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Sacramento Ballet cancels rest of its season

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The Sacramento Ballet will cancel its remaining three productions for the 2008-09 season in an attempt to get back on its feet financially.

The cancellation of 12 performances "does not mean that we are closing the curtain on our 54-year history," co-artistic directors Ron Cunningham and Carinne Binda told subscribers in a letter dated Wednesday. "Rather, we believe this is the most responsible action to take so that we might weather the current economic storm."

The ballet's 2,000 subscribers will have the option of receiving a refund for their unused tickets or exchanging them for tickets to upcoming shows by the Sacramento Philharmonic, Sacramento Opera or California Musical Theatre. The canceled performances of mixed repertoire were scheduled for February, March and May.

"For us to help the ballet to continue its relationship with its customers is a critical thing to do," said CMT executive director Richard Lewis. "In this economy, arts organizations throughout the United States are taking a hit. ... But I know the opera and philharmonic believe as we do; we're all partners."

For months, the Sacramento Ballet has tried to deal with lagging ticket sales while keeping its 24 dancers together.

"This was a very painful decision," Cunningham said in a phone interview. "We're asking subscribers to stay with us, to be understanding while we try to work through this."

The Sacramento Ballet has not been alone in its struggles. In recent weeks, companies in Cincinnati, Miami and Madison, Wis., also have had to cancel shows or face other major cutbacks. Vancouver's struggling Ballet British Columbia laid off all its dancers and most of its front office last year; however, its creditors agreed this month to a partial repayment plan and dancers were to return to work.

In December, the Sacramento Ballet pleaded for community support when ticket sales for its annual presentation of "The Nutcracker" fell \$500,000 short of expectations. The ballet's annual budget is \$2.5 million.

"We asked the community for help, and people really responded," Cunningham said. "We sold out almost all the seats for our remaining performances (of 'The Nutcracker.')

Unfortunately, it was a little too late for us to still reach our projections. We could simply shut our doors and wait for better times or we could try to work through this tough situation."

In addition to canceling shows, the ballet cut three people from its staff of 12.

"We've examined every nickel we spend, right down to how much we spend on toilet paper and can we get it donated," Cunningham said. "Our priority is our dancers. We can't fundraise around an invisible company, and our dancers are the treasured resource for our company."

Although response to "The Nutcracker" appeal was huge, this economy proved too tough to crack.

"The decision was excruciating," longtime board member and historian Fred Shadle said. "We're dedicated to the ballet and its being. The alternative was not canceling the season, but eventually (the company) would have to dissolve. The loss of the ballet would be disastrous."

Shadle, who has seen every production by the ballet since 1962, noted that the ballet has overcome tough situations before. Founded in 1954, the company had to cancel one show in 1973 due to heavy debt and faced bankruptcy in 1995.

"In my view, we have three major-league teams in this city: the Kings, the Monarchs and the Sacramento Ballet," Shadle added. "The ballet is the only one that wins all the time. The only time the ballet loses is when people aren't there to keep it together."

The benefits of saving a ballet company or other struggling arts organizations go beyond keeping dancers, actors and singers employed, noted CMT's Lewis. Studies show one trip to the theater or ballet generates an estimated \$28 per person in additional spending for restaurants, parking and other services.

"We're doing whatever we can to continue the revitalization of our downtown area," Lewis said. "We're all at the center of this effort. The arts are the heart and soul of this revitalization."

Meanwhile, the Sacramento Ballet's dancers will continue to perform at the company's studio, a far less expensive alternative to the Community Center Theater, as well as in schools and such nontraditional venues as art galleries during Sacramento's popular Second Saturday Art Walks.

Cunningham and Binda are working on a 2009-10 season built around "The Nutcracker" but also responsive to current economic conditions.

"Other ballet companies in recent history have been in this situation and gone out of business so fast, the community didn't have a chance to respond," Cunningham said. "We're keeping our dancers dancing, so people can see we're still here and have a chance to help. Our long-term stability depends on getting through these tough times."

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