It's a new era for the Joffrey Ballet. For the first time in their history, the reigns have been handed to someone other than a founder of the company. Ashley Wheater has some big shoes to fill, but having been a dancer his whole life, he knows how to slip into them—and release their full potential.

By Jake Jarvi

Robert Joffrey originally started his own dance company in the ’50s, when the art form he loved seemed to be growing too comfortable performing stagnant classics that, although beautiful, failed to provide both the performing artists and their audiences the nervous vibrancy that comes with trying something new. Since its inception, the Joffrey Ballet has been renowned for its innovation, experimentation, and dedication to breathtaking dance. So in 2007, when the Ballet was searching for a new artistic director—only the third in their history, after co-founders Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino—they needed to find someone who would push the company out of its comfort zone, and maintain that euphoric spirit of reinvention.

“Robert Joffrey was a great visionary. I think that he built his company on a blueprint of nurturing some of the greatest 19th and 20th century works, but also really pushing forward new creative work for the company,” says Ashley Wheater, the new artistic director of the Joffrey Ballet. “I want to do this for what Joffrey and Arpino started. They were truly mavericks of dance in America, and I feel there’s a responsibility that goes with having this position.”

It’s a responsibility he’s prepared for his entire life. Ashley has been dancing from the age of 6. Coming from a very musical family, it was initially the music that drew him to dance. “My sisters all took ballet. I used to go with my mother to pick them up,” Ashley recalls. “I clearly remember thinking, ‘How amazing that you can have music all day. The music came first and the dancing came afterward.’” He was accepted to the Royal Ballet School in London when he was 10 years old, and, in the years that followed, he studied and danced all over the world, even as a company member of the Joffrey for four years. Ashley left the company to accept a position as a principal dancer with the San Francisco Ballet after Robert Joffrey’s death in 1988. “When I was in the Joffrey,
it was one of the best companies in America. They had extraordinarily talented dancers and a great repertoire of new and created works,” says Ashley. “Joffrey was a stickler for having it right. He taught me so much.”

Having learned from the master is serving Ashley very well. As the artistic director himself now, his responsibilities include programming the repertoire each year, hiring and coaching the dancers, and finding lighting designers, costume designers, and set designers for each show. Ashley has made a decision regarding everything you see from the moment the curtain rises.

One of his early decisions was to add more diversity to the company—it’s all-too-easy with most companies to attend a ballet and see a stage full of the trimmest Caucasians you ever laid eyes on. Ashley brought the same eclectic eye he uses for repertoire to the practice of hiring dancers, eschewing uniformity and a specific body-type, focusing instead on dancers with charisma and undeniable talent. Women need to have beautiful, articulated pointe work and line control. Men need to be strong, reliable partners and big jumpers. Everyone needs to have had years of training and a mastery of all the technical steps.

And, where better to learn the techniques and control necessary to land center stage than from leaders in the field? The Academy of Dance is the official school of the Joffrey Ballet and they have upwards of 600 students enrolled at any given time. Dedicated students also have the chance to appear on the main stage alongside the company dancers. “Dance is such a broad spectrum. We have so many different programs,” says Ashley. “Whether they’re into ballet, hip-hop, or jazz, dancers in the company choreograph for them. They’ll do something that's completely within their boundaries, and it’s always a lot of fun. When you watch them dance, their commitment and passion for understanding the discipline of an art form are simply amazing.”

The commitment and passion apparent on the stage of the Auditorium Theater during the Joffrey’s programming year is infectious. Seeing a show isn’t just about a cultural evening out. When you see the Joffrey in action, you witness unfathomable athletic ability and control. People right in front of your eyes demonstrate the supreme beauty and grace that the human body is capable of when it is trained to precision. And with their imaginative show selections, you’re not just seeing a ballet as people have seen it for generations, you’re experiencing something that no one has ever seen before.

The lineup Ashley put together for this year holds true to the standards under which Robert

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*Ashley Wheater* continued on page 140

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*Photo by Herbert Migdoll*

*Photo courtesy of The Joffrey Ballet*
Joffrey himself once founded the company. It's an eclectic mix of the treasured old and the unexplored new. The fall season begins with the MiStars program celebrating the work of three iconic New York choreographers: George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Christopher Wheeldon. The holiday season wouldn't be complete without revisiting Robert Joffrey's seminal interpretation of *The Nutcracker*, which has been a Chicago treasure for many years. In February, the Joffrey performs the Midwest premiere of Ronald Hynd's *The Merry Widow*, a tale of comedic intrigue in three acts backed by a beautiful score by Franz Lehar. And they'll finish out the season in the spring with two world premieres, by Edwaard Liang and Yuri Possokhov, and a company premiere by Jiti Adam, a former soloist for the New York City Ballet. This season will once again feature live orchestral accompaniment by the Chicago Sinfonietta and it's sure to be unforgettable.

"When I think of what the company needs, I also think of what the audience needs," says Ashley. "The company is re-energized. I think that if you asked the dancers, they would say it has gotten harder. The classes are hard, the repertoire is more demanding, there's a lot more new material."

For more information on the Joffrey Ballet or to obtain passes to their new season, visit joffrey.org.

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SHE Boutique continued from page 50

computer they're working on?" This seemingly small North Shore boutique fills orders all over the world, providing trends of the moment, as well as pieces that are meant to last.

Nicolette is constantly looking for new designers and new lines to meet the shop's growing clientele. SHE Boutique's evolving nature ensures that its clients always have a new experience, whether it's live or virtual.

Nicolette is responsible for buying items that appeal to the quintessential North Shore woman, as well as virtual shoppers overseas. Still, Chicago's unique style is a solid influence in Nicolette's shop. "My favorite thing about Chicago in general is that there is a classic look you can't get anywhere in the world," the owner says. "You're always guaranteed to find the Audrey Hepburn-esque style."

SHE Boutique's merchandise has the perfect balance between eclecticism and classicism. Regardless of individual style, there is something to suit just about everyone at SHE. "If you wear something from SHE, you'll get stopped by someone," Nicolette says. "That's the SHE guarantee."

SHE Boutique is located at 453 Central in Highland Park. For more information, call 847-926-0150, or visit them online at shopsheboutique.com. —ANNIE DEL WALSH

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ASHLEY WITH JODIE GATES IN THE JOFFREY'S PRODUCTION OF PAUL TAYLOR'S ARDEN COURT.

Photo courtesy of The Joffrey Ballet

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