

# Dance Education in the Public Sector

## A History of Nashville's METRO PARKS Dance Division

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### ABSTRACT

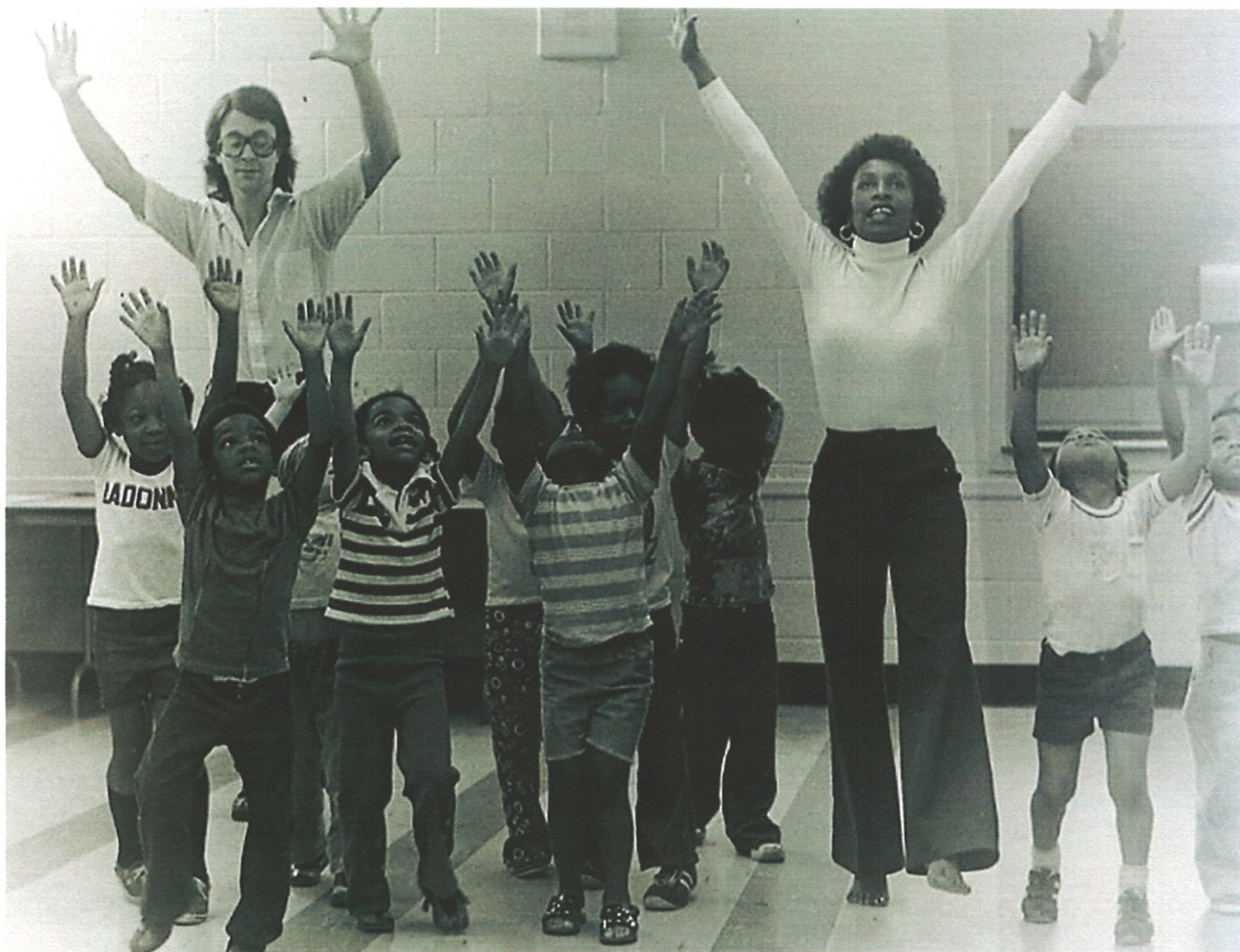
*In 1965, Metro Parks and Recreation of Nashville, Tennessee, added a Dance Division to offer a wider variety of recreational programming in the public sector. The program started humbly, with few resources beyond teacher salaries, and offered classes in community center gymnasiums and on playgrounds in the summers. As the program began to build steam and a regular student base, Metro Parks and Recreation also received more robust federal funding, and they were able to add additional dance instructor positions as well as put on performances. At its peak, free dance classes were offered in every community center in Nashville. In the 1980s, federal funding dried up and the program had to start looking for other sources of revenue. They began charging nominally for classes, and Metro took a small percentage of the money earned. In the 1990s, even as the breadth of programming diminished, a core, high-quality classical ballet program emerged. Shortly thereafter, the nonprofit organization Friends of Metro Dance formed to support the program beyond the scope of government funding. They provided state-of-the-art facilities for the program and purchased costumes and set pieces for the program's signature performance and fundraiser, the Mini-Nutcracker, as well as the popular performing group, the Swinging Seniors. Today, the program is in another period of growth and is evolving to support more expansive programming once again through public-private partnerships.*

