

VDC Interview Transcript
Sue Porter, Executive Director, BalletMet
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Ballet Met
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Columbus, OH 43215

Key:

CF: Candace Feck
SP: Sue Porter
JD: Jane D'Angelo, Executive Director, Ohio Dance
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway, VDC film team

CF: When did your relationship with BalletMet actually begin?

SP: I really had nothing to do with BalletMet before I was sitting in my office in a law firm, and one of my partners came in and said “They’re bringing in a new Artistic Director to the Ballet, my wife is on the Board, and they need some immigration work done. Could you help them?” I sort of thought about it — and when one of your partners in a law firm comes in, the answer is always “Yes” — you will figure out a way to do it. That actually is when I first met David Nixon, our third Artistic Director. I didn’t know much about dance, but I got to know him and his very special wife, Yoko Ichino. They were amazing people, and I was so interested in the art that they were creating, that we became friends. It wasn’t long after that that they asked me if I would be interested in coming on the Board. I was kind of hesitant — I was on a lot of boards around town, but had never been on an arts board before — and I thought... First I said no — and they pursued it — and I finally said yes. And of all the boards I’ve ever sat on, this is one I’ve never been able to leave. Until one day the board asked me to become Executive Director. So that’s how I got involved with BalletMet.

CF: What was the company like in the mid-nineties when you first encountered it?

SP: Right. David had just come to Columbus. He had danced in Canada and in Europe and it was his first job as an Artistic Director. The company was great for a community company of its time: they had some beautiful dancers, and always have had. David loved to tell stories through his ballets, so we had that type of focus, I think, within the company. And in his time here, he was able to choreograph work, some of which we still do today — such as *Dracula*.

CF: Perhaps we could proceed by talking about the history of the company through a review of its Artistic Directors.

SP: Well, I don’t know so much about the first two, other than what I’ve read or heard through BalletMet — I think there are other people who I know you’ll be speaking to who have more experience with that and have seen the whole breadth. I do think BalletMet changes with each Artistic Director it brings in, and we always think it takes a step forward. As I said, we had David [Nixon], who did these amazing story ballets here, and then went on to run a company in England and received all kinds of awards for his choreography. We had Stanton Welch as our Artistic

Consultant for a few years before he became the Artistic Director of the Houston Ballet, one of the largest ballets in the country. And then Gerard.

Gerard was somebody who had long experience with BalletMet as a dancer, an Assistant Artistic Director, and he really helped us through some very, very difficult times. We dealt with the recession, and he and our then Executive Director Cheri Mitchell, did an amazing job in what was a difficult time for our country, and especially for the Arts. Funding became very difficult both from governmental sectors and businesses, because everyone was struggling. And they had lots of discussions at that time about “Who should we be?” and “How are we going to get through this?” — but, “*Really*, who should we *be*?” Should we be a company like we had been, which does both classical and contemporary works, trying to give our community a wide array of dance experience, with a relatively large company, for a city of our size? — Or, should we do something that was smaller? Should we be more of a touring company? Should we go down to twelve dancers? And we had a lot of discussions around these ideas as we were realizing, I think, what the recession was going to mean to our organization. I think the interesting thing about that, and the decisions that we reached at that time, is that we said “You know what? We don’t want to get smaller, we don’t want to lose what we have been, and what we thought we could be.” We hunkered down a little bit, you know — there were some changes, we didn’t get to keep all of the staff that we had, it was a tough time as it was for many, many organizations and businesses. But instead of shrinking, what *we* decided was “We’re going to go *against* the trend, and go out and *raise* money. We had a program that we called “Moving Forward,” and we looked to raise a million dollars. And that million dollars was to improve our marketing, to make sure that we could maintain the number of dancers that we had had, prior to this — and we said, “No. We’re not going to shrink, we’re not going to do that. We’re going to raise money.” And we were successful in doing it. And I think *that* attitude really says something about who BalletMet is: we’ve always been fiscally responsible, we’ve been careful with the money, because we think we’ve been entrusted with a lot of responsibility when we ask people to both be our patrons — either by buying a ticket, coming to our academy, being part of our education programs or by contributing their money. And so we’re always very careful with that. But I think there are certain times in an organization’s history that you make a decision. And, you know, are you going to move *forward*? Or are you going to stay where you are? So we *did* that, and it really set up the company to be able, I think, to grow and to go on to another stage. And Gerard really helped us through that with Cheri’s assistance. And I also think it helped us attract our next Artistic Director Edwaard Liang, who is such an amazing, creative — just an incredible leader and artistic vision for our organization — and, you know, since Edwaard’s arrival, we’ve changed again! We are now focused on performing and creating world-class ballets, and our dancers, I think, are getting incredible experiences as a result of that.

