



# HERITAGE & CULTURE

## Culture Center



# en pointe

*Ballet Mississippi pirouettes to a 60-year milestone.*

In the 1950s, two dancers, Albia Kavan and Rex Cooper, crossed paths in New York City. Their artistic journey led them to Jackson, where they founded Jackson Ballet, later directed by Thalia Mara. Meanwhile, JoBee Best, wife of actor James Best, established the Mississippi Ballet Theatre in Jackson. **A PIVOTAL MOMENT ARRIVED IN 1983 WHEN THE TWO ENTITIES MERGED, GIVING BIRTH TO BALLET MISSISSIPPI, PROPELLING THE ARTFORM FORWARD, AND ESTABLISHING A MAGNOLIA STATE TREASURE.**

It was a masterful union of talent: Kavan, a former George Balanchine dancer, provided crucial contemporary ballet training. Mara, who trained with Russian classical ballet master Michel Fokine, emphasized artistic expression, coordination, and musicality. Best contributed training in jazz and musical theater. Additionally, Mara recognized Mississippi's sports-centric culture and played a pivotal role in establishing the USA International Ballet Competition (USA IBC) in Jackson. This strategic initiative aimed to bridge the gap between sports and the arts, fostering ballet enthusiasm and a broader appreciation for the performing arts in Jackson.

“All of this gives us a history, an energy, and a deeper understanding that when a student walks through our doors, they are stepping into an organization that has endured many challenges, trained many dancers, and created a name and place in this community and our country that is tremendously respected and obviously supported,” says David Keary, who has been Ballet Mississippi’s artistic and executive director for four decades. Keary began his journey under Mara’s guidance, honing his skills at Balanchine’s School of American Ballet and eventually becoming a member of the New York City Ballet in the early ’80s. Later, he transitioned to the Fort Worth Ballet before taking a different path altogether, attending law school and securing a position with the state Supreme Court. However, in 1994, Ballet Mississippi beckoned him back. Balancing his legal career by day and infusing historical significance into choreography by night, Keary revitalized the institution. He brought in professional dancers and crafted intricate choreography, breathing new life into Ballet Mississippi.

As the company nears a milestone of 60 years, it’s not just a celebration of time but a reflection on the integrity of a company that has become a credible beacon in the Southern states’ dance world. Countless dancers have been trained in its studios, with some, like Kathy Thibodeaux, trailblazing into professional careers. “The current artistic director at Mississippi Metropolitan Ballet is a former Ballet Mississippi dancer,” explains



writer ANNIE D. STUTLEY

# 60 YEARS

Keary. “But to me, the fact that we have been supported and kept alive, vibrant, and the leader of ballet in the state for 60 years is an amazing accomplishment. We have also presented *The Nutcracker* for 42 years...consecutively!” This timeless classic is brought to life every holiday season in Jackson, with several nods to Keary’s extensive research of the ballet’s origins. Keary stages a version closer to E.T.A. Hoffman’s book and weaves a story easy for audiences to follow, with all the familiar characters and variations from the *Land of Sweets* that have charmed patrons worldwide for more than 100 years.

In preparation for its anniversary, Ballet Mississippi will feature the second act of *Paquita*, with guest artists Alexei Orohovsky and Yana Peneva, 2023 USA IBC gold medalists, performing the grand pas de deux. Keary combines elements from the Russian Ballet and American Ballet Theatre for accuracy in variations and corps de ballet. “We must uphold the structure to preserve the essence of the art. Every movement should embody structure and classicism, serving a purpose rather than being mere motion for its own sake,” emphasizes Keary, stressing the integrity of choreography.

In its 60th year, Ballet Mississippi’s impact goes beyond dance movements. Its celebration of a new facility in Madison, a former Pentecostal church on nine acres



with a 16,000-square-foot sanctuary and a 10,000-square-foot recreation center, now houses two expansive studios, one rivaling Thalia Mara Hall’s stage. This transformative space, including a beautifully appointed costume room, not only ensures the company’s continuity but also holds the potential to be a hub for performances, concerts, and visiting artists, solidifying Ballet Mississippi’s status as a dance and music leader in the South. Ballets like *Paquita*, the summer student recital, and the fall’s annual “First Moves” student showcase will continue at Thalia Mara due to its size and capability for large set pieces. Plans are also in place to deepen the organization’s influence in Jackson through expanded community programs, including lecture demonstrations at libraries and schools in 2024, emphasizing student involvement in performances. This outreach, along with the new Madison facility, aligns with the founders’ vision of putting Mississippi at the forefront of ballet.

Reflecting on six decades of commitment to the craft, ingenuity, and appreciation of its foundational legacy, Keary can’t help but marvel at what Ballet Mississippi has become: “This is the heartbeat of American ballet...right here in Mississippi.” M

For more information, visit [balletms.com](http://balletms.com).



TOP AND BOTTOM: At Ballet Mississippi, ballet training for 10- and 11-year-olds emphasizes strength, stamina, and technique, incorporating tap and jazz and preparing students for pointe work, with classes scheduled for 1 ½ hours three times a week. Ballet Mississippi students attended Arts Day at the Mississippi Capitol. OPPOSITE, TOP AND BOTTOM: Ballet Mississippi’s annual “*Nutcracker*” performance is a beloved holiday tradition for many. Pictured with David Keary are Eden Wilson and Faith Merkh. Students Wilson and Merkh trained with Keary at Ballet Mississippi and continued their training at the prestigious Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.