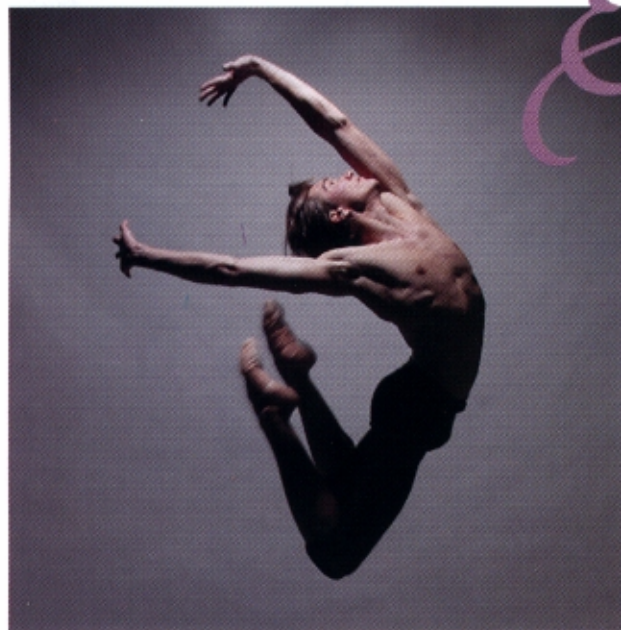




Atlanta Ballet's John McFall talks about the company & its mission.



Giray Atalay, photo by Charlie McCullers.

A STEP AHEAD

THIS YEAR, ATLANTA BALLET CELEBRATES ITS 75TH ANNIVERSARY.

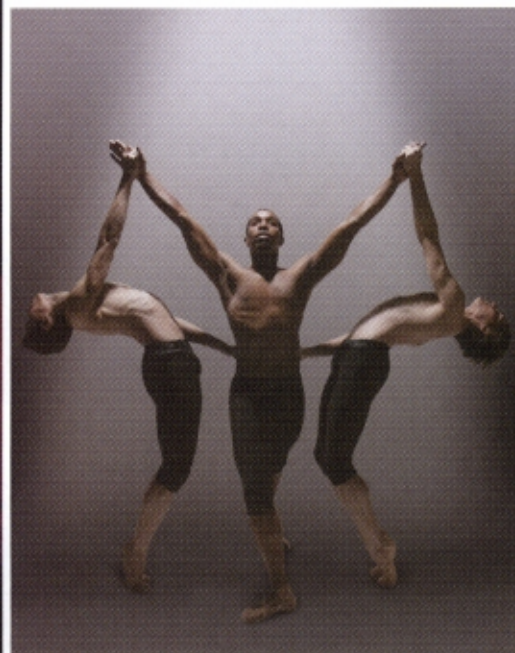
JOHN MCFALL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE PRESTIGIOUS COMPANY, TALKS TO ATLANTA STYLE & DESIGN ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF HIS JOB AND THE JOYS OF CREATIVITY AND COLLABORATION.

Atlanta Ballet was founded in 1929 by dance visionary Dorothy Alexander. Today, the company has the distinction of being the oldest professional dance company in America, the largest self-supported arts organization in Georgia, and the official Ballet of Georgia. The company has also served as an ambassador for Atlanta internationally on stages from Europe to Asia.

In 1996, the Atlanta Ballet opened the Centre for Dance Education, dedicated to nurturing young dancers and also to providing a creative outlet for adults interested in dance. The Centre is renowned for community outreach programs that bring dance to thousands of metro school children.

BY KEVIN MADIGAN • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF ATLANTA BALLET

"I'm really stimulated by engaging the community and getting people involved—bringing the arts into their lives."



FROM TOP LEFT: Wei Dongsheng as Dracula, photo by Kim Kenney; Tian Shuai, Aldawna Morrison Jr. and Giray Atalay, photo by Charlie McCullers; in a now-traditional special performance, Atlanta Ballet turns *The Nutcracker* on its head—it's "Nutty Fever!" Photo by Charlie McCullers.

John McFall became the ballet's third artistic director in 1994. During his tenure, he has brought several world premieres to Atlanta and choreographed many works of his own. His dancers come from around the world, including Korea, Brazil, China, Russia and South Africa.

We caught up with John McFall on a warm afternoon in early fall. Effusive and outspoken, he was enthusiastic about his role in directing the company's future and dead serious about the task at hand: when asked what he planned to do to mark the occasion of the company's 75th anniversary, McFall laughed and replied: "Raise money!"

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, McFall, 58, danced with the San Francisco Ballet for 20 years, then freelanced in New York as a choreographer until he became Director of BalletMet in Columbus, a change that ultimately brought him to the attention of the Atlanta Ballet.