CF: Perhaps this would be a good time to ask you a little bit more about your funding structure. You generate a large share of your income yourselves.

SP: As I mentioned, we ran a campaign in the late 2000s, which was called *Moving Forward*, and as part of that we wanted to achieve and sustain about a six million dollar budget. And, because times were tough, I think we also had some pressure within the community to see what we could do about our *earned* revenue. One of the hardest things, I think, for people who are not involved in the arts to realize is that we could *never* charge enough for a seat in the theatre to pay for what it costs to put on the productions they see. And unless you are really involved in the institution, I don’t think you know that, but that is certainly the case. So we are an institution that will *never* be able to earn enough revenue to completely pay for itself, but we tried to take steps to get better at that. So, we worked

and brought in some consulting on how we could sell *more* tickets, and we've had *amazing* success — at a time when tickets for the arts were not necessarily something that people were, at least in this community, investing in, we have increased our ticket sales — even within the last five years, it's up over 6%, which is a wonderful experience.

We also started to focus more on our academy, which allows us to produce revenue for the entire institution. I don't know that many people know that we have over 1700 students — from little three and four-year olds, up to people who are in their *nineties* taking some of our classes, so we're excited about that. That includes people who are training to be professional ballet dancers, as well as people who maybe just want to stay fit, or have a dance experience. So, that has allowed us to *earn*, through the academy and ticket sales, over 60% of our annual budget — which, again, for an arts organization, is something I think we are very, very proud of; in fact last year, it was close to 65%. But it still means we have to raise quite a bit of money — right now, clearly over two million dollars a year — each and every year, both from individuals and corporations. We do have some government funding, but not a lot, in comparison to our size. So each and every year, we go out and hopefully can show people why we're worth the investment. And why the arts are worth the investment.

CF: A daunting task, I know. I wonder if you could talk about how you see BalletMet sitting in the landscape of Columbus, Ohio — funding and perception are a part of it. What needs here do you feel you meet and how do you think that's being received?

SP: Well, I'm a little bit unique in that I did not grow up in dance. I never took dance lessons. I did, once I started to know some people at the Ballet, start to *go* to the ballet — and thought it was *beautiful*, and started to learn more about that. Within the Columbus community, I think BalletMet plays a special role. We are an arts organization that has flourished for almost forty years — and I think that is something to be *incredibly* proud of. And, we have done that by weathering all sorts of situations and all sorts of economies, and with the partnership of so many people in this community. So, when I look at the arts here, I think we are clearly a cultural leader in this community, I think we are very collaborative, which is also something that's good for our community. And when I watch — either the young students who are poking in the windows watching the professional dancers at the *barre* learning a new program, and I see the impact we're having on *their* lives — or I sit in the audience and I see the wonder — and just the emotion — that dance can provide, I think that we're having an important impact on the community and beyond. With the internet, things have changed to an extent, so we have a much broader reach, I think. We have a very interesting project and short video we produced this year called *Becoming Violet*, and it has had *hundreds of thousands* of hits at this point — and it's showing our dancers dancing and just doing something *incredible*. So I think we are understanding that the world is both within our community but it's also *beyond* — and that's an exciting opportunity for us. We're also so lucky with Edward's vision and his connections around the world that I think we're getting an incredible amount of attention from that; I mean, this year alone, his works have been in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Vienna, Rio — and that's taking BalletMet *and* Columbus' reputation — out into all of those places in the world. And we've got big plans for the future to expand and to keep doing that.

