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Guerrilla ballet

Dancers take to the streets to save the Sacramento Ballet

By Kel Munger

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It was a cold and rainy Second Saturday and Valentine's Day night, but the streets still were filled with art-walk-goers, revelers and lovers all the same.

A lithe blonde turned to face a tall, tattooed man, then—in some combination of Edenic serpent and elemental mercury—slithered and flowed down the length of his torso. This was not some bodice-ripping romance or striptease. This was ballet. Specifically, it was a scene from *Frankie and Johnny*, part of Sacramento Ballet's Red-Hot Valentine program, which injected some heat into the stormy holiday weekend.

It was scintillating and unusual, yes, but it also incited curiosity: Why are ballerinas taking to the streets, spinning and pirouetting in the night?

The crumbling economy has hit local performing-arts groups like the Sacramento Ballet hard. Shortened seasons, layoffs, performance reductions—times are tough, so the company is hitting back with both a transformed season that reaches out to audiences with more intimate settings, and also guerilla dancing and fundraising during big events, like Second Saturday.

And so, after putting on a performance at the Ballet's Midtown studio for paying customers, dancers spread out across the grid on Second Saturday to introduce revelers to the power of the human body.

At Solomon Dubnick Gallery, ballerinas Alexandra Cunningham and Sunchai Mui performed near the entrance. Quickly, they were surrounded by an impromptu audience. And of course, after dancing,



Sunchai Mui and Alexandra Cunningham add physical art to the visual display at Solomon Dubnick Gallery.

PHOTO BY KEL MUNGER

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they made their pitch.

In spite of canceling the full-scale season at Sacramento Community Center Theater, the Sacramento Ballet is still here, still dancing, and even more accessible than ever. The company has re-envisioned its place in the community. This means smaller venues, yes, but also more variety.

Carinne Binda, who shares artistic-director duties at the Sacramento Ballet with her husband and partner, Ron Cunningham, explained that the ballet has scheduled more performances of more works, so it's by no means a reduced season. It's just altered, which is a frustrating situation, sure, but not one without possibilities.

On one hand, Cunningham says that the role performing arts plays in the economy isn't duly recognized. "Even people who are engaged in the arts think of it as a luxury. But we're really drivers of economic growth. We fill the restaurants, the parking lots, the clubs and bars after the performance," he said.

But people are cutting back. Hence the company's new marketing scheme: Put on a series of Sacramento Ballet performances inside the company's small, personal studio, and send the ballet's dancers out on the streets to promote the new shows and raise funds.

And while Cunningham says the new studio performances are like "one-on-one conversation," such intimacy can be a little daunting for the dancers. "Sometimes that darkness on stage can allow a dancer to experience the moment in a fashion that's totally free," Binda noted. "When you're observed, it changes the experience."

"Some dancers like it a lot, but I prefer being in a big theater," dancer Ilana Goldman explained. "I like to feel as if I'm in my own world, separate from everything, so having the audience that close can be a little uncomfortable." It's personal and revealing, which takes some getting used to on the part of the dancers.



Stefan Calka and Kirsten Bloom perform the pas de deux from *Don Quixote*. The ballet is classical; the intimate studio setting is "guerilla ballet."

PHOTO BY KEL MUNGER

dance for customers as a cross-promotion.

If there's an upside to the financial situation, Goldman said, it's the way the dancers have gotten out in the community instead of waiting for people to come to their studio. "We've come to understand that we have to physically move ourselves from our comfortable building and go out and meet people," she said.

And things are looking up.

Sacramento Ballet on March 7. Mochii Yogurt, 1530 16th Street, will do the same on March 14. Join Sac Ballet's dancers at both events. Businesses interested in participating should contact the Sacramento Ballet. Videos, podcasts and event information from the Sacramento Ballet dancers is online at

www.saveoursacballet.com.

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At the company's Red-Hot Valentine's performances, dances included a classical—and physically challenging—pas de deux with principals Kirsten Bloom and Stefan Calka from *Don Quixote*; a sizzling, Cunningham-choreographed ballet to Ravel's *Boléro*; and a Latin-flavored excerpt from the ballet *Frankie and Johnny*.

"If you enjoy sports and theater, you'll see that we've married the two in a form of entertainment that is truly accessible," Cunningham said.

Think of it as television with real people, reality-TV without the idiot box. "There's this habit of an impassive gaze at a flat screen that has figures jumping around on it, and every so often they get up and go to the refrigerator," Cunningham said of typical viewer habits. The Ballet is offering a more direct connection to both performance and performer, so "instead of going to the refrigerator for a solitary beer, we have a beer together afterward," he joked.

Or even take a couple of turns around the floor with one of the dancers. After the Red-Hot Valentine's program, the audience got a free salsa lesson and a chance to dance with the local stars.

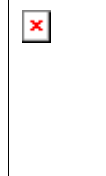
Back on the streets, members of the company are selling Sacramento on ballet, even showing up as "installation art" at Second Saturday galleries. "The first time we did it, the response was incredible. People just stopped what they were doing and gathered around us to watch," Goldman said.

The dancers also have been working with local businesses to form partnerships. Someone makes a donation—in some cases a percentage of the day's receipts—and the ballerinas show up to

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The smaller performances have mostly sold out. The first of the Beer & Ballet series, which featured works choreographed by the dancers, was so popular that an encore performance was added for February 21, and that show promptly sold out, too.

The company is not taking a short-term approach to the situation. "We hope that when we come out the other side of this, we'll have retained our audience and added to it in a way that will encompass the entire community," Cunningham said.

Goldman is also optimistic. "People are coming to our shows with very little notice," she said, which leads her to believe they're on the right track.

"I'm optimistic because we're still dancing." Goldman paused, then smiled. "This is not over, and it looks like we can come out of it in pretty good shape."

And at the 20th Street Art Gallery on Second Saturday, Gabriel Williams and Chloe Felesina worked out a pas de deux to the music the gallery played. "We were going to simply pose, but, well, there was music," Williams explained.

They just had to dance.

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