The Nashville Metro Parks and Recreation Dance Division provides high-quality, affordable dance training to children and adults in a supportive environment, supports local dance artists in work development, and educates dance audience members. Through a wide variety of classes, a Mini-Nutcracker and Spring Concert performed by Centennial Youth Ballet annually, partnerships with Nashville-based dance companies, and events that foster critical discussion about the art form, the program serves toddlers to seniors, novices to professionals, and everyone in between. The program has continued to thrive through many ups and downs because of support from Friends of Metro Dance, the nonprofit organization established in 1995 to support the Dance Division beyond the scope of government funding. The group funds performances by Centennial Youth Ballet and sponsors special dance-related activities, including a summer dance intensive for teens, a summer ballroom program for underserved children, continuing education for faculty, student scholarships, and master classes open to Dance Division students and the general public. Additionally, Friends of Metro Dance equips and maintains three state-of-the-art dance studios and has been critical to sustaining affordable dance education within the public sector in Nashville.

### EARLY HISTORY

In 1965, Mary Wherry, an all-district, all-state basketball player and consummate athlete was invited to start a dance program within Nashville's Metro Parks and Recreation department. She had been working on her master's degree at the Peabody College of Education and Human Development (now part of Vanderbilt University) with Clara Had-dox. Wherry worked in a Metro Parks community center at





John Algee and Linda Everett with Metro Parks students c. 1970s.

the time and Haddox's nephew was the Superintendent of Recreation in the Metro Parks administrative office. Professor Haddox told Wherry that she would have to take a dance class to graduate. Wherry could not stand the idea of wearing a leotard and tights and showed up to her first ballet class wearing a black t-shirt, black sweatpants, and basketball shoes. After two weeks, Professor Haddox walked up to Wherry with a pair of ballet slippers and dropped them at the barre. Wherry remembers, "Well, I plopped down on the floor, put them on and sure enough, it made a difference!" As the class progressed, Wherry struggled to find some way she could relate dance to her sports background. When the teacher put a rope on the floor for the students to jump over, Wherry thought, "Hey! I'm a jumper. I can do that!" As she soared over the rope, she looked at herself in the mirror and thought, "There's something wrong with this picture." She realized over time that dance was different from any sport she had ever encountered. It required all

of the strength and agility important to athletes, but it also required finesse, grace, performance quality, and so much more engagement from her than she ever had to give to athletics. Because of her newfound appreciation and respect for the art form and her background in recreation, she was the perfect candidate to become the first dance supervisor for Metro Parks and Recreation.

Wherry had the organizational skills to get a program started and set out to hire her faculty. Her philosophy was to pick good people and let them do what they do best. She vowed to support them fully and to allow them to be creative and take risks. Fortunately, she found dedicated people who shared her goals. She met Janet Clough at Peabody College when Clough coached her for a performance in the spring dance show. Clough was a student of Albertine Maxwell's, considered the "grande dame" of ballet in Nashville and the founder of the Nashville Ballet Society, which later became the Nashville Ballet. Wherry also hired The-



resa Liebhart, a ballet instructor; Janice Estes, a friend of the Metro Parks director, who had some dance experience; and Etta Johnson, who did not know a great deal about dance but whose sensitivity to the emotional and physical needs of children, natural musicality, and showmanship made her well-suited for teaching elementary dance and movement in community centers in some of the lower income residential areas of Nashville. It was important to Wherry that she develop programs in the community centers that served children with fewer educational and recreational opportunities. Being a part of Metro Parks and Recreation gave her the opportunity to serve people of all different backgrounds and economic situations. Early in her career, she noticed a huge difference in terms of access to the arts between the children in wealthier areas of Nashville, and children from the “inner city.” Whereas the children from upper income areas had the means to go to the ballet and to take dance classes at private studios, children from lower income areas never had those opportunities. They were never exposed, for instance, to ballet in any way. Wherry felt strongly that the Dance Division could open its doors to a wide array of children and could

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not only help them physically, but could instill in them an appreciation for the art form that would enhance their overall education, with the side benefit of building the dance audience in Nashville.

