

Memphis Flyer | Bodies in Motion

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The longer nights of autumn settling in signify more than just the coming of winter. It's also the season when the performing arts ignite, stages lighting up across the city to dazzle us, beguile us, and draw us into the show as if to a primordial bonfire. This is especially true of dance companies, where the elemental combination of ritual and individual expression is taken to a high art. And the holiday season is the bread and butter of many such ensembles due to one ballet in particular: *The Nutcracker*.

As research by *Crain's New York Business* determined in 2013, "a production of *The Nutcracker* can bring in anywhere from 40 percent to 45 percent of a ballet company's revenue." This makes it especially important in Memphis, where the audience for dance can be especially fickle. Yet dance continues to thrive here as never before, and the winter dance season — including New Ballet Ensemble's *NutRemix*, Ballet Memphis' *The Nutcracker*, and Collage Dance's *RISE* — is one reason why, not least because all three companies are also dance schools. Not only do these three productions put their respective schools' youngest students onstage with world-class dance virtuosos from Memphis and beyond, they highlight

the creativity and inventiveness with which all three companies approach the art of dance. The ways they're reimagining that art are one key to why dance is thriving in Memphis as never before.

A Dance Renaissance in the Home of the Blues

If Memphis is the “Home of Blues, Soul & Rock ‘n’ Roll,” as the city’s official slogan boasts, it’s worth pointing out the unifying subtext behind all those musical forms: dance. Social bodily movement was baked into the blues, soul, and rock-and-roll from their very origins. Of course, popular dance has not always been celebrated in the conservatories of the world, focused as they are on the Western balletic tradition, but that began to change through the second half of the last century as visionaries like Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey incorporated American folk forms into their choreography. Today, due to this city’s role as a crucible of popular music and dance, that merging of “high” and “low” terpsichorean art is accelerating — and putting Memphis on the cutting edge of innovation in the dance world.

That was underscored this August when a study by the Dance Data Project named Ballet Memphis and Collage Dance among the 50 largest dance companies in the country, with the former ranked at No. 32 and the latter at No. 46. Only one other Tennessee company, Nashville Ballet, made the list. In future years, Collage Dance will likely rank even higher, thanks to the \$2 million Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant the school received this summer. Dance is becoming a financial dynamo of sorts in Tennessee.

“We’re providing full-time jobs for artists,” Nashville Ballet artistic director Nick Mullikin told *The Daily Memphian*, and the point applies to Memphis as well. “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 a city overall, which then goes back — ideally, if the government is doing its job — to the people.”

Meanwhile, a third dance organization here, New Ballet Ensemble and School (NBE), has also been garnering praise for years, winning the prestigious National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award in 2014, with the school’s students dancing at the Kennedy Center in a performance *The Washington Post* called “dazzling.” Today, some of its former students are finding fame on an international scale.

There’s clearly something big happening in the world of Memphis dance. And although the Dance Data Project study was based on companies’ annual expenses in 2021, it indicates an even deeper truth: The success of the dance scene in Memphis owes as much to companies’ aesthetic innovations as to their finances. All three of the companies and their affiliated schools have, to varying degrees, embraced local vernacular dance forms, combining a commitment to the high technical standards of the balletic tradition with vigorous outreach programs that include Memphis’ most underserved communities. The end result not

only bends in the direction of social justice, it breaks new artistic ground and puts Memphis performances on the cutting edge of dance innovation. That's especially evident in each company's winter showcase performances.

NutRemix

The first opportunity to celebrate the flowering of local dance will be this week, when NBE's *NutRemix*, presented by Nike, returns to the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts November 17th through 19th. To say this show, now in its 21st year, is imbued with the spirit of Memphis is an understatement. Indeed, *NutRemix* is a testament to both the original ballet's malleability and this city's openness to reimagining classic forms.

While *The Nutcracker* has been reinvented before, most audaciously in the Mark Morris Dance Group's *The Hard Nut* (a dark retelling of the classic tale set in postwar American suburbia), there's nothing quite like the freedom of thought, music, and movement expressed by NBE's version. Rather than have the extended family of Russian nobility gather in a mansion in the ballet's first act, it's the fictive family of a petit bourgeois shop owner, his workers, and associated hangers-on around Beale Street. Transforming that locale, long known as a kind of sin city of the South, into a kind of multicultural utopia is a moving conceit that still allows considerable drama into the tale, as hard-edged urban grit enters in the form of hip-hop dance battles. Indeed, hip-hop dance, especially Memphis jookin', is proudly celebrated along with ballet, R&B, African, and flamenco dance forms, with the globe-hopping fantasia of *The Nutcracker's* second act transformed into a celebration of diversity.

