

# DANCE<sup>®</sup> magazine

## How Can a Ballet Company Transcend the "Regional" Label? Three Directors Sound Off

Cynthia Bond Perry - Sep. 18, 2018 10:46AM EST



Small- to medium-sized companies based in cities outside dance meccas—New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles—are often written off as "regional," or somehow lesser than their big city counterparts. But in recent decades, a few have defied such categorization as they've gained traction on the national and international scene.

So how does a company build an international profile without losing connection to its hometown? We asked the directors of Tulsa Ballet, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet and Sarasota Ballet to share their strategies.

### Forging a unique artistic identity

When Iain Webb came to direct Sarasota Ballet, he looked at American companies with a similar size and budget. "I could almost close my eyes and point to any of them," he says, "because they were all doing the same works. The oft-produced *Dracula* didn't excite him. Webb decided to go after a well-rounded

repertoire of historic ballets, works by established choreographers and new commissions, but his passion for preserving history is ultimately what has distinguished the company.

## Investing in new work

Tulsa Ballet in Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Shibuya Blues*. Photo by Francisco Estevez, Courtesy Tulsa Ballet

Tulsa Ballet, on the other hand, has invested in new work: Studio K, a 300-seat theater opened by artistic director Marcello Angelini on-site at the company's headquarters, is dedicated to presenting new ballets



commissioned to create a distinct identity for the company while helping the art form to progress.

## Having an eye for rising talent



Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in Jorma Elo's *1st Flash*. Photo by Rosalie O'Connor, Courtesy ASFB

In 1996, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet started small, commissioning works from then-up-and-coming contemporary ballet choreographers—Jorma Elo, Nicolo Fonte, Helen Pickett—whose work in turn shaped the young company's profile. "All of a sudden," executive director Jean-Philippe Malaty says, "the choreographers we had discovered were of

interest on the national and international level." A taste for these kind of works, and those created at ASFB, developed across the U.S., and touring opportunities emerged organically from there.

## Using connections



Sarasota Ballet in Sir Frederick Ashton's *Birthday Offering*. Photo by Frank Atura, Courtesy Sarasota Ballet

Of the 154 ballets added to Sarasota Ballet's repertoire under Webb's direction, about 27 are Ashton

works—many rarely produced, and some never before seen in the U.S. Webb attributes this to his and Margeret Barbieri's performing careers with The Royal Ballet, and their working relationships with Ashton and Royal Ballet founder Ninette de Valois.

## Recruiting dancers from around the world

Tulsa Ballet in Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Shibuya Blues*. Photo by Francisco Estevez, Courtesy Tulsa Ballet

Since the world's best dancers aren't likely to come knocking on Tulsa Ballet's door,



Angelini talks with colleagues all over the world to locate the best talent, then holds auditions in those places—most recently London, Rome, Cannes, Munich and New York City. The resulting international roster helps make the company relevant whether they are performing in Tulsa, NYC or abroad.



## Building a strategic model tailored to the company's home base



Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in Alejandro Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost*. Photo by Rosalie O'Connor, Courtesy ASFB

In keeping with the American West's pioneering spirit, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet nimbly set up homes in two cities. The company schedules its home performances around tourist season in both Aspen and Santa Fe. Many of their devotees also have homes in larger cities like New York and Los Angeles, creating a natural audience base when the company performs in those cities. Dancers are on a 52-week contract so that if a touring opportunity suddenly arises, they are in shape and ready to go.

### **"Never talk down to your audience."**

"Every program has a work that pleases (comfort food), one that puts us at the edge of our seats (the spicy stuff) and one that challenges us (the plate we never had before and that comes from a faraway place...)" says Angelini. "The important thing is to embark on a journey together with your audience, and continue growing in unison. Never talk down to your audience, just walk the walk together."