

All In The Family

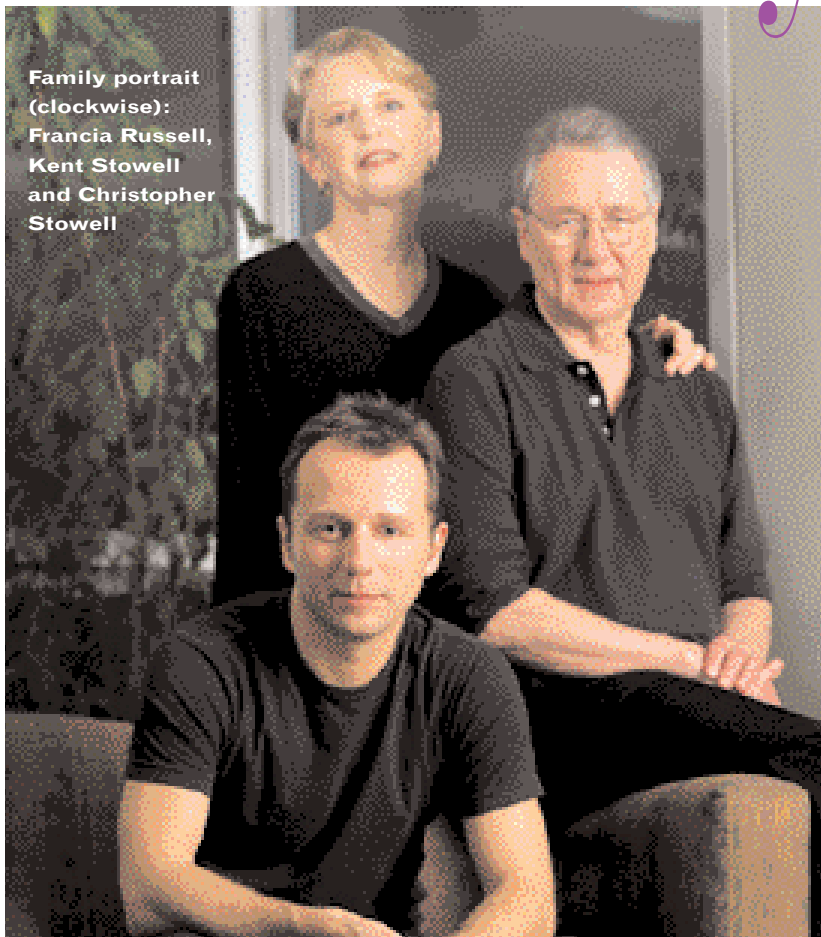
One family makes its mark out West.

Over the last 25 years, a dynasty has grown on the West Coast, developing a solid reputation for great ballet. Not since the Christensen brothers (Harold, Lew and Willam) has the West seen a family as influential in ballet as the Stowells: the husband-and-wife team of **Kent Stowell** and **Francia Russell**, co-artistic directors of **Pacific Northwest Ballet** in Seattle, and their son **Christopher Stowell**, who takes over as artistic director at Portland's **Oregon Ballet Theatre** in July.

Kent and Francia had distinguished careers as dancers under **George Balanchine** at New York City Ballet. In the early '70s they moved to Germany, where Kent danced with the Munich Opera Ballet and Frankfurt Ballet. The couple co-directed the Frankfurt Ballet for two years before returning to the U.S. to take the reins at PNB in 1977, when it was just a fledgling company.

Their main goal was to establish a classical ballet company and school of national importance. Balanchine's teachings drove some of their philosophy. "Balanchine was, I would say, *the* major influence in our lives as dancers," Francia says. But she's quick to point out that, contrary to what many think, "we do not teach Balanchine technique. We teach what we like, and we teach young dancers to be trained for ballet companies as they are now."

Christopher, the eldest of the couple's three sons, trained at the **School of PNB** and the School of American Ballet before joining San Francisco Ballet in 1985. He became a principal in 1990 and retired in 2001 to concentrate on choreography. "That was all going very



Family portrait (clockwise): Francia Russell, Kent Stowell and Christopher Stowell

Photography by Angela Sterling; makeup by Karen Armond

well, but I missed being a part of a group and being with people who were as entrenched in a tradition as me," Christopher says of his decision to direct OBT.

Despite his experience staging Balanchine ballets, Christopher says he will not inundate OBT's repertoire with Balanchine ballets, with one exception. "My first season there is his centenary, so we're most likely going to do three ballets by him to celebrate," he says.

Needless to say, mom and dad are proud. "I think Christopher has all the attributes of a good artistic director," Francia says. "He has a wonderful background, experience, intelligence and passion for the art form." And he doesn't have to look far for advice. "I can't imagine anyone who has a hotline to practical information like I do," Christopher says. "For simple things that I just need to know a little more about, I can pick up the phone on Sunday morning and make the call."

The family has a sense of satisfaction about what each member has achieved. "Everything that we have here," Kent says, "we have created.... All of the things about PNB, the good and the bad, warts and all, we made it." There is also anticipation about the future: "Something I'm very excited about is the next generation of artistic directors, which Christopher represents, because I think it's becoming time for a new take on ballet," Francia says. "I can't wait to see what comes of this new generation." **P**