

Berks Ballet Theatre to celebrate director's anniversary with 'Innovations'

By Susan L. Pena

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Reading Eagle: Ben Hasty | Kelly Barber, the artistic director of the Berks Ballet Theatre, works with Gretchen Kimmel, 13, in the BBT's studios in the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, 201 Washington St.

Kelly Barber will celebrate her 10th anniversary as artistic director of Berks Ballet Theatre with a performance entitled "Innovations," featuring the BBT junior and senior corps, guest dancer Jake Allison and a guest performance by Pennsylvania Regional Ballet, Saturday at 7:30 p.m. in Reading Area Community College's Miller Center for the Arts.

Barber, a native Berks Countian, started taking lessons at 9 with the BBT academy and danced with the company through high school. She went on to dance with Ballet Theatre of Annapolis, rising to the level of soloist in many roles.

She returned to Reading and taught at the Dance Academy of BBT and performed with the company. In 2006 she was named associate director, and in 2007 became artistic

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director. She continues to be the principal teacher at the BBT Conservatory of Dance, owned by Nathan Bland, BBT's ballet master and resident choreographer.

Barber said Saturday's program will be a mix of old and new work, including two new pieces by Bland, two pieces BBT has performed in the past, and an encore performance of an excerpt from Jose Limon's "A Choreographic Offering," which they performed Feb. 18 as part of the Limon Company show at the Miller Center.

"We have a lot of good repertoire that a lot of times we do, and then don't revisit," she said. "That's something I feel strongly that we need the company to do."

The program will open with Bland's "Shadow Play," a short piece for eight dancers set to "Frysta," a piece by Icelandic contemporary composer Olafur Arnalds that is part of his 2011 album, "Living Room Songs."

Bland said the work is an abstract contemporary ballet on pointe that works with the ideas of light and dark, with half the dancers functioning as "shadows" behind the others. The company recently took the piece to the Delaware Dance Festival and the Philadelphia Youth Dance Fest.

The finale, also by Bland, will be the 26-minute ensemble piece, "Salute to Sousa," set to eight marches by John Philip Sousa.

As to why he chose those marches, Bland referred to George Balanchine's famous "Stars and Stripes," adding, "It's very danceable music; it's easy to create some nice choreography to, and it's very fun. It has a lot of life."

He chose some of the most popular Sousa marches: "El Capitan," "The High School Cadets," "The Thunderer," "The Invincible Eagle," "Liberty Bell," "Semper Fidelis," "Manhattan Beach" and "Stars and Stripes Forever."

The neo-classical ballet, also on pointe, is for 11 dancers, including Allison, and includes ensemble pieces, solos and pas de deux.

Bland said that while he was working on the piece, he found out that Sousa died in the former Abraham Lincoln hotel, which added a Reading connection to the work. He also discovered that some of Sousa's descendants live in the Philadelphia area, and he's planning to invite them to the concert.

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Barber said the company will also perform "Finding Harmony," choreographed by Victoria Silva of Pennsylvania Regional Ballet for BBT five years ago to take to a festival in Montreal. The piece uses "Song of the Water" by the Al-Andalus Ensemble.

The junior company, with senior company apprentices as soloists, will perform Barber's choreography to Leo Delibes' "Waltz of the Hours," created some years ago.

The Pennsylvania Regional Ballet, whose artistic director Sandra Carlino is a friend of Barber's, will perform choreographer Christine Aumiller's "Whakatoi" to music by Dmitri Shostakovich.

Reflecting on her 10 years as BBT's artistic director, Barber said, "The interesting thing is that I feel the company has experienced so many different things: people who have worked here, choreographers we have brought in, the performances we have done. We've left Regional Dance America, and now we are doing different festivals."

She said a major event during her tenure has been the 40th anniversary gala in 2016. "That was a big thing," she said; "just the fact that it's still here after 40 years, and Carol (Ennis, founder and former artistic director) was there and we could honor her. That was so important to me, because we wouldn't be here if it weren't for her."

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