This reinvention leapt from the mind of NBE's founder, Katie Smythe, but it didn't come from nowhere. She'd tested the notion before she'd moved back to her native Memphis. "I was running the outreach education program through the Los Angeles Music Center. We were doing dance performances in schools, and I loved that, but how many *Cinderellas* can a group of Black children watch, where Cinderella is white and the prince is white, before they're thinking, 'Where am I in this?' It was really stupid and I was very headstrong! So I created a condensed *Sleeping Beauty*. I hired black dancers, and I danced in it, too. And we made it only 30 minutes. I changed the narrative, made it fun, and put all different kinds of music in it. And the kids loved it! So that's where I learned how to do *NutRemix*."

It was also a perfect opportunity to introduce younger dance students to a more professional production, and the show's been the centerpiece of the school's pedagogical approach. It soon became a vehicle for older students to explore their talents. "The only way to bring those different genres into our performance," says Smythe, "was to have the leaders of those diverse sections really lead them, choreograph them, and claim them as creators. I've never taken credit for *NutRemix* as choreographer because the truth is, the kids choreographed about 50 percent of it. John Washington choreographed the African section, Robin Sanders choreographed the hip-hop battle, Lil Buck choreographed the angel — in fact, he created that role. I also learned from a Chinese woman working for FedEx here, who wanted a place

to have Chinese dance classes. I studied with her and then we made the Chinese scene more culturally authentic, using Yo-Yo Ma's *Silk Road* music. We were undoing the stereotypes inherent in *NutRemix*."

Eventually, the production gained the support of Nike, and now boasts a full-on production featuring the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and Big Band and African drummers. And as professionals from elsewhere, including NBE alums who've gone on to successful careers, join the cast, they help Memphis tap into an international network of excellence. This year will feature two renowned NBE alums: Maxx Reed, who's returned to serve as the show's creative director, and acclaimed dancer Memphis jookin' ambassador Lil Buck, who will reprise his role as the Memphis Angel. Internationally celebrated dancers Myrna Kamara and Filipe Portugal will also share the stage with NBE's students. With so many talents involved, *NutRemix* is a Memphis phenomenon that shows no signs of losing its spark of innovation.



The Nutcracker (Photo: Stefanie Rawlinson)

The Nutcracker

NutRemix isn't the only reimagining of *The Nutcracker* in the city. The Buckman Dance Conservatory will offer a fresh interpretation of the classic, *Nutcracker: Land of Enchanted Sweets*, this December 1st through 3rd at the Buckman Performing Arts Center. But the classic staging of *The Nutcracker* has a special place in the hearts of dance fans, and Ballet Memphis has had that covered for nearly 40 years.

This year's production will carry all the finery of a traditional ballet company production, with some unexpected touches that will only be revealed in the performances, scheduled for December 9th to 10th and 15th to 17th at the Orpheum Theatre, featuring live music by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. With choreography by Steven McMahon, this season will represent an evolution of the set and costume design that will bring “renewed vibrancy to the classic story,” according to a Ballet Memphis press release. “Transport yourself to a sweetly nostalgic riverside and a confectionary dreamland through the eyes of a young girl destined for adventure. Ballet Memphis’ new production of this beloved American holiday tradition promises to delight in both familiar and unexpected ways.”

Like NBE, Ballet Memphis treats the holiday performance as a chance to mix young students of dance — and not just those enrolled in Ballet Memphis — with the seasoned veterans of the company. “The students can audition for *The Nutcracker*, which is the professional company’s production,” says Eileen Frazer, community programs manager and teaching artist at Ballet Memphis. “So that includes between 60 and 100 of our students getting that performance opportunity. Also, *The Nutcracker* auditions are open to students from other studios as well. So we get to have a little community and integration with everyone in the city, and even from Arkansas and Mississippi.”