CF: I'm one of those *Violet* hits!

SP: Ah! Pretty amazing... Did you know it was filmed right here?

CF: I didn't. I would like to follow up on the fact that you didn't have a life in dance, you didn't dance — and there you were, sitting in your law firm when your life sort of changed...maybe that makes you the perfect kind of spokesperson, since *most* of the world didn't grow up in dance. Do you think that perhaps gives you a special entry into people's lives?

SP: So, one of the things that I've found in the last year as being the executive director of BalletMet — you know, something that I am incredibly proud and excited about doing — is that I am unusual — within the administration of ballet companies. And I am different because I wasn't taught as a young child to love ballet — but I have become *so passionate* about the artists, who are *amazing* athletes, and what they do in the studio, and if I can do something to bring other people who might not know about that into the world of dance — if I can help those artists take the next step in their career, I really think that I am doing something wonderful for our community, for this company and beyond — because I *do* see the power of art. And when we have so much negativity in the world, it's *amazing* to be able to have something, or see what these artists can do on the stage — and the joy they can bring. So, I don't know if that makes me a *special* spokesperson or not, but I'm clearly an *impassioned* spokesperson — for the artform and for what I think we can do to make it more accessible.

CF: You mentioned BalletMet's strategy or history of being collaborative. Would you like to talk about some of the exciting collaborations that are going on or that have marked the company?

SP: This has been something that I'm really proud that BalletMet, I think, has been a leader in. I think over the years of the other arts organizations that we have collaborated with. Maybe the first is the symphony, you know, in being, really, their largest employer outside of the symphony itself, and the experience —having live music, that *The Nutcracker* is. I think it's an incredible experience when you have that orchestra there and you have the young children going — and they love what they see on the stage, but they also love to go down in the pit and see how it all comes together. But, I think also we've tried to do interesting collaborations: we have worked with the Jazz Arts Group, we have worked with Shadowbox [Theatre] — and people still talk about how, you know — “that rock and roll ballet that you did!” Uh, we've done things like having two amazing pianists on stage — and last season — and this again was part of Edwaard's creative idea, we did a ballet loosely based on David Bowie music; one of our dancers composed the additional music, in order to have a full piece —and we had two musicians from Pro Musica, working on electric instruments! I had no idea there was such a *thing* as an *electric* cello — but there is! And it was *amazing* to hear. And I saw how they brought that all together in that collaboration, which of course started here in Columbus, and then later in the season was danced by the Washington Ballet on the Kennedy Center Stage. *That was pretty cool*. And, so, we recognize the value that brings, I think, to the community. We're just done with *Twisted 2*, which is, in this community, *the collaboration of all collaborations*: the Columbus Opera, the Symphony and BalletMet — and it was an amazing experience. We had done it two years ago¹ and the community really *asked* us to do it again. And it brought all of these artforms together, and it will have a great impact on our community. And we've also understood that for a company such as ours — at our size — we cannot invest in the new work that other, bigger companies can do. I hear stories of some of the larger companies doing new *Nutcrackers*, and they're spending, 3, 4, 5 — 8 million dollars to do that! Well, we — at this point — don't have those types of resources. So, with Edwaard's connections, we've been able to look at other types of collaborations, and we're currently working with the Tulsa Ballet, a company of about our size, to create a brand new work that has an

¹ *Twisted: A Trio of Excellence* premiered 25-28, 2014

incredible team of artists working on it, designers — Basil Twist, who is an internationally known puppeteer, is doing the life-sized puppets, and the sets. It's just an incredible project, and we're *sharing* in it. So, it will open in Tulsa, it will then come to Columbus — and I think this might be a model for other companies to move forward: different parts of the country, so it doesn't impact either of our ticket sales. So that's great. And of course, we've also — you know, when we talk about more local collaborations, we've had a wonderful relationship with the Cincinnati Ballet, doing works that neither of us could do on our own, so that's been a wonderful collaboration over the years, as well.

CF: I think you also have done, and perhaps are considering a collaboration with the OSU Department of Dance.