Wherry and her new dance faculty got to work purchasing tape players, gathering materials, and selecting and recording music. The Dance Division had no home base, save a desk in the offices at Sevier House, a dank and moldy Metro Parks property, and had to travel with all of its supplies—tape players, tap shoes, lummi sticks (cylindrical wood sticks), and more, all acquired through the Recreation Support Program. After getting the program started, Wherry became the Assistant Recreation Superintendent and was able to advocate on behalf of the Dance Division to rally the community center staff for support. Wherry realized that many of the community center staff members had very little experience with the arts, so she instigated in-service visits, once a week for eight weeks, to give the dance, music, and visual arts teachers the opportunity to lead a class for the center staff,

talk to them about what they were doing, and why it was important. Wherry remembers, “I think that opened their eyes to something other than playing ball because, for the most part, recreation programs were geared to those people who either kicked or hit or threw a ball of some kind, and we had the notion that there were other people in the community that we needed to serve that could give a rat’s rear end about baseball or football or soccer.” The dance faculty benefited from the support of Wherry and the Metro Parks director, and when they showed up to teach, the community center staff helped haul supplies into the building and worked to get the children into the classes, some with more finesse than others. One community center director would make an announcement that the gymnasium was closed for girls, and they all had to report to the club room for dance—a strong-arm technique that did not help to win over the students. However, in another center where a small but dedicated group of students would show up each week for class, the director would round up all the basketball players in the gym and make them leave so that three little girls could have their ballet class. The dance faculty got creative with recruiting students as well. Clough, who became the Dance Supervisor in 1971, recorded some James Brown music and blasted it in Douglas Park to get some adults into the room for a ballet class. She also had an ally in Hazel King, an art teacher, who convinced her entire art class to come take ballet.

Shirley Blackburn, an early faculty member who served as the Dance Division Supervisor from 1995 to 2013, remembers the challenge of adjusting to conditions and expectations that were different from what she grew up with studying dance. She never knew how many students she would have, and it was hard to make progress with different children showing up each week. For many of their ballet classes, the backs of chairs served as ballet barres, and they danced on tiled floors. Only one center let them use the gymnasium. Clough even taught one class in the shower room where they danced on concrete floors and held onto the shower stalls. Still, she remembers it as one of her best classes because the children were so eager to learn. In the summers, the dance faculty would travel around and teach movement and folk dance on the playgrounds using jump ropes and parachutes. If the children were able to focus through an entire ballet barre, the teachers rewarded them with lummi stick activities at the end of class.

## DEVELOPING PERFORMANCE OPPORTUNITIES

After a couple of years, the dance classes gathered enough momentum at the community centers that they started putting on performances at the bandshell in Centennial Park. The visual arts staff would make the costumes. Janice Estes, who was the Dance Supervisor for several years after Wherry, ambitiously decided that one of the program’s first performances would be *Sleeping Beauty*, with each community center as a different jewel. Clough, sensing her students



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were not quite ready to perform ballet, taught them a folk dance, and they ended up performing their folk dance in the ballet tutus Estes had ordered. Wherry describes developing the dance program as "modeling clay—making something work even when you didn't know how it was going to turn out." The program survived and thrived because the staff had the license to take risks, flounder, and try new strategies that worked better.

After a few years of community center performances, Clough hit on a wonderfully successful idea that brought recognition to the program in the community—Dance Centennial. This annual dance performance began in 1975 and ran until 1982 when it was discontinued due to budget restrictions and cutbacks. The mayor at the time, Richard Fulton, and his wife never missed a performance. Dance faculty and advanced students performed in the productions, which took place in the Nashville Children's Theatre, a Metro Parks property that the Dance Division was able to use at no cost. Because of the resources available to them as a publicly funded program, in ad-

dition to grants from the Tennessee Arts Commission, along with a wealth of musical talent in Nashville and connections with the Nashville Symphony, Clough was determined to have music performed live at every performance. Ken Krause, a local musician, would write music and form an orchestra made up largely of staff from the music department. The staff from the community centers worked backstage. Wherry remembers, "They got to leave the centers and work in the theater all week and they loved it! Because the staff were involved, they learned to appreciate it, and they learned how hard it was and what went into it. They really bought into it!" Grants helped pay choreographers who came to set work, including Tom Pazik from Atlanta Ballet, beginning the Dance Division's relationship with the company.