Such student involvement is critical to Ballet Memphis’ mission, and they’ve been delighted by what appears to be growing interest in ballet among young people. “In Memphis, the ballet community is thriving. The city has several schools and companies, and I think the love for classical ballet is only growing at this stage,” says Frazer. “We saw a bit of a dip during the pandemic, as all organizations did, and we’re still growing our student body back from that, but we have students coming to us from other studios, where the focus hasn’t been classical ballet, because they want that focus on classical technique.”

Even with that as a starting point, Frazer points out, such technique forms the basis for a wide variety of dance. “We do a class in modern dance as well, but classical ballet doesn’t just mean dancing to classical music. You need that classical ballet foundation to do all types of dance, even all types of sports. We have kids coming through saying, ‘My football coach told me I had to take ballet.’”

Frazer emphasizes that, because of the company’s eclectic performance schedule, their students are not learning in a vacuum. “Being attached to our professional company, the students are seeing these incredible professional dancers, dancing to all kinds of music — classical music, or Patsy Cline, or Roy Orbison, or soul music. We aren’t just doing full length classical ballets. We’re bringing in a lot of up-and-coming choreographers, doing a lot of new work. That lends itself to doing more contemporary movement.”



RISE (Photo: Tre'Bor Jones)

RISE

All three schools are committed to balletic technique as the foundation of their teaching, even as they're open to more modern forms. Perhaps that's been the key to the thriving dance culture Memphis is enjoying. And the rapid rise of the most recent addition to the Memphis scene, Collage Dance, is indicative of just how primed the city is for dance education and performance, all wrapped into one.

Founded as a performance company in 2006 by executive director Marcellus Harper and artistic director Kevin Thomas to remediate the ballet industry's lack of racial diversity, it was originally based in New York, not Memphis. Their mission grew directly out of Thomas' 10 years of experience as the principal dancer at the Dance Theatre of Harlem. They relocated here the next year and added the conservatory to the organization, sensing that dance was not only gaining momentum but had potential for growth in Memphis.

They were onto something. That same year, in 2007, a video emerged of Lil Buck mixing ballet and jookin' in a solo to Saint-Saëns' "The Swan" for an NBE event in West Memphis. It went viral, helping to launch the dancer's career and raising the profile of Memphis dance as a whole. Meanwhile, Collage worked to find its footing locally, teaching in various host

locations from 2009 on, attracting more students every year. And their professional company, officially known as Collage Dance Collective, was building its reputation and touring internationally.

Karen Nicely, Collage's community engagement programmer and faculty teacher, has worked with the organization from the start and is not surprised by Collage's rapid evolution into one of the South's leading companies and conservatories. "I have been with Collage every year and it's been amazing to see. It's grown because of the mission that the guys have: to expand access and quality training to even more communities and especially underserved communities." The culmination of that came in 2020 when, despite months of quarantine, Collage raised \$11 million to build a dedicated dance center of its own. Soon that beautiful modernist building in the heart of Binghampton will spring to life when Collage Dance hosts the International Conference of Blacks and Dance from January 24th to January 28th — the ultimate feather in the cap of the organization that will feature performances by the Collage Dance Collective as well as other internationally celebrated companies.

Collage's sense of mission may explain why their most gala event of the year is not *The Nutcracker* (although the professional Collage Dance Collective does perform the ballet elsewhere during its touring season), but a dance created by Thomas, *RISE*. While it also includes a mix of the company's professionals with students, it is inherently more politically and culturally engaged with the modern era than any 19th century ballet could be. It typically takes place during Black History Month, and the 2024 production, scheduled for February 3rd and 4th, will be no different.

"In *RISE*, you see the stars of today, which are my professional company, and the stars of tomorrow, which are my students," says Thomas. "Students are dancing alongside the professionals. So it really feels like a community. I was inspired to do this piece when I went to the National Civil Rights Museum when I first came to Memphis. It just reminded me that we have a history that needs to not be forgotten."

The specific history evoked is that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I use his last speech, his 'Mountaintop' speech, to tell our story through movement and music, as you hear his words," says Thomas. Though the sound design is pre-recorded, it is made all the more powerful through the music of local composers Jonathan Kirkscey and Kirk Kienzle Smith. As Thomas puts it, "We've used the music of these two Memphians to create a ballet honoring Martin Luther King's philosophy, using his powerful speech which talks about the future. And the future is our kids, our students. It's their future."

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