SP: I think I can say that we *are*, but it's just not finalized. Let me state it this way: we have always had a *great* relationship with the Ohio [State] Department of Dance. In fact, the current Chair, Susan Hadley, has been on our last two Artistic Director search committees. So we have relied on the expertise, and she's just been such a *fabulous* partner with us, and of course has choreographed some works here. We are excited to expand that partnership, and we hope we have some exciting projects coming up in the future to partner, and actually give some of the students there the opportunity to dance with our professional dancers. We couldn't be more excited to try and make this happen.

CF: You had that moment during the recession when you made a really bold decision not to shrink, not to stand still — *Moving Forward* — and I'm curious, actually, about your commitment to the blend of classical work with contemporary work.

SP: You know, [BalletMet] has *always* had, both the mission and the vision to be an *innovator* of dance — and wants to bring the *best* in dance to our community. We've talked many times about the fact that we have sort of a two-track system, in which we perform classical dance, and then more contemporary dance. And we've talked many times over the years: "Should we do more of one or the other?" Should we do *only* one or the other?" And have always come to the conclusion that *because* we are the premiere professional dance organization in and around central Ohio, it is important that we do both. We believe that our patrons deserve to see that range — or, maybe it's not *deserve* to see — but certainly to have the experience to see what is going on in the dance world, and it includes both.

CF: I'm very curious about your personal story, in a way — as it pertains to ballet and dance. And I'm interested if there is anything you would like to say about how BalletMet, in particular, and dance, in general, lured you away from your practice of law?

SP: I *loved* being a lawyer. I had great partners, I worked for a firm that is a vital part of the Columbus community, and it had always been incredibly supportive of me, and my desire to be involved. I often say of the BalletMet Board that it was the only Board I could never *leave* — and I was on it for a long time — we always take a year off after a number of years within it — but, even during my year off, I was always working on projects with the organization. And one day, I realized I *really* enjoyed spending time here: we were in an executive director transition, we were running a national search, and we hadn't found the right person yet —but were *hopeful* that that person would come in, and I volunteered to be the *interim* executive director so that our last executive director could go on with the things that she had wanted to do, and move on. "I will come in for a few hours a day," I said — and I started doing that, and within about two weeks, I was spending more than

forty hours a week here! — But I realized I was having this *incredible* experience! The people here... within this organization — the artists — are beautiful, and you see the commitment. I keep *telling* people, “Do you *realize* that a ballet dancer comes in, warms up for two hours at class, and then rehearses for six hours? And *then* often goes out in the evenings to work out, do Pilates, go to the gym? *I mean these are amazing, amazing people!*” They are committed, they are beautiful artists, and it’s because they *love* what they do. So I was in a building where that was going on. I saw everything *else* that happened, and the passion that exists here. People don’t come to work for a dance company because they are trying to get rich — or because they don’t want to work hard! I mean, I have never *seen* people *work* as hard as they do within this organization, and *always* trying to do better, always trying to get to the *next* step in where they want to go— and that’s a *very, very powerful* place to be! And, I thought that I had something to contribute — and, at some point, the Board thought that I did too, and asked that I stay.

CF: What’s *next*? You mentioned the Tulsa Ballet collaboration, which could be a model not only for other companies, but perhaps for yourselves. Maybe there are other projects out there that you’re going to pursue. What do you see coming up, or what do you see as the next step in realizing the vision of BalletMet’s mission?

