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# Ballet hopes to drink and thrive

## Informal Beer & ballet offers new dances, a relaxed atmosphere - and a chance to support the company during tough times

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In the dance equivalent of a bake sale, the Sacramento Ballet Company has whipped up a tasty treat to add a little coin to the till – and to keep interest and momentum up. The company will present six performances of its popular Beer & Ballet series beginning Saturday (and continuing the next two Saturdays).

Beer & Ballet – in which dances created and performed by company members are presented in the informal surroundings of the ballet company's studio, where beer, wine and other refreshments are available – usually comes later in the season. It's a relatively inexpensive production – no rent for theater space and little cost for costuming – but, "It doesn't add significantly" to the bank account, Sacramento Ballet co-artistic director Ron Cunningham said earlier this week. "For one thing, we can't seat that many people," he said.

To combat that, the company will perform two shows each Saturday, one at 6 p.m. and another at 8:30.

Cunningham said the Beer & Ballet shows can contribute to audience development by attracting people who might not attend a more formal dance program. It also gives regular attendees a chance to keep tabs on the company.

"People like to track dancers and their development," he said, "and some like to track a specific choreographer, someone like Stefan Calka, whose work they've liked from year to year.

"It's a bonding experience with the community."

And these days, community bonds are really important.

"In the same way we had an appeal (for donors and sponsors) during 'The Nutcracker,' we will be continuing that," Cunningham said.

An e-mail campaign to drum up audiences, dancers on street corners seeking support, a drive to solicit more corporate donors and a special \$10 ticket price helped the financially struggling dance company in December, but they didn't close the gap.

"We did have a shortfall," Cunningham said. "We did not make our projections, but about midflow of 'The Nutcracker,' tickets took off like gangbusters and we finished the run pretty well."

Still, he said, "The economy's not good and it's made the season start pretty slow."

Art communities everywhere face financial difficulties, he said, but Sacramento, which lacks a strong base of corporate sponsorship, is especially hard hit.

"We are very much more dependent on earned income than most (professional dance) companies are" because of that lack, he said. "All the arts groups here are struggling with that. It puts a strain on the entire community when the economy is this bad."

Indeed, the Sacramento Theatre Company, in a press release Monday, cited the "struggling local economy" as the reason it has restructured programming for its J. Arliss Pollock Stage this season. Three "new works" plays to be performed in repertory and Tobias Andersen's "Illustrated Bradbury," based on short stories of Ray Bradbury, are affected. The New Works Festival now will consist of one staged reading of each of the three works, "Black Pearl Sings!" at 8 tonight, "Brownie Points" at 8 p.m. Saturday and "Beat Aside Apollo's Arrow" at 2 p.m. Sunday. "Illustrated Bradbury" has been postponed until the 2009-10 season.

"It's important for any arts organization to be extremely prudent during these troubling times," STC managing director Mark Standriff said.

The ballet's Cunningham said his company hopes to avoid cancellations and is working with its board of directors and others "to look at the long-term plan, to address our problems as best we can to be viable in this economic downturn."

"I'm really an optimist," Cunningham said. "We all have the audacity to hope."

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