

A DECADE OF

dance



For 10 years, the South African Ballet Theatre has grown to establish itself as South Africa's leading ballet company, giving the country a status of excellence in performance and theatre. With their own backgrounds in dance, **Christine Grové** and **Paola Chellew** investigate the importance of supporting the arts >



When you think of ballet, a number of images may come to mind. Girls on their tip-toes, men in tights, pirouettes and ballet shoes? Indeed these are all true, but like with most of the arts, the background and significance of ballet often eludes the general public. The answer to the question "why is ballet important?" is the same as the answer to any question pertaining to arts and culture – culture is the soul of a society. Without any arts, a society has very little to show for itself.

With its roots in the royal courts of Renaissance Europe, ballet developed into one of the most respected forms of dance, largely due to the intricate training needed to perform even the slightest movement. Like opera and classical music, ballet forms a part of elitist culture which is associated with accomplishment and style.

Like with all culture in South Africa, there is a great void where funding for the arts should be. Despite this, the South African Ballet Theatre, now celebrating its 10th year, rose from the ashes of The State Theatre Ballet in 2001 and forged a central niche in the local dance sector. A non-profit organisation, SABT is the country's largest professional

ballet company and has won several awards, including the PetroSA Proudly South African HomeGrown Award for Nation Builder of the Year in 2007. SABT also manages the SABT Development School in Alexandra, Melville, Mamelodi, Eersterus, Soweto and Katlehong, as well as an extracurricular ballet academy and graduate apprenticeship programmes.

The importance of investing in the arts becomes clear when talented young South Africans go abroad in search of better options. Like Kimbrian Bergh, a founding member, who like the proverbial prodigal son, has returned to the SABT for the 10-year celebration of its inception. Having left for New Zealand in 2004, it seems fitting that he should take part in this commemoration. He left during a turbulent time in the company, as well as being a victim of crime. Like many other South African artists, he chose to accept a better opportunity offered overseas. Nevertheless, he is immensely proud of the SABT, which continues to grow in strength despite the overwhelming odds.

Classical ballet is generally seen as an elitist art form that has nothing to do with Africa and everything to do with First World

countries. Yet, ironically, the SABT Development Programme has never been more active – over 250 dancers are being taught afternoon ballet classes all around Gauteng. The dancers regularly participate in the company's major productions, where they share the stage with international guest artists like Kimbrian. "But we're back to the odds: no barres, no dance clothes, lack of transport," he says. The SABT receives funding from the National Lottery and from the strained coffers of the National Arts Council, not nearly enough to finance a production requiring an orchestra, costumes and various salaries.

Artistic director, Iain MacDonald, currently a principal performer for the company, as well as teacher, coach, husband, dad and fundraiser, he has had to learn to juggle roles since taking over the reins in 2006. Prior to that he worked his way up the ranks as a member of PACT ballet, enjoying promotion to principal roles and success in international guest appearances.

We all agree that South Africans should embrace the diversity we have in our country: it's unique. Where in the world can you see a production of *Giselle* or *Sleeping*



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Beauty accompanied by a symphony orchestra, in an intricately-detailed theatre, as well as perhaps going to watch an exhilarating display of gumboot dancing at Gold Reef City? The contrasting elements that make up the body of our performing arts reflect our varied society and we are all a fundamental part of it.

Looking to the future, both Iain and Kimbrian agree that there has to be an outlet for the graduates of the Development School, such as employment with a company like the SABT and a sufficient wage to ensure they are not lured away by lucrative contracts overseas. South African actor, director and playwright, John Kani, says: "Under difficult circumstances, the South African Ballet Theatre has grown in size and stature to become not only the country's largest professional ballet company but also its most highly esteemed, keeping alive the rich legacy of classical ballet in our country and working hard to ensure that the magic of ballet is shared with as many South Africans as possible."

John continued to say, "I have noted over the years that every world-class city and country boasts a world-class ballet company, supported and embraced by its nation. SABT provides our country with this status, and well deserves our support. It must also be noted that many other developing countries also maintain a proud ballet culture. China, Cuba and Malaysia, to mention a few, regard their ballet companies – which are encouraged and funded by those states – as jewels in their arts and culture crowns."

The South African Ballet Theatre has implemented a "Hall of 1 000 Stars" initiative which allows audiences to contribute from R50 upwards to SABT each month, via debit order. The accumulation of these contributions helps to sustain SABT including all four of its outreach programmes.

SABT's next production will be *The Sleeping Beauty*, opening 30 September at the Joburg Theatre. For more information on SABT visit www.saballettheatre.co.za and fundraising enquiries can be directed to Mr Teboho Nkoane on (011) 877 6882 or teboho@saballettheatre.co.za