SP: We think about where BalletMet goes next all of the time. I have this *amazing* partnership right now with Edwaard Liang, the Artistic Director — I think he has such incredible insight into the world of dance — and he’s always got new and exciting ideas. And I love the fact that we can work together to look for new opportunities: the Tulsa project certainly is one, we’re looking for other collaborations within our community and beyond, because I think that is something that we need to do, to get out. We’re looking at what type of touring opportunities we might want to explore, and how to do that — and how to keep building a place where dancers want to come. Some people will use this term “regional ballet company” — and we don’t like to use that. We like to think that we’re a *boutique* that is doing *incredible* dance in what we now know is one of the *smartest* cities in the country, if not the world — and *this* community allows us to explore and to do some different things, and we’re looking for those new things. The *Twisted* collaboration — nowhere else in the world has somebody thought to put the Opera, the Ballet and the Symphony on the stage at the same time! And this is a community that will both allow that idea to flourish, and to expand — and that’s what we did through *Twisted 2*. So, BalletMet, I think, wants to keep innovating — and we’re always planning — three and four years ahead. Of course, you know, next year’s our 40th anniversary: that is *forty years* of, you know, bringing incredible dance to this community, growing from such a small organization into one of the twenty largest ballet companies in the United States — and *surviving*. There’s not a ballet company in Cleveland anymore, there’s not a ballet company in Detroit, there’s not a ballet company in Indianapolis. We here in Columbus, and I think you can expand that to Ohio — are supportive of the arts. And so, we understand that we have a special place, and we’re looking to make sure that we can continue those traditions and bring dance throughout the world.

CF: I’m sure there are special plans on the agenda for the fortieth anniversary. Any that you’d like to unveil?

SP: We are constantly planning the fortieth anniversary — we are *so* lucky that we have some of the people who really gathered to *found* the ballet still *involved* in the ballet, forty years later, and I think that’s a very *special* situation. So we, we do plan to celebrate that year. We are going to be doing some special collaborations: the Tulsa collaboration will premiere on the Columbus stage as part of our fortieth season. Through Edwaard’s connections, we are going to have some amazing

choreographers, who will be coming here to work with our dancers — programs that have not been seen — both classical, and new and innovative. So, I think there's that. I want to make *sure* — and I think that everyone here at BalletMet wants to make sure — that we honor our history, and look toward the future. So, there are some projects that will come up that hopefully will surprise and be interesting for the entire community.

CF: Enticing! I wonder if there is there anything else that you would like to talk about while you have the chance — perhaps identifying some of the landmark moments for the ballet.

SP: One of the things that I was able to bring to the BalletMet Board was my background as a labor and employment lawyer, so I was involved in two artistic director searches, and leading those searches to look for new talent to come to Columbus. And the thing that I found in both of those searches was that we had a company that people wanted to come and be a *part* of. And that was true fifteen years ago, and it was true four to five years ago when we did the search that convinced Edwaard to make his home in Columbus. That tells me a lot about BalletMet — that we can attract people of international caliber that want to come and work and live in this community, which is pretty special, and help this organization grow, and be committed to it. So, I think that's been an interesting experience over the years, that sets BalletMet apart. Our Dance Center also sets BalletMet apart. You know, in 2005, in our desire to be fiscally responsible, we ran a campaign so that we could purchase a city block in Columbus. We wanted to really invest in our community but also have a place that's our home. And through that, we were able to have a Dance Center that is amazing — because when people come from anywhere in the country or even from abroad and they see our studios, and they see where we're creating this work, they're amazed: like, "Wow, this is a *great* space! It's really cool! Windows, and lights and beams!" It's just an incredible place to create art. We were also really fortunate that we were able to build a black box performance space in which we can do very intimate productions, and allow our academy to do special performances. So that's been a *wonderful* transition for the organization. We had a sixty thousand square foot warehouse on the property, which, at one point, was completely rented out by a company that used it for storage. And when they didn't need that kind of storage, they decided to move. So we spent a lot of time trying to decide: you know, "What should we do?" And we have recently been able to sell that, and we're going to have apartments, right within our block, and that's, I think, going to transform this whole area in our discovery district, so we're excited about that.

CF: Maybe you could elaborate a bit about the role of the academy, too — you mentioned the outreach and that it, allows you to serve a lot of the Columbus population of central Ohio.

JC: I'd also love to know a little more about what prompted each part of the program to come up.

SP: Okay, I'm going to be able to do the more *recent* parts of that; Nancy [Strause] will be able to help you with some of the older developments. I can tell you it *is* my understanding that there was a small academy first, and then it moved, through the work of some amazing Columbus citizens, to become a community and a professional company.