Before Nashville Ballet came into existence, Atlanta Ballet would come to Nashville and perform their *Nutcracker*. The first year they came, George Carpenter from the Nashville Symphony called Clough to rehearse local children for the production. Seizing an opportunity to bring some of the local dance community together, Clough invited some of the better quality dance studios to take groups of children and rehearse them. Some of the studios, because they were

trying to run a business, resented that the Dance Division classes were free, but Clough used the *Nutcracker* as a way to build bridges. In the following years, although the audition for parts was open to students from all area dance studios, the *Nutcracker* dances were rehearsed by Metro Parks teachers.

The original, primary goal of the Metro Parks Dance Division at its origins was to provide free, high-quality dance experiences to children across Nashville to enhance their quality of life and education. In the late 1970s, there became a secondary goal of providing preprofessional training. As students in the program gained increasingly high levels of technique, Clough was determined to support them through added classes of advanced ballet and more performance opportunities. A student company was formed in 1981 and named Centennial Youth Ballet. The first performance included excerpts from *Sleeping Beauty* based on the Marius Petipa choreography and a version of *Carnival of the Animals* with choreography by dance faculty. The company was asked to perform a Mini-*Nutcracker* at Hickory Hollow Mall in 1981 and 1982 and, at the mall manager's request, included a Santa Claus. This led to an annual performance that grew in size over the years. As with professional ballet companies, Mini-*Nutcracker* is the biggest revenue producer of the year. After the initial performances at the Hickory Hollow Mall, other venues included the Cumberland Museum, Nashville City Bank, and the dance studio in the Centennial Arts Activity Center. One memorable year, the Showmobile, a traveling trailer that opens up into a stage, parked on 2nd Avenue downtown, and the production was graced with actual snow. After five years in different venues, the production moved to Metro's 200-seat Looby Theater until overflow audiences dictated a larger space. Harpeth Hall School (a private school serving middle and high school students) generously offered to donate their Davis Auditorium for the Mini-*Nutcracker* performances in 1995, and the young dancers have performed there ever since. With high-quality dancing, sets, and costumes and low-cost tickets, it is a Nashville favorite and families from all over the city attend every year. For ten years, Friends of Metro Dance invited community center children from Metro Parks to attend the final dress rehearsal of the Mini-*Nutcracker* at Harpeth Hall. In addition to providing bus transportation, the nonprofit hosted a reception during intermission for the children and families who attended. A decline in interest by community center staff to attend coupled with undependable bus companies ended the program's original format, although a few centers have continued to bring smaller groups of children to the performance.

Students who studied in the Metro Parks Dance Division and danced with Centennial Youth Ballet have gone on to dance with American Ballet Theatre, Nashville Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, Ballet Arizona, and Portland Festival Ballet, and have attended university dance programs such as Juilliard, New York University, North Carolina School of the Arts, and Butler University. These early performance experiences undoubtedly influenced their dance careers.





Centennial Youth Ballet Mini-Nutcracker, 2013. Photographer: Karen Alisa.

## FUNDING AND LACK OF FUNDING

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the program had robust funding and always had seven or eight full-time instructors on staff, plus several more brought in for summers, making it easy to provide free programming to every single community center in Nashville. In 1981, their budget got slashed due to decreased federal funding. When instructors retired or changed jobs, they were not replaced. The Dance Division began charging for classes, although the fees were low. Clough had to get creative to be able to offer the range of programming she wanted. When she was approached by a woman who wanted to teach bellydance, Clough could not hire her but asked her supervisor if they could take in money for the classes, keep a percentage, and pay the teacher out of a small bank account they would open. The classes were packed and brought in a lot of money. In 1988, Mayor Phil Bredesen found out about the account (and similar accounts in other departments) and said all of the money should be coming into the Metro government, leading all of the satellite groups to scramble for nonprofit status. By 1995, the dance satellite group became Friends of Metro Dance and began sponsoring special workshops, performances, master classes, and guest artists, as well as providing scholarships. They also purchased an HVAC unit, ballet barres, a raised dance floor, and marley covering to better equip the Centennial Arts Activity Center, a converted gymnasium that became home to the Dance Division in the mid-1970s.

