

For the first time, two of the largest US ballet companies are in Memphis

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Three of the country's largest ballet companies are in Tennessee, according to a new analysis.

Two of those ballet companies are in Memphis, according to an August 2023 Dance Data Project study that ranks the 50 largest organizations. Collage Dance Collective entered the top 50 for the first time at No. 46. Ballet Memphis is No. 32.

"It's things like this (study) that show the community does want to see dance," said Marcellus Harper, Collage Dance Collective executive director. "The community does want to see dance grow. And to have two of the largest ballet companies in the country in our city is reflective of that."

"Every great city has great art and culture groups, and ballet companies are generally a pillar of that," said Steven McMahon, Ballet Memphis artistic director.

The other Tennessee company making the list, Nashville Ballet, moved into the top 25 at No. 22.

“I think it shows that Tennesseans value the art and are really showing up,” Nashville Ballet artistic director Nick Mullikin said about the study.

This is the fifth annual such report the Dance Data Project has conducted.

The Dance Data Project ranked companies by size of their annual expenses as reported during the 2021 fiscal year. Dance Data Project uses Form 990s filed to the Internal Revenue Service as well as third-party databases of Form 990 data.

The study notes that the list is not based on “aesthetics;” it is an objective one based on a company’s “economic contribution to the ballet sector.”

“We recognize, specifically, that we’re providing full-time jobs for artists, we’re making an economic impact in these cities and we are giving cities in Tennessee a place to attract other businesses, which increases the tax revenues and benefits to for a city overall, which then goes back — ideally, if the government is doing its job — to the people,” Mullikin said.

Only six states have three or more ballet companies in the top 50. New York has the highest number of companies represented with five. Texas follows with four. Joining Tennessee with three companies on the list are California, Florida and Pennsylvania.

Leaders with all three Tennessee companies mentioned the connection between their city’s notable music heritage and their city dance scene.

“Nashville isn’t just a music city, it’s a dance city,” Mullikin said. “And you can’t dance without really great music. So that pairing goes alongside it, and I think there’s such a wonderfully rich culture in Tennessee.”

“Memphis is a music city. There’s nothing that pairs better than music with dance, so to me, it’s natural that Memphis should also be known for its dance,” Harper said.

Gretchen Wollert McLennon, Ballet Memphis’ president and CEO, said Memphis and Tennessee’s representation on the ranking gave her a “sense of pride.”

“Our attitude is, at the end of the day, more people coming to dance, even somewhere else, brings more people understanding the arts and ballet and dance itself,” she said. “And hopefully accrues to the benefit of the whole ecosystem.”

On Sept. 16, Ballet Memphis and Nashville Ballet will both be part of Collage’s third annual Memphis Dance Festival.

The free event will also include performances from Memphis native Lil Buck, San Francisco's Alonzo King Lines and New York City Ballet, among others.

About 3,000 people attended last year's festival.

For the Dance Data Project study, the entity defines a ballet company as an organization that "has roots in classical ballet and is a professional performing company." It also considers if an organization teaches pointework to an affiliated school and it commissions choreography its peer companies perform.

The overall aim of the Dance Data Project is promoting gender equity in dance; other reports from it analyze gender distribution of choreographers among the 150 largest ballet companies in the U.S. and gender distribution among those same companies' board and executive leadership.

"All three of us, it's great that we're all inside of this list, but every one of us is approaching this art form differently," Mullikin said. "So that also gives us a lot of context about how versatile the art form is. ... I'm hopeful as Tennessee tries to move forward, as we try to build upon who we are, as we try to grow and learn from our mistakes, that we can do that alongside what ballet means, which means ballet also has to grow and learn from itself. It has to evolve."

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