We are incredibly *proud* of our education programs as well as everything else that we do. We serve over 30,000 students in schools and through "Morning at the Ballet" each and every year. We have programs that start with pre-K students: there's a program called the Wiggle Jig that was developed here — and that's to give preschoolers the opportunity to hear live accompaniment, we go into a Head Start program, different types of preschools and they have two teaching artists, as well as live

accompaniment (so, we go in and take a keyboard) and they hear music, and they dance! And what we've found is that this is an incredible way to get these students ready for kindergarten. They're learning to listen to *directions*, to *follow* those directions, to move their bodies, and be part of it. We even have a companion book called *The Wiggle Jig* that each of the children are given that takes some of the characters through *their* dance experience. And this is something that we have been able to create here, and are starting to license in other communities — we're up in Cuyahoga at this point and hopefully we'll expand that — all approved by the Ohio Department of Education for learning; we've got STEM components of that as well. We also have a program called "Moving into Literacy," and that's really for students in [grades] two through five, where we work on a literary book or poetry and combine dance with that, and that's within the school systems. We've just *started* a program, at the request of the superintendent of the Columbus Public Schools, who was hearing about our programs; we went in trying to say Wiggle Jig should be in all city of Columbus pre-K classes, and he was very encouraging about that, and we do have a number of them that we're going to start this fall. And he said, "You know, some of our high schoolers need something, too. Can you come up with a program?" Our Education Director is an *amazing* person, and also understands that when someone like that asks, the answer is yes. And so, we have now developed a program called Urban Dance and Wellness, and we will start that at a number of high schools here this year in pilot programs. And this, again, is the idea that through movement, we can reach so many people within the community. And, also, you know, for many, many years we have had "Morning at the Ballet" — a way to bring in *thousands* of students—you know, they're at all ages — and to have an experience in the theater. And some of these kids have never *been* to a live performance before — have *never* been into something like the Ohio Theatre, which is just this incredibly beautiful place, and moving — and we're very proud of that program and giving them the experience. You know, and we also have a KidTix program, and last year we gave out close to 4,000 tickets, and these were to... other not-for-profits, just... community partners throughout the Columbus area — some of them are faith-based, some of them are just doing *incredible* things within our community. And we want those tickets to go to people who might not have the experience of seeing this. An *incredibly* successful program. You know, when I think of our academy and the fact that we are trying to serve so many different people, I think we're very proud of what we're doing here. We call them "the pinkies" —so they come in, and they're four, five, six years old — and just want to have an experience with dance — we never *know* if one of those might be the next Misty Copeland. It could be amazing. So, we love having them come into the building, we love having them go through, but even if they don't want to be a professional dancer, to have an experience of dance like this, we hope they will be a lover of dance for the *rest* of their lives.

I think one of the great things about BalletMet is that we're always trying to just further dance within our community and try to make sure that kids have *access* to dance, and even kids who might not *think* that they could be dancers or might not think that they could ever, *ever* be able to come to BalletMet and take dance lessons —and in thinking about that last year, our Academy Director and our Education Director decided to join forces and start a program called "Soar on Saturdays." The idea behind this is that we want to have more *access*. And there might be people in more disadvantaged parts of our city who might want to come to the Ballet. So "Soar on Saturdays" is a Saturday program, it's in six-week increments, and it's free to any who want to come to BalletMet and take dance lessons. We try to have a number of different *types* of dance: Hip Hop, Flamenco, and they came up with a Dance Fusion program. We thought that we would just pilot it — and really, we marketed it to communities and schools where we knew that it might be more difficult for kids to have a ballet experience — and almost from the day it started, it was *completely, completely* sold-out — well, it wasn't "sold" because we weren't charging anything for it, but we had wait-lists,

almost immediately. And we ran that program last year, and then we had a rule that if you went to *one* six-week session, you couldn't go to the *next* because we had so many students who were waiting for that experience. And it allowed us to look for students who might have talent that we could put on a scholarship, or give some aid to and bring in to the programs, and we've had just such a tremendous response that we did make it part of the program this year — and again, within the few weeks of announcing we were going to do it again, [we had a] whole year — completely booked. And that *tells* me that there's interest, and we have to find more *ways* to bring all kinds of people into dance. And isn't that the great thing about dance? — Is that it is... anyone can enjoy it, from any walk of life, at any level. So, that's pretty amazing.

