

BY NANCY COHEN ISRAEL  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRANTON ELLERBEE

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# IN GOOD COMPANY

FOR 10 YEARS TEXAS BALLET THEATER'S BEN STEVENSON HAS INSPIRED CREATIVITY AND CAMARADERIE, ACHIEVING A PERFECT BALANCE.



Ben Stevenson celebrates 10 years as artistic director of Texas Ballet Theater.

A portrait of Queen Elizabeth II hangs in Ben Stevenson's office. But for dance lovers in North Texas the real crown jewel is Stevenson himself. Though he is a member of the Order of the British Empire, he has devoted much of his career to elevating ballet in Texas. This year marks his 10th anniversary as artistic director of Texas Ballet Theater, following 27 years in the same role at the Houston Ballet. During the 2009-10 season, Texas Ballet Theater celebrated his 40th anniversary, commending him as one of the most influential figures in American Ballet. In August 2011 he accepted the Lifetime Achievement Award presented at the Anaheim International Dance Festival. He also holds the Texas Medal of Arts Award.

While audiences and critics have been singing his praises for years, Stevenson's greatest fans are his dancers, who cite his ability to inspire them as artists, entertain them with his sense of humor, and create a family atmosphere among his company of 40 as his greatest strengths.

"There are no divas in this company, from apprentice to principal," says Lucas Priolo, who began his career with Stevenson at the Houston Ballet and subsequently followed him to North Texas. "It is a testament to Ben. It starts from the top and it trickles down." Priolo, who has been dancing professionally for 15 years adds, "I owe my whole career to him."

That kind of tenure is unusual in the world of ballet companies, where the average time a dancer spends with one company is four to five years. A quick look at Texas Ballet Theater's roster of dancers and artistic staff shows an extraordinary rate of retention. This made for a smooth transition when they all began arriving in North Texas. Stevenson says, "Artistic directors have their ways of working. This way I don't have to re-train people. It has been very helpful."

"We (the company) have been working together for so long," says dancer Robin Bangert. "We're a team. It becomes a living, breathing work of art." Originally from Massachusetts, Bangert went to Houston to study at the Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy prior to joining Texas Ballet Theater in 2004.

While classically trained, Stevenson continues to explore new work, as evidenced by this season's opener, *Peer Gynt*, a ballet that made its debut in the 1980s. "It is a difficult story to tell so it took a long time to figure it out. But it has proved to be a successful piece," Stevenson says. Priolo, who dances the



Dancers Robin Bangert and Lucas Priolo.

title role in the current production, is equally enthusiastic. "It is one of Ben's best. It is a full journey," from adolescence to old age.

Male dancers are particularly drawn to the work because, as Priolo says, "It is one of the few ballets that is all about men." Tim O'Keefe, the company's associate artistic director concurs, adding, "It's brilliant because it is a story that is very difficult to tell."

While Stevenson continues to add to the ballet canon, he still cites the classics as an important part of the repertoire. "*Swan Lake* keeps the company in good shape," he says. "But you have to grow the audience in order to move on."

And so he continues to balance the new with the old. Audiences perennially enjoy his *Nutcracker* and can look forward to a new production this holiday season. Stevenson also enjoys the Tchaikovsky classic "because the children on stage are performing for the first time, and the children in the audience are often seeing ballet for the first time."

In addition to this traditional holiday production the company also performs *The Nutty Nutcracker*. While this "adult parody of the classic ballet" is another Stevenson brainchild, he wholly credits the company for putting it together every year. He says,

“(It is) tough to do it. We only have a couple of afternoons to put it together. It is the dancers who basically put it on. It is a work of the whole company.” As a result, every year this one-performance-only production brims with surprises and humor. Fort Worth’s Bass Hall is its only venue.

“I am so anxious and terrified that it won’t come together, but every year we have the audience laughing,” Bangert says, adding that the company never has a full run-through before performing this annual treat. She also credits Stevenson’s sense of humor for making it such a fun production. Priolo adds, “The magic that happens in *Nutty* is unique. You are flying by the seat of your pants when you’re up there. It is a really unique experience.”

Stevenson sees this as a company for Fort Worth and Dallas equally, as emphasized by the company’s touting of the season’s Two Great Cities, One Great Company catchphrase. With the exception of *The Nutty Nutcracker*, its performances are divided equally between the cities.

Other traits that his dancers repeatedly cite are Stevenson’s ability as a storyteller and his knack for bringing characters out in his dancers. O’Keefe says it’s important to do more than just the steps, emphasizing, “You have to communicate something to the audience.”

Stevenson is also committed to growing the next generation of dancers. Schools in Dallas and Fort Worth provide rigorous training where promotion is not a given. “I was brought up learning to dance. I have tried to keep that going,” Stevenson says, add-



Lucas Priolo, Betsy McBride, and Carl Coomer. Above: Havilah Sprunk.



Lucas Priolo with Betsy McBride.

ing, “It is nice to have two schools that have slightly different outlooks.” With classes for girls and boys, he feels that they provide outreach into the community.

Stevenson’s goals for the next 10 years are a manifesto on nurturing his dancers as well as his audiences. “I would like the company to be able to take on more performances,” he says. “I want to find more performance opportunities and to develop new choreographers. I would like to expand the repertoire. I am also interested in making the company as exciting as we can.”

Stevenson has provided his imprimatur on many full-length works with his choreography. Dance companies around the world have staged his work. It would be enough to rest on his laurels. However, he continues to conceive new projects. “I would like to do an evening of music and dance, everything from the Beatles to Beethoven,” he says, noting that he is

also looking forward to this season’s *Voluntaries* by Glen Tetley and Mozart’s *Requiem*, which will close the season. O’Keefe refers to *Requiem* as one of Stevenson’s most important endeavors, describing the interpretation as “very contemporary.”

When asked what makes working with Stevenson special, Bangert sums it up best. “Everything! He is so inspiring,” she says, echoing sentiments expressed by everyone who works with him. Priolo adds, “He has such an amazing way of making things work. North Texas is lucky to have him.”

Stevenson concludes, “Personally, I am particularly excited about the company here. I have seen enormous growth. We just want to go on being as wonderful as we can be.” And he has great hope for the company’s future, adding, “Hopefully, in the end, Texas Ballet Theater is the product rather than the ballet. If people like the company they will come to see the ballets.” **P**