Right: Richmond Ballet in Eliot Feld's *Contra Pose*; below: Dance Theatre of Harlem in Michael Smuin's *St. Louis Woman*

Above: Oakland Ballet in Robert Henry Johnson's *La Femme Au Puits: Thirsting*; left: Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre in Susan Shields's *Concerto Caprice*

clockwise from top left: Stephanie Berger, courtesy of Richmond Ballet, Andy Mogg, Scott Suchman

Fight For The Future

Ballet companies confront the difficult times ahead.

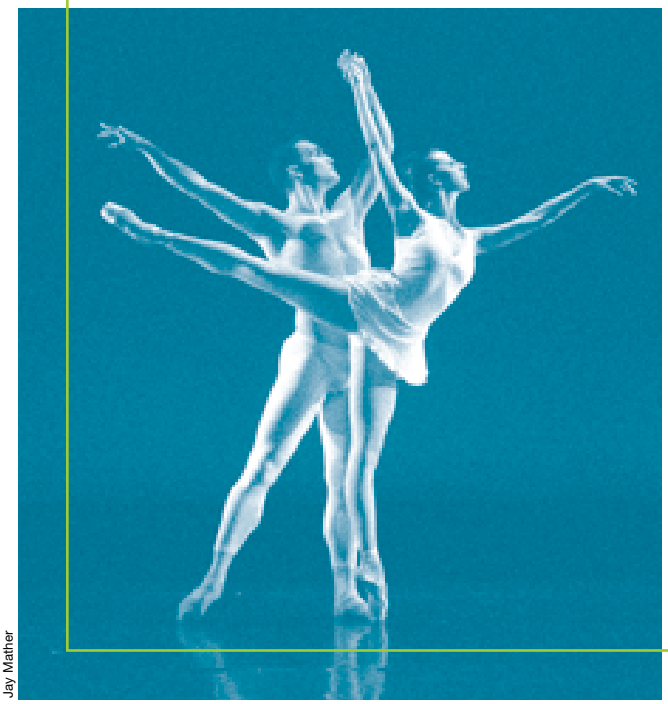
Though the success of such television shows as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing With The Stars* might suggest that interest in dance is on the upsurge in America, many ballet companies across the country are floundering. So what tactics can companies use to survive—and thrive—in today's cultural climate?

In the early 1990s, medium-sized companies faced difficult financial times, but between 1992 and 2000, not one company with a budget over $1 million perished, according to John Munger, director of research and information at Dance/USA. In the last year alone, however, Ballet Internationale and Oakland Ballet have permanently closed their doors—and Ohio Ballet may soon follow. Additionally, Ballet Pacifica, Dance Theatre of Harlem and Eliot Feld's Ballet Tech remain on hiatus until more money can be raised.

"We've seen really wonderful companies just disappear. There are some that are on the brink, too; they are right at that waterfall," says Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre Artistic Director Terrence Orr, whose own company found in 2004 that it was spending more than it was making.

While smaller companies are accustomed to some strain, bigger companies often enjoy more visibility and continuous support. Some big companies also benefit from larger endowments, which keep them safely in the black each year (see sidebar). Medium-sized companies, however, may be at the highest risk, because the amount of money they need to stay afloat tends to be unmanageably high when revenue drops.

By Jocelyn Anderson



Jay Mather

Sacramento Ballet in Jack Hansen's *Agnus Dei*

While each all are looking artistic

Once money problems arise, often due to declining donations and ticket sales or a general economic downturn, most companies first cut back, understandably, on their budgets. In fact, cutbacks are a startling trend at many existing companies, Munger says. His research shows that out of the 75 to 80 dance companies with budgets of more than $1 million (most of which are ballet companies), three or four made budget cutbacks from 1999 to 2000—numbers that are considered normal. Nine cut back from 2000 to 2001. But in 2002, the cutbacks numbered 20, and in 2003 it was 25, and in 2004 a staggering 41.

At PBT, Orr says, the company slashed its budget from $8 million to $6.4 million, partially by eliminating the orchestra and using recorded music instead (Atlanta Ballet will also use recorded music this season). PBT's orchestra will return for two productions this season, with *Swan Lake* and a Balanchine program, but the company will reduce the number of performances in its larger venue, the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts.

"It shows our supporters that we are really trying to right this ship," Orr says. "This is what it means, and this is the truth of it."

Artistic directors are getting savvy about these trends, and many presented ideas at the recent Dance/USA National Roundtable in Portland, Oregon. Sessions covered a variety of topics, including what companies can do to create successful business models.

While each company's struggles are different, all are looking for new ways to satisfy their artistic visions *and* bring in more revenue. For some, that means staying small and shunning further growth, a method that reduces the pressure to push for a larger audience. That tactic seems to be working for such companies as the James Sewell Ballet and Diablo Ballet.