Friends of Metro Dance began producing the annual Mini-Nutcracker, performed by the Centennial Youth Ballet. Developed and masterfully guided by Shirley Blackburn, Friends of Metro Dance is credited with keeping the quality of the program high, even as the full-time staff dwindled to three instructors and one director.

## CREATIVE EXPANSIONS

In the 1990s, Blackburn found a way to make an impact with the senior citizens of Nashville. When the Elizabeth and Douglas community centers were converted into dedicated senior centers, the director of Metro Parks requested dance programming at the centers. Linda Everett, who taught preschool rhythms and tap for children, started teaching the seniors line dances, tap, jazz, and chair exercise classes. As the program grew, some of the participants expressed an interest in performing. Everett started choreographing short dances and the group began performing at churches. The classes met twice a week at the two community centers and the groups would come together to rehearse once a week. Everett had unbelievable style and showmanship as well as the ability to maximize what little resources she had. She would shop at closeout warehouses for accessories and would come in with 35 vests to turn into costumes. Soon, they got calls requesting performances. Westminster Presbyterian Church loved them and invited them to perform and have

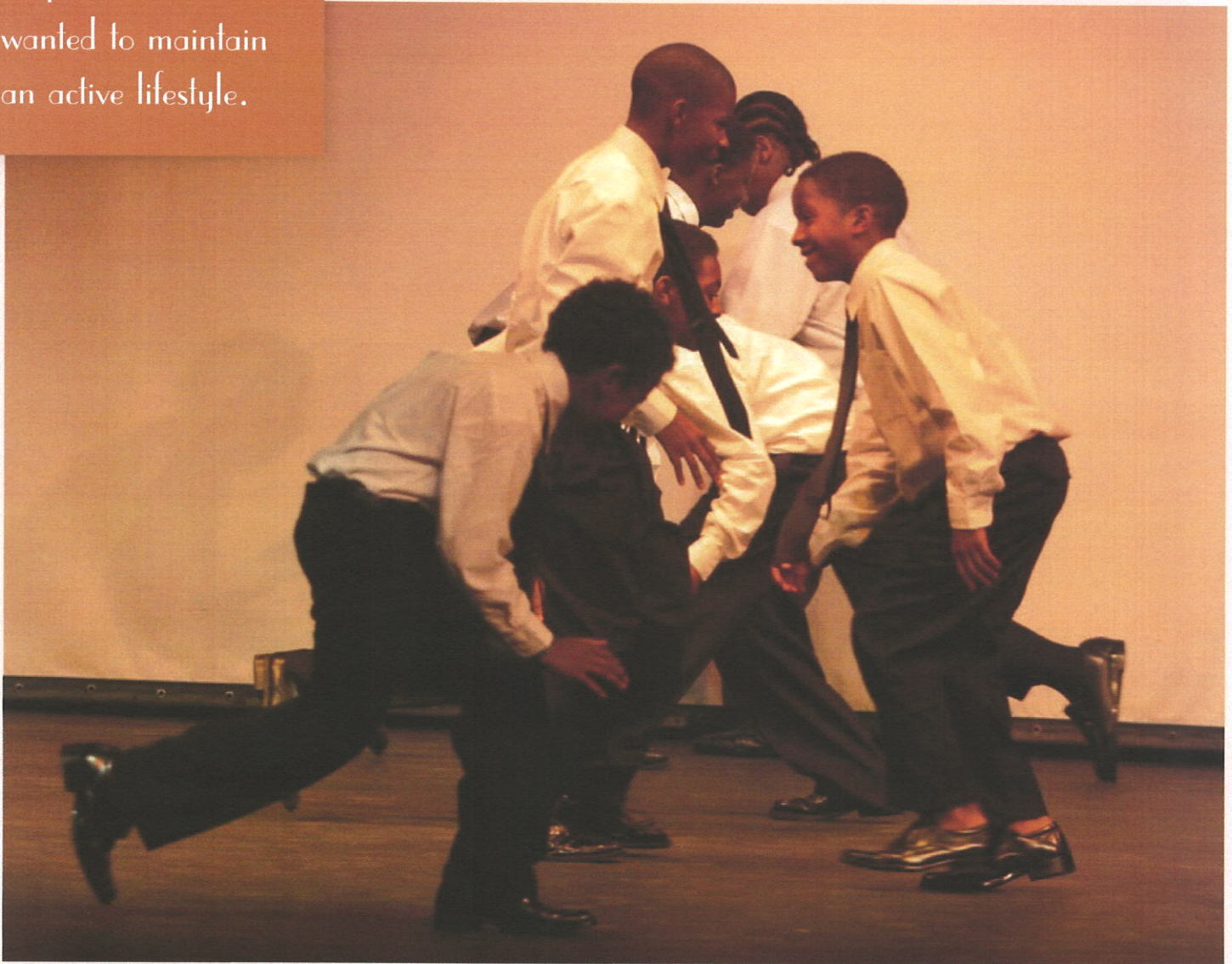


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lunch. The group was invited to perform at the Opryland Hotel, Baptist Hospital, and for a Black History Month event at Hadley Park. They also performed at the Taste of Jefferson Street Festival in 2003, a Neighborhood Association fundraiser for Germantown, a newly gentrifying Nashville neighborhood. Besides performing, the group cooked and sold dinners with dishes named after the dancers. Many of the Swinging Seniors were

retired professionals in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, such as Carrie Gentry, who ran the Tennessee State University Dance Department and wanted to maintain an active lifestyle. Unfortunately, the group dissipated when Everett died suddenly several years ago. As was the trend during that time, her position was not replaced, and the Dance Division was down to two instructors and the director.

Moving into the new millenium, the Dance Division director had to get creative once again to serve the community center populations with a limited staff. Shirley Blackburn, with help and support from Friends of Metro Dance, partnered with Dance World, a Nashville ballroom and social dance studio, to create the Music City Ballroom Kids program in 2008. The program was inspired by the success of the film *Mad Hot Ballroom*, a documentary following New York City fifth-graders participating in Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau's successful Dancing Classrooms program. Dance World co-owners Danny Baye and his wife Charlene were very supportive of the program—Baye donated his



