

Pacific Northwest Ballet a National Leader

Totem Report March 15, 2017

By Gary T. Smith

Nothing like a little song and dance to lift spirits amid another spring downpour.

Wednesday, March 15 was the 18th consecutive day of rain in Seattle, a streak among the all-time long ones, as Seattle 4 convened at McCaw Hall for a respite with the ballet.

Two leprechauns, **Ken Colling** and **Laurel James**, resplendent in green (not mold but Emerald and Kelly Green), greeted Rotarians, and following the invocation by **Sheree Wen**, the Rotary Rogues, led by **Jimmy Collins** and accompanied by **Todd Summerfelt** and **Trish Bostrom**, led the club in singing *The Wild Rover*.



The program focused entirely around the region's dance treasure, the Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) – the business of the ballet, the artistic side of ballet, and for those who could stay, a dress rehearsal of a ballet premiering in Seattle this week. In her introduction, President **Cathy Gibson** noted PNB is the nation's fifth largest ballet company.

Ellen Walker, PNB's Executive Director, said the organization has a \$24 million budget with 600 employees. In addition to the performing company, it operates the third largest ballet school in the United States with over 1,000 students and 29 faculty. The seven programs a year PNB puts on at McCaw Hall, including the Nutcracker, provide about half of all ballet revenues.



The Nutcracker is a business essential: of the 230,000 attendees last year, nearly 100,000 came for the holiday favorite, providing more than half of all ticket revenue. Walker said about 26% of revenue comes from charitable contributions (of which 75% are from individuals) and 20% of revenue comes from ballet school tuition.

Story ballets, such as Swan Lake, are the draw, the entry point to ballet for most people, explained PNB Artistic Director, Peter Boal. The "next chapter" as people come to deepen their appreciation of ballet, he said, comes in programs such as PNB's upcoming performance, called *Director's Choice*.

PNB is recognized for supporting the works of new choreographers and *Director's Choice* will feature three ballet works by choreographers working today. The first, *Empire Noir*, is by a young Brit named David Dawson, whose works are very energetic, "extremely physical," said Boal. The second, *New Suite*, is by American choreographer William Forsythe, "a great creative force in dance," he said.

The third piece, *Her Door to the Sky*, is by American dancer and choreographer Jessica Lang, who danced for Twyla Tharp. Lang's texture, said Boal, is rare and unique. PNB co-commissioned this work and this performance will be its Seattle premiere. Watching it in dress rehearsal was a real treat for Seattle 4 members.

Set to music by 20th century composer Benjamin Britten, dancers in earth and sky tones of the desert Southwest move against a spare set evoking scenes framed by the doorway in Georgia O'Keeffe's northern New Mexico home. Lang traveled to O'Keeffe's home to understand what O'Keeffe was seeing when she painted her *Patio Door* series from 1946 to 1956.

The *Director's Choice* program runs from March 17–26. And by the way, at every place setting at the Rotary luncheon was a card from long-time PNB board member **Lynn Lyndsay**, entitling the bearer to one free ticket to a PNB performance with the purchase of one.

Boal said the Seattle ballet audience shows great excitement in discovering new choreographers and new dancers. In choosing choreographers to feature, he evaluates about 100 works every year. "I look for an original voice. I look to grant opportunities. We are looking to create greater diversity (in dance)."

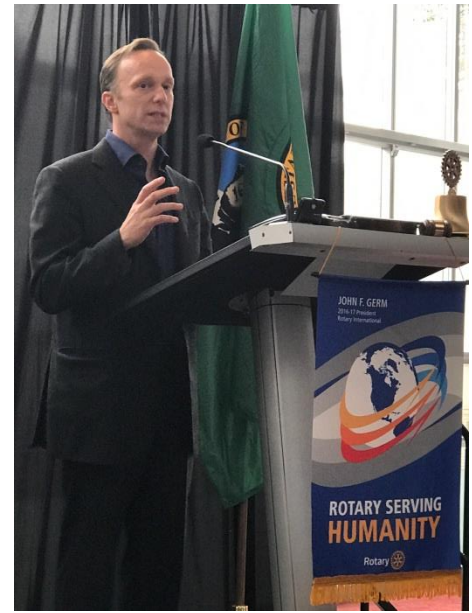
Don Murphy asked whether traditional ballets are being updated. Boal said yes, it is becoming a trend. By getting away from elaborate sets and costumes, he explained, the focus shifts to the choreography and the dancers. "A good Juliet doesn't need a castle behind her," he said.

The dancers are fulltime employees, Walker said, working 41 weeks a year and taking class daily. The company of 47 dancers presents more than 100 performances each year.



And don't forget the shoe budget. Carrie Imler, a principal dancer retiring from active dancing after 23 years with PNB who spoke about her experiences and perspectives as a dancer, estimated she typically wears out from 70 to 110 pairs of toe shoes...per year. The company, said Walker, spends \$200,000 a year on shoes.

Ken Grant asked whether ballet is a dying industry. "That's my fear, every night," said Boal. "But in Seattle it is



regenerating. We have fresh audiences, new takes, excitement, people getting not necessarily what they expect. People are getting more and more holed up with a monitor in their lives, and there is something about coming to the ballet and sharing that experience, without all the discussion of our technological age.”

And then, there is the timeless magic of movement and music. Soon after the program, the skies cleared, and sun was forecast.

