

AMERICAN MIDWEST *Ballet*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Jim Williams, Marketing Director
(402) 577-0336
jim@amballet.org

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DANCERS STEP IT UP AS AMERICAN MIDWEST BALLET OPENS SEASON 13

The sounds of dancing feet are filling the air today as the dancers of American Midwest Ballet [AMB], back from their summer break, begin their first day of work on the company's thirteenth season of professional dance.

"Summer was nice, but we're all happy to be back in the studio," said company artist Whitney Walsh, a California native. Like many of the company's 22 professional dancers who hail from around the nation and abroad, Whitney was drawn by the opportunity to dance with the company and now calls the Midwest home. "It's wonderful to have a break to be able to visit family and recharge, but I always look forward to the start of a new season, and the chance to collaborate with my friends and learn new works."

Single tickets went on sale this morning at amballet.org/tickets for all three of AMB's Season 13 productions, said Erika Overturff, AMB's founder and artistic director. She said the season will open October 15 and 16 with *Momentum*, a mixed-repertory program of four individual ballets, at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center in Council Bluffs.

The Nutcracker (November 19 & 20 at the Hoff Center, and December 3 & 4 at Omaha's Orpheum Theater) and *The Wizard of Oz* (April 7 at the Hoff Center, and May 13 & 14 at the Orpheum), will round out the season, which also includes touring performances in Spirit Lake, Sioux City, and Dubuque, Iowa.

COMPANY NEWS

"In addition to a really fabulous slate of ballets, we are excited to welcome several new dancers to the company," Overturff said. The new dancers are:

- Former Ballet Pensacola principal dancer **Marsalis AnderSon-Clausell** [*note capitalization of 'AnderSon'*], who joins AMB as a company artist. A native of Roswell, Ga., he trained at Metropolitan Ballet Theater and the Atlanta Ballet, with additional studies at Orlando Ballet and Nashville Ballet.

– Boston native **Jack Kadzis**, who joins AMB as a company artist. Jack trained with the Boston Ballet School, apprenticed with Sarasota Ballet, and was a dancer with the Milwaukee Ballet before joining AMB.

– **Erica Lohman**, of Indianapolis, Ind., who joins AMB as an apprentice. She has a BFA in dance performance and choreography from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

– **Casey Kelley** of Elkhorn, who joins AMB as a trainee.

In other company news:

Erin Alarcón, continuing as a dancer, also takes on the role of AMB's ballet master this season. The position previously was held by Matthew Lovegood, who retired from the company this past spring. As ballet master, Erin is responsible for conducting rehearsals, teaching company classes, and planning the dancers' schedules.

Leah Kressin, of Carlsbad, California, has been promoted to company artist after spending her first AMB season last year as an apprentice. Leah holds a BA degree in dance from California State University Long Beach.

[Download headshots of those mentioned here.](#)

SEASON 13 IN BRIEF

- **October 15 & 16 - *Momentum***, AMB's award-winning mixed-repertory program, at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center in Council Bluffs. This season, *Momentum* will feature:
 - The world premiere of a work created for AMB by Omaha native Ray Mercer, Broadway dancer and resident choreographer of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program in New York City
 - Frank Chaves' *Eva*, a tribute to the songs of vocalist Eva Cassidy
 - The return of audience favorite *The Diner*, by Erika Overturff
 - The *pas de deux* (dance for a couple) from the 1871 classical ballet *Don Quixote*.
- **November 19 & 20 and December 3 & 4** - Performances of ***The Nutcracker*** at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center and the Orpheum Theater. Following up on an initiative begun last season, the November 20 performance at the Hoff Center is a "sensory-friendly" version to enhance accessibility for individuals on the autism spectrum. AMB also will perform *The Nutcracker* on tour at Spirit Lake, Iowa, December 9 and 10.
- **December 2 - The Nutcracker Gala**, a biennial fundraising event, returns this year with a "Waltz of the Flowers" theme. Guests will mingle on the stage of the Orpheum Theater, see short selections

from *The Nutcracker*, and dine in the Orpheum lobby. Ticket information for the gala is available from sarah@amballet.org.

