

DANCE



Reaching for the Barre

Small companies seek to fill the dance void

By **KIMBERLY GREENE**

Art galleries?
Check.
Theaters?
Check.
Independent film?
Check.
But . . . dance?

It is relatively easy to find many things in Syracuse that define a well-rounded arts community. One thing, however, seems to be missing. Somewhere between the opera and the orchestra, the missing link just happens to be one of the most endangered and elusive of art forms: dance.

Performing companies of all styles breeze through Syracuse throughout the year, but as far as staying power is concerned, Syracuse is certainly an unstable environment for dance. The Syracuse Ballet Theater experienced its heyday in the early to mid 1970s before folding due to financial struggles and lack of public support. The Syracuse Contemporary Dance Company, established in 1985, is trying to avoid that same fate. Most members pull double-duty as teachers at the Syracuse School of Dance, and the company is only able to perform every other year. In fact, teaching is the way most dancers survive.

Cheryl Wilkins-Mitchell, director of the Onondaga Dance Institute, calls dance the "orphan child" of the arts. Born and raised in the area, she left after high school to pursue her own dancing career with Dance Theater of Harlem, Cincinnati Contemporary Dance Theater, Landrum Dance Theatre, and Southwest Jazz Ballet. Wilkins-Mitchell moved back to Syracuse to raise her family, having heard that there was a low crime rate at the time and that there were many family-oriented activities.

"I didn't realize moving back here was going to be performance suicide," she said. "I wanted to come in and be part of something." Instead, she found her professional dance opportunities limited. So in 1994, Wilkins-Mitchell shifted gears and opened her own studio, which celebrates its 11th anniversary this month. The space is small, with one main dance studio, an office, a dressing room, and a waiting room. Pictures, newspaper clippings, promotional postcards, and headshots line the waiting room walls and Wilkins-Mitchell grins proudly as she mentions a few students who have expressed interest in dancing professionally.

"It's got to be a concerted effort to build a dance community here," Wilkins-Mitchell said. "It's just

really difficult, but you keep trying to make it happen."

To help build that community, Wilkins-Mitchell said that she aims to get students out and about to experience different teachers when they come into the area. But few teachers are comfortable with sending students off to other studios. Young dancers have to be exposed to that kind of environment if they want to develop, Wilkins-Mitchell said.

Deborah Boughton also cultivates dance at her stu-



Photo by Margery Wilkins.

Set in motion: The dance movement in Syracuse.

dio, the Center of Ballet and Dance Arts, which has been open for 27 years. She moved here in 1970 with the Syracuse Ballet Theater and remained when the company dissolved several years later. Though well-known companies such as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theater, and the Taylor 2 Dance Company have performed in the area, Boughton is not convinced Syracuse is the right breeding ground for a dance company.

"Even when a major group comes in, it's not extremely well-attended," she said.

Instead of working to nurture professional dance locally, Boughton focuses on her school of over 200 students, most of whom are interested in leaving the area and dancing professionally.

"My primary function is to train dancers," Boughton said. "I've seen the storms come and go, and I'm still here."

But does dance in Syracuse only exist for training purposes? Can a community with so many other art forms stand by and watch professional dance fizzle?

Apparently not.

Kathleen Rathbun just happens to run a ballet company. The Upstate New York Ballet Company was founded in 1997 when Rathbun realized that there was an audience as well as a need for a dance company in Syracuse. She grew up in the area and returned after training at The Juilliard School in New York City. Like Wilkins-Mitchell and Boughton, Rathbun also has a school of dance, Ballet & Dance of Upstate NY, Inc., founded in 1990.

The Upstate New York Ballet Company is semi-professional, so while she uses her students for the corps, she brings in professionals to dance the lead roles. Originally funding the productions herself, Rathbun was barely able to get the works seen.

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When audiences finally began to notice, so did the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra. The Upstate New York Ballet Company and the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra first collaborated for a production of "Cinderella" in 2002. Two more shows, "Romeo and Juliet," and "Swan Lake" performed to sold-out audiences in the years that followed.

For Rathbun, collaboration is vital to the life of her company. She has worked with Armory Square Association's Candlelight Series, introducing well-known modern and contemporary choreographers to Syracuse. Rathbun wants to create a venue so that local dancers will want to stay in the area and perform.

"It takes time," Rathbun said. "We need help from the community."

Rathbun is in the process of restructuring the Board of Directors for her company, and is looking for people with experience in the arts. She is also looking for corporate support, which she has had trouble getting in the past.

"The goal is to have a company that stays here, that teaches and grows," Rathbun said, her eyes twinkling. "I definitely think dance is here, and a lot of people have said it's our best kept secret." ■

Kimberly Greene is a graduate of Marymount Manhattan College and holds degrees in both dance and communication arts. She danced professionally and worked for a Manhattan literary agency.