

# Oregon Ballet Theatre

By Linda R. Besant

Founded in 1989, the Oregon Ballet Theatre is the largest professional ballet company in Oregon. The company, which is rooted in the traditions of classical ballet, performs a wide-ranging repertoire that ranges from classics to the work of modern choreographers. Attracting artists from around the world, OBT has performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Joyce Theater in New York, and Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts in Virginia. The company operates a ballet school and employs nearly two hundred people.

In the late 1980s, two Portland-based companies, Ballet Oregon and Pacific Ballet Theatre, were struggling and decided to merge their funding resources. In order to maintain the talents of Ballet Oregon's Dennis Spaight and Pacific Ballet Theatre's James Canfield, representatives from each organization formed a committee to negotiate the consolidation. Canfield, a former principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet who was known for his edgy choreography, became artistic director. *Oregonian* art critic Grant Butler described his aesthetic as, "signature rock 'n' roll." In contrast, Spaight created works in a more classical or traditional style.

By the summer of 1989, the two groups were officially one company with twenty-five dancers in the corps. Canfield developed a diverse repertoire of over eighty ballets, including classics and contemporary works. From 2003 to 2012, OBT performed nearly 350 ballets, 20 of them world premieres. Artistic director Christopher Stowell created ten ballets for the company and expanded its repertoire with works by such choreographers as George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, William Forsythe, and Lar Lubovitch. He is best known for his choreography for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which premiered with OBT in 2007 and continues to be performed by other companies across the nation.

Kevin Irving became OBT's third artistic director in 2013. Under his leadership, the company performed world premieres from contemporary choreographers Nicolo Fonte, Darrell Grand Moultrie, and Helen Pickett and collaborated with Portland artists and organizations, such as the Portland Art Museum, the Multnomah County Library, violist Kenji Bunch, and the band Pink Martini. In 2023, Dani Rowe became artistic director and was the first woman to lead the company.

OBT's performing company presents a four-show main stage season each year at the Keller Auditorium and the Newmark Theatre in downtown Portland. The performances are often accompanied by small ensembles or the OBT Orchestra, led by Musical Director and Conductor Niel DePonte. The orchestra accompanies most of the large-scale classical ballet productions such as *Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Professional instructors from the Oregon Ballet Theatre School, founded with the company in 1989, train over 800 students at its headquarters in the South Waterfront District in Portland. (A second campus, opened in West Linn in January 2016, closed in June 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.) Some of the teaching faculty are former dancers at OBT, and others are recruited nationally. Alumni have danced professionally with international companies and almost every major company in the United States, including the New York City Ballet, the American Ballet Theatre, the Joffrey Ballet, and the Los Angeles Ballet. In 2015, the school launched OBT2, an upper-level junior ensemble that performs locally and trains dancers as they transition to professional careers. OBT also offers several after-school programs, in-school workshops, and field trip opportunities, and it provides curriculum to teachers who want to integrate dance and movement into subject lessons.

OBT adapted to the COVID pandemic by creating digital content and by performing on non-traditional stages in a series of pop-up appearances and classes. As of 2024, the company is comprised of twenty-four dancers and four apprentices.

## Sources

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