- **April 7 and May 13 & 14** - Performances of *The Wizard of Oz* at the Hoff Center and the Orpheum Theater. This original full-length story ballet was created by AMB's Erin Alarcón, a lifelong fan of both the classic film and the groundbreaking fantasy novel. AMB also will perform *The Wizard of Oz* on tour at Sioux City, Iowa, on April 14 and Dubuque, Iowa, on April 21 and 22.



MORE ABOUT MOMENTUM

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Ray Mercer, a cast member of the Broadway production of *The Lion King*, got the idea for his new work, still untitled at press time, one day during a rehearsal, when he was sitting in the audience area and glanced down into the orchestra pit.

“I looked down at the orchestra and the way that it's structured,” he said. “Aesthetically, I looked at how they're all structured and placed in a certain place, and how once they join together, they make this beautiful sound.

“I wanted to equate that to a community, how if a community came together, what beautiful things they could produce. I thought, what would that look like visually? I decided to get eight to ten tables, and line them up as if they were an orchestra.”

Mercer, who is in the process of “workshopping” the new piece in New York, said the tables will play a very physical role in the final work. “I want it to be very athletic,” he said. “The dancers may do things up and around a table, they may switch their tables, there may be duets at a certain table. It's as if the table represents a home base, a place where they retreat to and they escape from.

“Movement-wise, because AMB is a ballet company, it's very technically based – but I want it to be extremely physical. I'm so drawn to the physicality of dance. I want to create an experience that the audience is excited about, and that the dancers are excited about. I really want to push the limits: the way they approach dance, the way they approach storytelling. I really want to push the athleticism behind dance.

“Because of my background in musical theater, I'm really interested in storytelling – that what I create is tangible, it has a through-line, that it is something that the audience can connect with, that it's humanistic. I'm very interested in works that are humanistic.”

Erika's take: “*Ghost Light*, the work that Ray created for us as a solo for Katerina Schweitzer, was completely captivating. I'm really looking forward to seeing what he will create for us on a larger scale.”

When **Frank Chaves** created *Eva* for Chicago's River North Dance Company in 2013, the Chicago Sun-Times said it “has all the marks of an instant classic.” It began, he said, because of the voice of a woman he had never met.

His Philadelphia presenter had invited him to dinner and began playing records by Eva Cassidy, a singer who had died tragically of cancer in 1996 at the age of 33. A small but passionate band of fans had kept her works alive, and eventually her posthumous albums achieved worldwide popularity.

“He was playing her for me on purpose,” Chaves said. “He had always dreamed of commissioning a piece to her music. And that was my introduction to *Eva*.

“I immediately fell in love with her voice – this gorgeous, crystal clear, pitch perfect, beautiful voice that just cut through.”

Chaves began by going through Cassidy's wide-ranging catalog, which ranged from pop tunes to gospel. "I had to go through her library and pick the songs that really stuck out to me, or that I really had a kind of connection with, and those that evoked emotions within me," he said. Eventually he also met Cassidy's parents, saw some of the visual art works she had created, and met people who had heard her perform. The creative process, he said, gave him a feeling of deep connection with the singer he had never met.

"I think that for me, so to speak – and it's interesting to use this phrase – it was a match made in heaven," he said. "I just feel like my choreography with her music was meant to happen. So thank you, Eva. It really worked out beautifully."

Erika's take: "Frank is brilliant at creating work that isn't just beautiful, it really moves you. I've wanted to add *Eva* to the AMB repertory ever since I first saw it, and I'm thrilled that we're going to be able to share it with our audience for Season 13."

Erika Overturff's *The Diner* holds a special place in AMB history. Performed on tour at the Dance Chicago festival in 2009, it was the first work the company ever presented – even before its official Omaha debut. Set to songs linked by the theme of food, it plays out as a series of vignettes about workers and customers whose paths cross in a classic roadside diner, in an era when the highway was America's common ground.

Erika's take: "It's time to have some fun, and *The Diner* is just fun all around! I originally created this ballet after I heard a song about coffee. I instantly pictured a solo for a bluesy waitress. I was hooked, but needed more – and began listening to all the songs about food I could find. Pretty soon I cooked up a sweet little piece set in a roadside diner.

"This ballet is all about personality, and I realized we had the right cast of characters this season to really bring this piece to life! From a short-order cook, to lively patrons, to a trio of waitresses, *The Diner* brings together two wonderful things – dance and food. What's not to love!"