Music City Ballroom Kids, 2010. Photographer: Shelby Smith.





Centennial Youth Ballet *Sleeping Beauty*, 2013. Photographer: Karen Alisa.

time as a teacher, and a grant from the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency paid the studio instructors. Dance teachers worked with the children twice a week and trained community center staff members to rehearse them. The grant provided all of the costumes and shoes, and the program was completely free. The summer program culminated in a performance and award ceremony at Belmont University's Curb Event Center. Members of the Centennial Youth Ballet, the Dance Division's primary ballet performance group of students in the upper levels of the program, volunteered at the final performance.

## THE DANCE DIVISION TODAY

As the current director, hired just this past year, I am confident in saying that the program seems to be back in an upswing. Although there are still only two publicly funded instructor positions, the department once again has been able to bring on freelance instructors at a generous revenue split, making it possible to keep costs low for participants but desirable enough to retain high-quality teachers. The program has been able to expand beyond ballet, and classes in Afro-Caribbean, hip-hop, and tap are available again, as well as theater dance and yoga. The program has also partnered with New Dialect, a new contemporary modern company based in Nashville and led by Juilliard graduate Banning Bouldin. After touring Europe

with Aszure Barton and several other renowned dance companies, Bouldin returned to her hometown of Nashville, and New Dialect's recent inaugural performance was received with ecstatic enthusiasm. The company rehearses daily in the Dance Division studios, invites the community to free studio showings and open rehearsals, and provides the syllabus and teachers for a new comprehensive contemporary modern program for children and teens. The Dance Division has partnered with the Center of Excellence at Vanderbilt and Centennial Medical Center, and with support from Friends of Metro Dance, now offers a group dance therapy program for people with Parkinson's, the first of its kind in the state. We have pursued other public-private partnerships and have partnered with a new contemporary arts space, OZ Arts Nashville, to host full-day multidisciplinary arts programming on public school holidays to assist working parents. Although resources are still limited, there is a community of creative individuals committed to ensuring that dance is always supported and will continue to thrive in Nashville in ways that reach diverse communities.



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