iowa began a serious effort to develop a professional ballet company. Jorge Samaniego, artistic director, and Kenneth MacDonald, associate director, since August of 1978, have provided the necessary expertise and artistic direction to make the company a reality in a very short time. The present dancers include Samaniego and MacDonald plus six additional young performers. Three are from Des Moines and three are from other parts of the country. In addition to these performers, the company includes lighting and set designer Wayne Mikos, costume designer Donette Yeaton, and business manager, Kay McElrath.

Studios for the company are located in a recycled elementary school in Des Moines. The facility is made available to the company in exchange for educational services to the Des Moines public schools. Their performing home is the newly opened center for the performing arts in

downtown Des Moines. Although its home base is the capital city, the company intends to serve dance needs for the entire state. Its future plans include touring to other states and to other countries. In October the company took its performances to four cities in the state--Davenport, Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, and Sioux City under the sponsorship of the Iowa Humanities Board, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Youngers department stores.

The emergence of a professional ballet company in Iowa reflects the growing interest in dance in all parts of the nation. Iowans did not suddenly discover dance in 1978, however. The university based Iowa Dance Company under the direction of Alicia Brown in Iowa City provides a training ground for aspiring dancers in an academic setting. The university dance department includes among its faculty Francoise Martinet, a former member of the Joffrey ballet. A force for modern dance and dance education in the state, Betty Toman, is located at Iowa State University in Ames. Ms.

Toman is currently president of the American Dance Association. The Omaha Ballet under the direction of Thomas Eckell and Kathryn Horne, formerly with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet and American Ballet Theater in New York, represents another aspect of dance in Iowa. On the opposite side of the state, Julia Bennett and Edna Dieman operate the Dance Theater of the Hemisphere.

The present Des Moines Ballet has previous roots in its own community, where inspired teachers of ballet such as Mary Joyce Lind, who organized the initial group that became the Des Moines Ballet, have established the need and the interest necessary for its support. Samaniego's task has been to take the company to a higher level of professional development. His background as a performer with the New York City Opera Ballet, the Netherlands Dance Theater, Milwaukee Ballet and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company has provided the necessary professional experience to facilitate this task. In addition, he has choreographed for Milwaukee and Princeton ballets and for the Puerto

Rican dance theater. Associate director MacDonald complements Samaniego's efforts with his own training with American Concert Ballet, Lottie Gosslar, and the Milwaukee Ballet.

Lois Black, Julie Branam, Debbie Cameron, Sue Cooper, Kimberlee Knight, Rick Moore, Ron Olson, and Cynthia Vermillion are the other dancers in the company. Although most of these dancers are less experienced than Samaniego and MacDonald their determination and eagerness to satisfy the artistic demands of their chosen art is no less evident. They willingly repeat the same phrase one, ten, or a hundred times--to get it right. Their effort is rewarded in performances that are better than anyone could expect given their limited professional experience and their one-year's work together. The unassuming modesty of the dancers adds strength and integrity to their dancing and helps to overcome technical limitations.

Apart from the necessary dancers and support staff, a dance company must have choreography. Either

the company develops its own choreography, or it becomes a vehicle for the works of past and present outside choreographers. In this case, company director Jorge Samaniego has chosen to create his own works for the company to perform. The titles of his recent works "Isolations," "Tocota and Fugue," "Rhapsody in Blue," "Adam and Eve...A Rib," and "The Times They Are A-Dancing," suggest a range of ballets that include pure movement works, comic and whimsical dances, and those which probe the conflicting forces of modern life. Samaniego's choreography exhibits sufficient variety and artistic depth to satisfy the dancers and their growing audiences, at least for the present.

Guest artists Ann Marie De Angelo of the Joffrey Ballet and John Meehan of American Ballet Theater contributed to the pleasure of audiences on the company's fall tour and to the education of the younger company members. Both De Angelo and Meehan bring the experiences of their own international reputations to the Des Moines Ballet. De Angelo danced as soloist in "Isolations" and with

Meehan in the pas de deux from "Don Quixote." De Angelo is a highly spirited Italian-American ballerina whose own artistic presence gives life to the most abstract of steps. Meehan's elegant restraint and strong physical presence complements De Angelo's forceful energies as he

partners in Don Quixote.

The growth of a professional dance company in Iowa at this time signifies the further growth of the arts in the Midwest. It is an encouraging sign.

--By Curtis L. Carter