Known almost universally among dancers as simply "**Don Q**", the *grand pas de deux* from *Don Quixote* originated as part of an 1871 production that Marius Petipa created for the Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg, Russia. The *pas de deux* became famous in its own right through worldwide touring performances by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Erika's take: "The story line is simple – a young couple celebrating their engagement – but the thrilling dancing makes the Don Q *pas de deux* one of the most spectacular achievements of 19th-century classical ballet. It gives the dancers a chance to blend charming acting with brilliant technical feats."



MORE ABOUT *THE NUTCRACKER*

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The Nutcracker led AMB to a strong comeback last season after the previous year's COVID disruptions, Overturff said, with fresh elements that enhanced the beloved story, iconic characters, and opulent design of the production.

Those enhancements will carry forward this year, she said, with expanded roles for the company's professional dancers – including the role of Clara, the ballet's young heroine.

But Overturff said some scenes in this year's *Nutcracker* definitely will have a more youthful look. This year, auditions for the ballet's community cast were open to dancers age 9 and up, she said – an

expansion from last year. The young dancers, drawn from studios across the metro area, will be seen in roles such as baby mice, elves, candies, and the members of the Sugar Plum Court who greet Clara on her journey.

Erika's take: "The blending of our professional dancers' skill and artistry with our young dancers' sparkle and energy is part of what makes *The Nutcracker* so magical."



MORE ABOUT THE WIZARD OF OZ
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A popular favorite since its premiere in May 2019, *The Wizard of Oz* will again take audiences dancing down the Yellow Brick Road to wrap up Season 13.

“It’s a genuinely spectacular experience,” Overturff said. “In terms of the number of sets, it’s the biggest production we’ve ever done. It was a wonderful, collaborative effort between our design team and the ballet’s choreographer, Erin Alarcón.”

Alarcón was already one of AMB’s most recognizable dancers – known for roles ranging from the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* to the tragic heroines of *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* – and had created several short works for the company when she unveiled *The Wizard of Oz* as her first full-length story ballet, Overturff said.

“It has been a dream of mine to choreograph *The Wizard of Oz* for as long as I can remember,” said Alarcón, a fan of both the classic MGM musical and L. Frank Baum’s groundbreaking fantasy novel. She said her very first onstage appearance, at the age of 5, had been as a member of the Lullaby League in a local ballet production, an experience she recalls even today with “an overwhelming sense of joy.”

Alarcón said her *Wizard* draws not only on the book and movie, but on her own experiences as a performer and ballet-goer.

“I wanted this ballet to be done in the style of my favorite classical ballets,” she said. “You will see a farm scene that reflects the peasant scenes traditionally found in ballets such as *Coppélia* and *La Fille Mal Gardée*. With the Poppy scene, I wanted to pay homage to the Wilis in *Giselle*; and with the Gift scene, I wanted to give a nod to Marius Petipa,” the influential choreographer of 19th-century Russia’s Imperial Ballet.

“Along with ballet, Erin takes inspiration from tap, jazz, and musical theater dance,” Overturff said, “and weaves those elements seamlessly into the choreography.”

Alarcón said her goal in creating her ballet was to let the audience experience the sense of watching a child’s imagination come to life. “I always wished that the characters in my favorite books could jump off the pages and that I could join them in their worlds of endless possibility,” she said. “That is the experience I’m hoping to capture in *The Wizard of Oz*.”

Erika’s take: “Erin’s *Wizard* is an amazing accomplishment. From its colorful, grand scenes to sweet, funny moments, the way she brings the story and its beloved characters to life on stage is absolutely charming! Audiences will be dazzled and entertained, and most of all they will remember how it touched their hearts.”

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ABOUT AMERICAN MIDWEST BALLET

American Midwest Ballet [AMB] brings the beauty, athleticism, and energy of professional ballet to audiences in the Midwest and beyond. Performing at home and on tour, its mission is to provide cultural enrichment through dance programs of the highest quality: breathtaking performances, inspiring education, and uplifting community engagement.

AMB's Season 13 is presented with the generous support of premiere benefactors the Holland Foundation, the Fred and Eve Simon Charitable Foundation, the Iowa West Foundation, and Douglas County; season sponsor Omaha Steaks; and major supporters the Nebraska Arts Council, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and the Sherwood Foundation.

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