AMERICAN MIDWEST BALLET

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Contact: Jim Williams, Marketing Director
(402) 577-0336 • jim@amballet.org
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SHOWCASING THE EXPRESSIVE RANGE OF DANCE, 'MOMENTUM' AIMS TO ENCHANT BALLET FIRST-TIMERS AND AFICIONADOS ALIKE

A gripping and inspiring dance drama, a sultry tribute to the sounds of the Caribbean, and an exhilaratingly eerie classical ballet will come together October 17 and 18 in American Midwest Ballet's *Momentum*, a program crafted to **appeal to newcomers and experienced dancegoers alike**, the company's director said.

"Sometimes people think of ballet as long-form stories, such as *Cinderella* or *The Nutcracker*," said AMB founder and director Erika Overturff. "Of course we love those ballets, and we perform them regularly. But for *Momentum*, we get to do something a bit different. Each season we feature a fresh *Momentum* program, with shorter individual ballets that **showcase the incredible expressive range of dance**."

A Light in the Dark

Perseverance, Overturff said, is the focus of this season's opening work, *A Light in the Dark*. Created by Broadway legend Ann Reinking [1949-2020] and contemporary Chicago choreographer Melissa Thodos, the critically acclaimed dance tells the true story of Helen Keller — a rebellious girl, both blind and deaf, whom no one could seem to reach — and Anne Sullivan, the dedicated teacher who refused to give up on her.

The story is widely known through the 1962 Oscar-winning film *The Miracle Worker,* Overturff said, and Thodos' and Reinking's **dynamic, physically daring choreography** makes Helen's breakthrough especially inspiring and emotional. Premiering in 2013, *A Light in the Dark* received critical acclaim and toured extensively; a 2014 television version aired on PBS stations and was nominated for a regional Emmy Award.

"It's an incredible story," Overturff said. "It's very moving. **It's a narrative story about real people, with a big element of emotional connection.** The story is about Helen Keller, but it's equally about Anne Sullivan. They're both heroes."

Danse Macabre

Making its premiere just in time for the spooky season, Overturff's own eerily elegant *Danse Macabre* is a pure classical ballet, with an unconventional twist. "The idea," she said, "is that **on rare special occasions, the dead get to reunite and have the night of their lives."**

Set to Camille Saint-Saëns' famous 1872 "Danse macabre, Opus 40", the new work is filled with **daring lifts, dynamic leaps and turns, and sparkling *pointe* work for the women**, Overturff said. The dancers – seven men and seven women – wear darkly luxurious costumes, with long velvet coats and boots for the men, highly ornamented dresses for the women, gold brocade offset by deep jewel tones, and long gloves hand-painted with skeletal motifs.

"We wanted the dancers to look very beautiful, like they're going to a ball or a big celebration," she said. "But yet, it's almost like they're **a little bit translucen**t — you can see the hint of the skeleton. In a way I was thinking of it like one of those old-fashioned paintings where, when you look at them from one angle, you see a beautiful portrait, and then from another angle it's a little more ghostly."

Yet in spite of the spectral aura, the mood of *Danse Macabre* is one of celebration, she said. "**It looks eerie, but it's joyful.** Really, it's about *joie de vivre*, the joy of life — being together with people in the best times, and living life to the fullest."

Habaneras, the Music of Cuba

Contemporary choreographer Frank Chaves created this vibrant six-part work as **a celebration of his Cuban musical heritage**, Overturff said.

"Frank was only six months old when his family left Cuba," she said, "but **his father made sure his home was filled with the music of great Cuban composers** such as Ernesto Lecuona, Carlos Puebla, and Silvio Rodriguez. It's a cinematic style of music, like a film score, filled with life, color, and emotion. It's wonderful music to dance to."

Chaves, artistic director of the renowned contemporary company River North Dance Chicago from 1993 until his retirement in 2015, first staged this work for AMB in 2019. "**I dedicate this piece to my father,**" he said, "for introducing my sisters and me to the arts and to the many joys and fulfillment that music can bring to the soul."

Performances of American Midwest Ballet's *Momentum* will be Saturday, October 17, at 7:30 pm, and Sunday, October 18, at 2 pm. Ticket information is available from AMB's website at **amballet.org .**

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