



on their toes

DESPITE LA'S RICH CULTURAL ARTS SCENE, DANCE HAS LONG BEEN ON THE BACK BURNER. BUT THANKS TO THE LOS ANGELES BALLET, IT'S PIROUETTING ITS WAY TO TOP HONORS. BY EMILI VESILIND

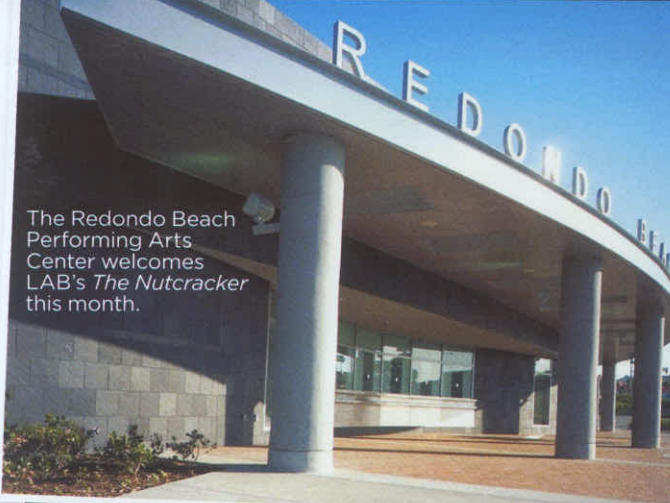
Ballet in Los Angeles has had a rocky history. Marred by countless false starts, the city's classical dance scene has historically had trouble supporting a top-tier professional troupe—prompting iconic director/choreographer George Balanchine to famously proclaim there was “no hope” for ballet in L.A.

Until now, that is. The Los Angeles Ballet (LAB), which kicks off its sixth season December 3 with *The Nutcracker*, has slowly evolved into L.A.'s official resident company, renowned for its high-caliber dancers and next-generation repertoire—a mix of old chestnuts and original works by innovative young choreographers.

For dance-world insiders, it may not come as a surprise that the company is flourishing. LAB's husband-and-wife artistic directors and cofounders, Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary, are both former principal dancers and veteran ballet instructors (and, in Christensen's case, artistic director) with decades of experience at some of the most venerated ballet companies in the world.

Together, along with Julie Whittaker, another ballet-world veteran and executive director of LAB, they created a board of directors. Two years of business planning

Principal dancers Allyssa Bross and Christopher Revels in last season's production of The Los Angeles Ballet's *The Nutcracker*.



The Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center welcomes LAB's *The Nutcracker* this month.

followed before the company gave its very first performance, *The Nutcracker*, to favorable reviews in 2006.

Still, it seemed some local dance fans remained wary of the new company, which had adopted the same moniker as so many other upstarts that showed promise, but quickly fizzled out. But LAB's high-quality dancers and consistent, stellar programming over the past five years—geared to both the ballet neophyte and the connoisseur—has eradicated much of the doubt.

LAB has had its share of turnover among its dancers since its inception, which is to be expected in a young company, but currently boasts around 30 dancers who work an annual 24- to 28-week season. "They are young, beautiful, and exciting to watch," says a proud Neary, adding that many are fresh from America's best ballet schools.

The company tours the greater LA area each season, performing at Glendale's Alex Theatre Performing Arts & Entertainment Center, Royce Hall at UCLA Live, the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center, The Broad Stage in Santa Monica, and—new this season—the Richard & Karen Carpenter Performing Arts Center in Long Beach and the Valley Performing Arts Center in Northridge. "It's important we establish [ourselves in] LA first, before we tour anywhere else," says Christensen. *The Nutcracker*, this season's festive opening ballet, is "very important to present around the holidays," says Neary. "Kids love it; the dancers love it, and so do we."

Next up on the Ballet's schedule is *Swan Lake*, which Christensen calls "fabulous, because it has glorious music. Whether you like hip-hop or classical, there is no way you will not be moved by what's going on."

Finally, the company will reprise its provocative NextWaveLA series, which features world-



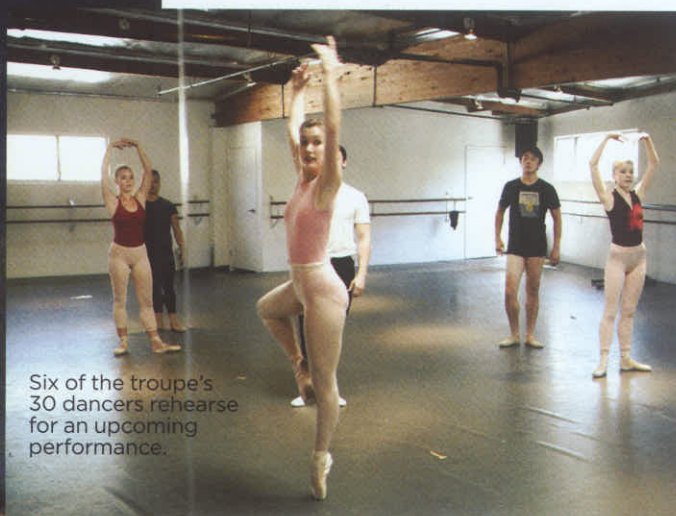
The Los Angeles Ballet's artistic directors and cofounders, Colleen Neary and Thordal Christensen.

"It's important we establish [ourselves in] LA before we tour."
—THORDAL CHRISTENSEN

premiere works created by local choreographers specifically for dancers in LAB. This time around, the guest choreographers are scheduled to be Sonya Tayeh, Josie Walsh, Travis Wall, and Stacey Tookey—all contemporary artists known for their contributions to the reality competition show *So You Think You Can Dance*. "The choreography you see them do on TV is very different than what they do for the company," says Christensen. "With us, they are working with classically trained dancers."

The choice to feature choreographers outside of the classical dance arena is indicative of the couple's dedication to cultivating the next generation of ballet enthusiasts in LA. "We're a classical-based company, but the creation of new works is very important to us," says Christensen. "We have to be a [melting] pot for the performing arts here. We're trying to bring together choreographers, composers, and dancers. It's good for us, good for the company, and good for LA."

The Nutcracker is performed at the Alex Theatre Dec. 3-4; Royce Hall, Dec. 17-18; and Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center, Dec. 22-24. For tickets and information, visit losangelesballet.org. **LAC**



Six of the troupe's 30 dancers rehearse for an upcoming performance.