



by Ken Hoyt

# CULTURE CLUB BODY BEAUTIFUL

**CHRISTOPHER STOWELL GAINED GREAT EXPOSURE TO THE ART OF DANCE FROM AN EARLY AGE. HIS PARENTS, KENT STOWELL AND FRANCIA RUSSELL ARE THE FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTORS OF PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET IN SEATTLE.** “I was an only child for six and a half years,” Stowell says. “We lived in New York and in Europe, and wherever they went they took me along. I was very engaged in their artistic life. When we moved back to the United States I was eleven years old, and the annual productions of the Nutcracker were new to me. It’s not an annual tradition in European ballet companies. There were children’s roles. I was completely enamored... It was clear if the director’s son gets to perform he should be a regular student in the school. It took three years [of training] before I was bitten by the art form.”

But Stowell didn’t get to be Artistic Director of Oregon Ballet Theatre (OBT) just because of his family tree; not that his parents encouraged his career choice. “My parents,” he says, “were both supportive yet very hesitant. They knew: A) that it’s a tough career, B) that not everybody is cut out for it, and C) that it would be difficult if their son wasn’t talented.” It worked out well. Stowell spent sixteen years at San Francisco Ballet, much of it as a principal dancer. He then focused his energy on an international career as teacher, coach, and choreographer before he took over as OBT’s artistic director in 2003.

Stowell agrees with his parents that it is a tough career, but one worth pursuing. “Whether you end up being a professional dancer or not, [the training] is an incredible way of getting in touch with yourself. You gain an understanding the rewards of hard work, self-discipline, community and teamwork. Three quarters of the people who leave our school aren’t necessarily going to be professional dancers, but they are definitely richer for the experience and more prepared for life because of the training they received.”

The ballet world, like many art-driven careers, has always provided a safe haven for LGBTQ people. “It’s a little enclave,” says Stowell, “where [dedication to] something beyond yourself allows people to be more comfortable. Nobody is spending time thinking about how they fit in. They’re focused on something greater. No one has the time to spend being judgmental. We’re all focused on achieving an unachievable art form; and it’s a level playing field. The other thing that is unique is the mix of ages. I’ll be working in the same room with four year olds and people that are seventy. There is not a generational divide, which I think is extremely healthy.”

At the same time, ballet has become a little more mainstream, and recognized as more than just an art form for an elite audience. “For a long time people were seeking only the ethereal and graceful aesthetic in dance. But that [doesn’t] reveal the work, effort, sweat and athleticism involved. In a ballet company like ours we have a repertoire that is so much broader that there may be one work where we’re ethereal and graceful, and another work where the very thing we want people to see is the sweaty, muscular and raw.”

This season’s opener is a cooperative venture with the Portland Art Museum show, *The Body Beautiful*, which will have traveled from London where it was mounted in conjunction with the Summer Olympics. Stowell will create an evening of dance that “relates to the ideal of classical Greek beauty [as well as] myth.” Two OBT audience favorites, Balanchine’s *Apollo* and his father’s *Orpheus Portrait* will be returning. There will be two new pieces, William Forsythe’s *Second Detail*, which has a very contemporary feeling, and *Narcissus + Echo*, taken from the Greek myth about the beautiful youth Narcissus, who loved his own image and Echo, a Nymph with a gorgeous voice. She also loved, to tragic ends, Narcissus. In other words, it’s the perfect fuel for ballet. “*Narcissus + Echo*, reports Stowell, “will have fantastic set design. I’m working with an incredible Seattle artist, John Grade.” At this time Stowell plans to use less traditional dance movement juxtaposed with, “a contemporary feeling that uses some fantastic Baroque music I haven’t selected yet.”

Stowell was asked, “The name of the show is *Body Beautiful*, so is it fair to say that it will be body conscious?”

“Absolutely. We’re going to save a lot of money on costuming.”



OTB’s Christopher Stowell. Photo by Blaine Truitt Covert

Reach out with your events to Arts & Entertainment Editor Ken Hoyt. [ken@justout.com](mailto:ken@justout.com)