

## New Name and New Dancers Mark Growth for Ballet Quad Cities

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 28 August 2001 18:00

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When she began dancing with CMBT two years ago, Erica Christensen found that the company was not well-known in the Quad Cities. “No one even knew there was a ballet company around,” she said. At the time, CMBT: Quad Cities Professional Ballet Company had four dancers. This past year, that number grew to eight. And in the upcoming season, the newly christened Ballet Quad Cities will feature 11 dancers.

Those things have fostered greater awareness in the community, Christensen said. And that, in turn, has spurred more growth.

This year, along with adding three dancers, Ballet Quad Cities will expand its educational outreach programs and begin touring regionally. In December, the company will take *The Nutcracker* to Muscatine, and in February, it will perform new works at Coe College in Cedar Rapids. According to Joedy Cook, the executive director of Ballet Quad Cities, the company hopes to have four performance venues outside of the Quad Cities by September 2002.

All these things plus a fresh name equal a chance for the dance company to re-introduce itself to the community as well as surrounding areas.

Cassandra Manning Ballet Theatre started in 1990 as a company for 15 high-school dance students. As the students grew older, “the next step was a professional company,” Cook said. So five years ago, the Cassandra Manning began a transition into its professional incarnation, with one paid dancer. The name was shortened to CMBT, and finally this month the company changed its name to Ballet Quad Cities, something “to better reflect our commitment to the community,” Cook said. “Ballet Quad Cities’ says it all.”

While the ballet company has been doing educational outreach for the past several years – including programs in schools and reduced-priced matinees for schoolchildren – Ballet Quad Cities is expanding its programs to include senior citizens and organizations such as the Girl Scouts and the Boys & Girls Clubs. It is also adding printed curriculum materials to its

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classroom programs. "As the ballet company grows, we make sure the educational opportunities grow with it," Cook said.

Ballet Quad Cities is the only professional ballet company in Iowa and western Illinois. And it says a fair amount about the climate in the world of dance that a young dance company in the Quad Cities has been able to lure dancers from around the country.

"They're re-locating here because of this job," Cook said. "Dancers are here for only one reason: because they're dancing for Ballet Quad Cities."

That's not because Ballet Quad Cities pays extraordinarily well; it's because Ballet Quad Cities pays at all. "There are so many dancers, and so few jobs," said the 23-year-old Christensen, who was looking for dancing work for a year and a half before landing in the Quad Cities.

Although dancers put in 30 hours a week during their eight-month contracts, most also hold down second jobs, whether teaching dance or working in the service sector. Christensen works four or five days a week teaching at the City Center School of the Arts

"That's not an ideal situation," said Kristin Marrs, a 21-year-old dancer entering her second year with the company. "But this is basically a dream come true, to be paid for doing what I love."

Cook said that future growth might involve boosting pay rather than adding dancers, "to take care of the dancers we have."

Ballet Quad Cities is in many ways in an ideal position: It's small enough to offer a supportive environment while growing.

"We're like a big family," Christensen said. "In bigger ballet companies, it's just not as friendly."

Ballet Quad Cities Artistic Director Johanne Jakhelln brings both friendliness and professionalism to the company, dancers said. Cook added that she also makes dance more accessible through her use of accompaniment.

"She has a wonderful flair for choosing music," Cook said. Jakhelln picks tunes that are "easy to hear," she added. "We are not just a hardcore classical ballet company."

That goes for the choreography, as well. Marrs said that Jakhelln is extremely knowledgeable about classical ballet yet is also well-versed in contemporary dance. The result is a diverse schedule that shows different facets and possibilities of dance.

The 2001-2 season opens with an interesting program on October 13 and 14, with two public performances. Dan Culver, director of orchestral activities and Henry Veld professor of music at Augustana College, will lead an orchestra providing live music for the performance. Culver said the orchestra will play an undanced overture and then provide the musical accompaniment for *P*

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*eter & The Wolf*  
and two new ballets.

“To work with these people is a real joy because of the level of professionalism and responsibility,” Culver said.

For the October program, guest choreographer Simone Ferro has created a ballet to Villa-Lobos’ *Bachianas Brasileiras Number Five*, a piece for soprano and eight cellos based on a Brazilian folk tune. Ferro worked with the dancers this past spring and will return in September to fine-tune the piece. Marris said the choreographer brings a “different style of movement” to the company.

And then a jazz ensemble will keep the beat for a new 20 minute piece by Jakhelln invoking the rhythm and feel of bustling downtowns in the 1940s and ‘50s, with music composed by Edgar Crockett for piano, bass, percussion, and two wind instruments. This varied program should showcase the company at its most versatile.

Cook said she hopes to make live music a more integral component of the Ballet Quad Cities, and Culver said future collaborations are already being planned. A program with the Augustana Symphony Orchestra is slated for fall 2002, and this season includes a collaboration in May between the Augustana Jazz Ensemble and Ballet Quad Cities, with new choreography by Jakhelln.

The season also includes the holiday favorite *The Nutcracker* in December, the classic comedy *Coppélia* in March, and a free outdoor smorgasbord of dance at *Ballet Under the Stars* in Rock Island’s Lincoln Park in June.

It’s not unusual that Ballet Quad Cities uses all original choreography. Ballet is “always choreographed to specific dancers,” Cook said, showcasing performers’ strengths. Christensen added that original choreography is also popular because it sidesteps legal and royalty issues.

Marris said the upcoming season offers something for most everyone. For children and people unfamiliar with ballet, both *Peter & The Wolf* and *The Nutcracker* have “a story to follow so they’re not quite so abstract.” And the October and May programs offer live accompaniment, giving them an appeal to those who love music as well as dance.

“They are very intelligent, graceful athletes,” Cook added. Ballet is as demanding mentally as it is physically, requiring a lot of memory work. “Things move quickly,” she said. “Everything has to move.”

“People just have to give ballet a chance,” Marris said. “People say, ‘I don’t like ballet,’ but they’ve never even been to one.”

*For more information on Ballet Quad Cities, call (309)786-3779. Ballet Quad Cities is also*

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*developing a new Web site at (<http://www.balletquadcities.com>).*

### **Ballet Quad Cities Schedule**

#### **The Premiere Performance**

featuring Prokofiev's *Peter & The Wolf* and two world-premiere dances choreographed by Johanne Jakhelln and guest choreographer Simone Ferro; with live orchestral accompaniment

Saturday, October 13, 2 and 7:30 p.m.

Adler Theatre

#### **The Nutcracker**

Friday, December 7, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, December 8, 2 and 7:30 p.m.; and Sunday, December 9, 2 p.m.

Capitol Theatre

#### **Coppélia**

Saturday, March 9, 2 and 7:30 p.m.; and Sunday, March 10, 2 p.m.

Capitol Theatre

#### **A Very Special Evening**

featuring live music by the Augustana Jazz Ensemble

Friday, May 3, 8 p.m.

Augustana Centennial Hall

#### **Ballet Under the Stars**

Saturdays and Sundays, June 15, 16, 22, and 23, 8 p.m.

Lincoln Park Classic Theatre