After Diablo Ballet suffered an almost fatal deficit in 2002, which it survived by appealing to the public, Artistic Director Lauren Jonas not only decreased the number of dancers, but also became the company's executive director. Now that the company has slowly rebuilt itself, she says, it will stay at 10 to 12 dancers.

"It's really important for me to financially take care of the people we have, pay them well and give them benefits—to keep it containable that way," Jonas says.

At the roundtable, Tom Mossbrucker, artistic director of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, presented his company's two-city model (Aspen, Colorado, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, are both home cities). The model has worked at ASFB while it has failed elsewhere—most notably Cleveland/San Jose Ballet—because Mossbrucker has kept the company much more portable, with 10 dancers and no full-lengths. The result has been six additional weeks of work for his dancers.

Other companies have searched for new ways to present themselves to new audiences. Some are striking up collaborations with other arts organizations in their communities. In October, Miami City Ballet will move into the new Carnival Center for the Performing Arts, along with three resident music companies. After receiving a lot of help from the city, Sacramento Ballet has just mounted a capital campaign to raise $4 million to start a similar venture with the local opera, symphony and musical theater group. The new building is scheduled to open within the next two to three years.

In the meantime, Sacramento Ballet found a way to optimize the use of its current space. The now yearly Beer and Ballet event allows audiences to enjoy a performance with a beverage in the

company's struggles are different, for new ways to satisfy their visions *and* bring in more revenue.

company's casual setting. "Some people don't like the idea of Beer and Ballet," says Artistic Director Ron Cunningham, "but you know, they do like studio shows, and we purposefully call it that because I like the idea of—and my wife [co-artistic director Carinne Binda] hates this phrase—taking the capital C out of culture."

Richmond Ballet also has its own studio theater and regularly invites audiences to come to see newly commissioned work in a space that doesn't require additional rent. Plus, they can start the evening whenever they want, often choosing to begin at 6:30 pm, so people can come straight from work and get home at a reasonable hour.

"Everyone thought I had lost my mind when I brought a lot of the works into the new building, and frankly, it was largely financially motivated," says Stoner Winslett, artistic director of Richmond Ballet. "But people started coming and word started spreading. The stage is as big as [the one at] the New York State Theater and the house is 214 seats, so it's like you're in it. And I think it's meaningful for people to be right up next to the dancers and see the sweat—to see these new works come to life."

The trick to discovering new means of survival, say artistic directors, is knowing the difference between a good idea and a clunker, one that will fit with your artistic vision and not compromise your company's standards. Because even though money talks, it's still the artistic freedom that guides a ballet company.

"Our job is to be a leader, not a follower, of the audience," says Winslett. "In the early days of Balanchine, there were few people coming in, but he was willing to keep going and more people [eventually] came. If something is important enough to you, you have to figure out a creative way to do it within the bounds of financial responsibility."

Money Talks

Companies hope endowments can give them long and prosperous futures.

For ballet companies to survive increasingly difficult financial times, many are looking to endowment funds as the answer. An endowment is donated money that an organization cannot generally access, but which generates interest that can be used toward the budget each year.

According to Dance/USA, 24 of the 30 largest ballet and modern companies in America reported endowment funds in 2003. Many more have them on wish lists. The idea is that smaller institutions that lack endowments are more susceptible to unforeseen cash-flow problems—which forced Oakland Ballet to close its doors in January.

"The entire community is being impacted by what happened at Oakland Ballet," says Karen Brown, its former artistic director. "But if you've got an endowment, then you can draw on that to help bridge the gap of your cash flow. If you don't have that, then you are going to go under. That's just the bottom line."

Terrence Orr, artistic director of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, says the company's $10 million endowment helped during the hard times in 2004. "I think that's probably one of the things that kept us afloat, or we might not have made it either," Orr says.

In April, Atlanta Ballet started a study of how much it could expect to raise from the local community. Other medium-sized companies, such as Louisville Ballet and Richmond Ballet, have smaller endowments—in the thousands—with goals of making them larger.

So far though, it's the big companies that have been most successful at growing endowments. Houston Ballet's $53 million endowment, for example, pays 12 percent of the company's $16 million yearly budget. In 2002, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater also effectively raised about $60 million for a new building and endowment fund.

New York City Ballet launched the largest endowment campaign in dance history in 2000, with an end goal of $80 million, only to be topped last year by San Francisco Ballet, which announced its goal of $85 million by 2008.

The trouble with endowments is that they take time, effort and even, yes, money to raise. And not all companies have the resources to make them a priority.

Still, smaller companies are finding ways to show their communities that their institutions deserve secure futures. "People have to understand and value what you do and [think] that you deserve a long life before they're going to give you an endowment," says Richmond Ballet Artistic Director Stoner Winslett. "I think we are there."