CF: That *is* amazing. Is your space *sufficient* to accommodate all of these different programs? You seem to be going on full charge, in every direction!

SP: We have an amazing space, and in fact what I've learned, especially in the last year, is that *our* space is much larger than most ballet companies. So that's exciting. Now to run a professional company, to have a very large training program, to have the other academy programs and everything else we do, every once in a while it's a... I will say, scheduling "opportunity" — I like 'opportunity' or "challenge" rather than anything else! And so we have that — but we really think we've got the space here to do this. We are looking — you know, we have to — as we plan for the future, there may be some renovations we'd like to make to our space, but we are *so lucky* to have what we have now, and we think we can improve on it. We have also expanded in the community: we teach at the McConnell Heart Center here in Columbus; we are providing a dance program to a local arts high school — so we have ways to sort of expand in the community, and so we think that we have the space to do what we need, but we have to be smart about how we use it.

JD: Did you ever talk about the diversity of the company itself? Where you're getting the dancers from? Many, I know, are from Cuba... Maybe you'd want to mention something about that.

SP: Right. People who have not had much dance experience ask me a lot: "So, what do dancers *do* for work? *Where* do your dancers live? *What's* their *real* job? And, I look at them and I say "Well, you know, being a dancer is their real job. They *are* professionals. And they're *here*, eight hours a day, dancing the whole time. So, we have that. But then the next question is "Where do they come from?" And we are so lucky. We've got twenty-six dancers from all over the world now that have made their home in Columbus. They've become part of the community. They have homes here, they have families here, they come in — and, we've been *really* lucky to attract dancers from all over the world, and that again is because of the artistic *vision* that our Artistic Directors — and most recently, Edwaard — have brought. We have four new dancers this season — two of them from Cuba, one of them last danced for the National Ballet of Canada, and the other, who is an African American dancer, from Washington Ballet — just a beautiful dancer. So, we have a company that is made up of incredible artists from all parts of the world, and that's pretty exciting.

MD: This might be a little off-topic, but I'm curious about the life of the academy student. They're kind of going through their teens, so what is that process like? Are there a lot of them hoping to come into the fold of the company? Or, what is that like for them?

SP: So, BalletMet, over the years, has been very lucky to have had students who have started with us, and gone through all of our training, and become company members. What is so exciting about what I see in the buildings now is that I watch these incredibly *dedicated* young artists and how they

go through their training — hopefully, *some* of them to have a professional career — and they...work *so* hard and have to learn so much and they dedicate their lives to it. When you see what they are doing, they are taking class, they are learning ballet, they are now learning modern and jazz and tap, because a dancer today needs to have a lot of skills to be able to become a professional. And we try to help foster that — we have training programs in the academy that take you up to a certain level. We then have a training program, and these are young artists who are here all day — most of them have already graduated from high school. I think we have close to thirty now, that are here in this year-long program, to be able to learn what it takes to be a dancer. And they dance — we also have seminars and things to try and prepare them for what is it like to be a professional dancer, and how to hopefully find a job. And the other thing that Edwaard started when he came was a second company. And these also are housed within our academy: we call it BalletMet II. There are six dancers, and these are artists who come here for a year, and really are learning the real *inside* part of being a professional dancer. They work on the productions with the company, but they are also able to go out into the community and do all sorts of residencies and talk about dance in community organizations, high schools, you know, all types of school systems. So that life, I think, is very interesting, and we're very proud that we are now in the third year of BalletMet II, and each of the last two years we took one of the BalletMet II dancers into the professional company — *and* the ones that we didn't take have primarily all found jobs in professional companies, which is amazing and we're very, very proud of what we're doing there.

CF: Thank you so much. It was great to get your perspective. Really, really wonderful — and impressive!

SP: Well, this *organization* is impressive, I mean *this* place is *such* an amazing place to be, and to work, and to create in that we are so lucky, we are so lucky it's here!

Come and see us!