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*Commentary:*

## Los Angeles Ballet on upswing in its fifth year

By Lewis Segal, SPECIAL TO THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

**Despite a rocky arts landscape, Los Angeles Ballet has managed to not only survive but also prosper. What's needed now is more attention from the local community to this admirable, and creative, company.**

Congratulations are in order — and maybe a sigh of relief. With its “Nutcracker” performances this weekend at the Alex Theatre in Glendale (plus repeats through the month in two other Southland venues), Los Angeles Ballet entered its fifth season as a resident professional company. Season 5 and counting: not exactly a golden anniversary but definitely a hard-won benchmark.

It's been a turbulent demi-decade for all arts organizations, one in which long-established companies such as Orange County's Ballet Pacifica vanished from the landscape. And that was before the recession took its toll in radically diminished institutional and governmental funding for the arts.

But Los Angeles Ballet hasn't merely survived for five seasons; it's increased the operating budget some 80%, from \$900,000 in 2006-07 to \$1,624,000 in 2010-11. And there are other signs of growth: increased ticket sales (up 12% last season), a new school and company center in West Los Angeles, a reconstituted board of directors, expanded support staff and audience development activities.

So celebration is justified, but not complacency. After all, John Clifford's attempt at a company of the same name in the 1970s existed for more than 10 years before it folded: a casualty of consistently under-rehearsed dancing, relentlessly mediocre home-grown choreography and the erosion of its support base.

In contrast, the dancing in the new, millennial Los Angeles Ballet has always been meticulously professional and the new choreography varied and often exciting — though you can't really measure the quality of any company from



Los Angeles Ballet Artistic Directors Colleen Neary, left, and her husband, Thordal Christensen, at the Los Angeles Ballet Studios. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

its “Nutcracker.” Clifford, however, had a knack for making his troupe seem omnipresent, a major player in local dance, while the excellences of the new company have achieved little impact or even visibility on the L.A. arts scene.

Yes, it appeared as a guest on the popular “So You Think You Can Dance” reality show. And it publicized its “Nutcracker” by offering tickets on the Groupon discount site. But such innovations produced no buzz in the local community. And if you looked at the winners of the annual Lester Horton Dance Awards — an index of peer-group recognition in Southland dance — you'd scarcely know Los Angeles Ballet existed.

Yet season after season, the company gives admirable performances of challenging neoclassical masterworks by George Balanchine, staged by co-artistic director Colleen Neary. The rep this March includes two highly accessible Balanchine staples: “Raymonda Variations” and “Western Symphony,” the first a tribute to the choreographer's imperial Russian heritage, the second an expression of his enjoyment of the cowboy culture in his adopted homeland.

But Balanchine isn't the company's sole choreographic asset.

Indeed, co-artistic director Thordal Christensen's 2009 staging of August Bournonville's full-length “La Sylphide” easily outclassed the badly deteriorated American Ballet Theatre version and the crude approximation by the Bolshoi Ballet. The company's first attempt at a genuine 19th century story ballet, it proved conclusively that Los Angeles Ballet can switch styles with no loss of authority.

On the schedule for May: “Giselle,” another foray into the Romantic era, which Christensen previously staged for the Royal Danish Ballet.

### **Creative partners**

A husband-and-wife team, Christensen and Neary danced, respectively, in Bournonville’s and Balanchine’s home companies along with other national and international ensembles. Besides their expertise on stage and in the studio, they have explored business strategies that initially seemed promising but sometimes proved counterproductive.

Wisely, they quickly abandoned the notion of making Los Angeles Ballet a backup ensemble for guest stars, a practice that sells tickets but generates no company loyalty. However, their very brief repertory seasons (typically four performances) leave dancers little time to develop a personal spin on roles — to own them by an individual interpretation. So the performances often look strongly cast, coached and executed but not indelible.

Worse, the directors have divided those seasons into weekend engagements in Westwood, Glendale, Redondo Beach and sometimes Santa Monica, which requires everyone to remain rehearsed at maximum firepower for nearly a month with only a performance or two in each venue as payoff.

The concept of touring greater L.A. is sound in terms of audience development, for virtually every poll says that the public doesn’t want to travel more than half an hour to cultural events. But the strain on the dancers has caused Los Angeles Ballet to lose some of its most distinctive soloists to companies with longer seasons. And high-profile principals are a major reason that people keep coming back to ballet.

Christensen and Neary have also had to contend with the very daunting conditions of sustaining art in Southern California — a place famed for welcoming every kind of creative expression without supporting anything for long. As far as ballet is concerned, the Los Angeles audience is highly isolated, almost never seeing the reigning international stars and classical companies that appear regularly down the 405 on the well-subsidized dance series at the Orange County Performing Arts Center.

As a result, American Ballet Theatre has become the sole standard-bearer for the ballet audience in L.A., though, ironically, the company’s reputation in New York largely depends on those very same international stars who are seldom booked for its engagements at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

As the insular, old-guard ballet audience here ages and shrinks, only ABT and ABT offshoots turn up

regularly on the Music Center’s classical lineup — and then only for split weeks — while widely acclaimed (and arguably better) companies such as San Francisco Ballet are increasingly unseen or undersold. So where does that leave the newbies?

With a clean slate, that’s where. To survive, Christensen and Neary must build an audience from scratch — not just for Los Angeles Ballet but for the art in general — an audience that knows what it’s seeing and will still be around by the time the company celebrates its next five-year benchmark.

### **In the works**

In February, the directors are scheduled to present a plan for the future to their board. A draft of that plan reveals projected budget increases that should reach \$2,460,848 by the 2015-16 season.

“Swan Lake” is penciled in for Season 6 or 7, and the recently inaugurated Choreographic Workshop — in which local dance-makers created works for the company — will become an annual event.

A season of five productions instead of the current three will expand the dancers’ 24-week period of employment. Additional venues (Pasadena? Northridge? Orange County?) are also under consideration. But live music is not on the horizon, according to executive director Julie Whittaker (much too costly), and all this hoped-for growth will take place in an economy that experts warn may languish through the company’s 10th anniversary and beyond.

Caution is warranted, but so is pride. A company founded with the highest possible standards at the worst possible time is not only news, it’s inspiring. Christensen and Neary took a chance on Los Angeles and produced the kind of art that helps us get through times like these.

Isn’t it high time that Los Angeles stops ignoring the evidence and takes a chance on them?

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Institutions are living beings with their own distinct energies and auras. Watching one appear, grow, stumble, recover and mature can be a fascinating spectacle.

I don't know anyone personally at Los Angeles Ballet, but when I was asked to write a five-year retrospective on the company, I found myself producing more of an advocacy piece than I had intended.

That surprised me.

I first watched Los Angeles Ballet as staff dance critic at *The Times*, reviewing its inaugural performances. But before that I reported on its formation and initial plans, along with those of two other ballet companies that failed to get off the ground.

I watch it now as a civilian, not uncritically but with an investment in years. In a way, I am part of its history. That doesn't make what I have to say important, but it is informed by seeing what a lot of other companies were dancing in the Southland during the same five years and balancing their achievements against those of this struggling, can-do local entity.

[Click here to run my analysis of Los Angeles Ballet.](#)

-- Lewis Segal

*Photo: The Los Angeles Ballet 's February performance of "Serenade." Credit: Los Angeles Times.*