"I'm interested in building," said McFall, who regards his duties as a great deal more than just staging productions for the company. "I'm really stimulated by engaging the community and getting people involved—bringing the arts into their lives."

Much of his energy comes from the creative process itself and the joys of collaboration.

"You can't help but be inspired when you watch these young people in the studios. Whether you're collaborating with the dancers, the designers, or the choreographers, you realize everyone you work with creates something of interest to the public."

Discussing his early influences and his start as a dancer, he recalls: "My grandmother took me to see *Peter Pan* when I was probably five years old at the Starlight Theater in Kansas City. I thought it was the best thing ever. That opened the door."

McFall remembers being the first young man to be accepted into the Starlight's dance ensemble. "That was my first professional job," he said proudly. "The work involved staging a new summer stock production every week and even included the participation of Ginger Rogers."

Asked about the talent of today's young dancers, McFall said: "It's huge. Absolutely huge. When I first arrived ten years ago, it was necessary to recruit dancers from outside Atlanta. But now that has changed. We are training extraordinary dancers. Artists who grew up right here in Atlanta will be performing the leads in *Swan Lake* and other ballets."

What kind of response does he get from his dancers? McFall points to the long tenures of his dancers as evidence that they are happy and thriving. There's not a lot of turnover. In other dance companies, he remarks, it's like a turnstile. "They come in, they taste it, and then they go! That's very typical." What's McFall's secret? He helps his dancers discover their individual strengths, does not force them into a mold, and encourages them to be adventurous and to take risks. "You need individual dancers who will go down that path into the unknown, with the choreographer... Most dancers, it gets trained out of them because [they] get so focused on doing the steps."

"Part of our mission is to have a presence in Atlanta's many schools and to really connect with the students!"

As the Atlanta Ballet remains focused on its mission of education, McFall ponders the fate of future generations of dancers and expresses concern about the lack of arts training in public schools. "I think the arts are vital, but I don't think that's recognized. It's rather sad how little arts activity there is available in the schools."

McFall remains passionate about providing a remedy and believes the answer is to take the art of dance to schools and demonstrate its many facets to kids without alienating them. He explained: "We're very involved in our external education activities. Part of our mission is to have a presence in schools and to really connect with the students. It changes their behavior, their awareness." He clearly believes that the arts are a vehicle that helps young people get focused, disciplined and motivated.

"We've established our own school," he continued, "and it's a very good school. We have a whole spectrum of different dance styles available in our training. We need to train youngsters in all those disciplines. Not only does this kind of broad training elevate and expand their awareness of different cultures, the different styles work well together. If you do flamenco, it actually makes your ballet better. If you do hip-hop, it makes you a better jazz dancer. You've got to be able to do it all."

McFall is thrilled with what's happening with the Atlanta Ballet.

KEY EVENTS IN ATLANTA BALLET'S HISTORY

- 1929** The Dorothy Alexander Concert Group, the nation's first regional ballet, opens its doors.
- 1953** The company makes two USO trips, including stops in Bermuda, Azores, Iceland, Japan, Korea and Okinawa.
- 1956** Atlanta hosts the nation's first regional dance festival. The festival continues to this day under the umbrella of Regional Dance America.
- 1973** Governor Jimmy Carter proclaims Atlanta Ballet the State Ballet Company of Georgia.
- 1996** Atlanta Ballet Center For Dance Education is founded under the direction of Sharon Story.
- 1999** London audiences are captivated by the Atlanta Ballet's performance of McFall's *Peter Pan* as the centerpiece of the Royal Festival Hall's Millennium Celebration.
- 2001** Atlanta Ballet premieres *Shed Your Skin: The Indigo Girls Project*, a unique performance that combines a live rock band with 21 dancers.
- 2003** The Centre for Dance Education is awarded full accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Dance and becomes one of only nine schools affiliated with a professional dance company in the nation to receive this status.
- 2004** John McFall celebrates his tenth year with Atlanta Ballet and introduces *Jupiter*, which uses Mozart's last two symphonies to showcase the unique qualities of the company's dancers.

A new *Dracula* ("It's the best *Dracula* in the world!") and this season's *Swan Lake* are both high on his list of must-sees, as is a new work from British choreographer Christopher Hanson, which will open next May. McFall also spoke excitedly of a new project called *Toy Castle*, a small touring theater for kids featuring 180 short stories. "It's conceptualized for little people. We want to introduce them to a live theater experience," he said. He is also proud of having recently received accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Dance.

But there's more on McFall's agenda! "We need to get people elected to public office who understand the value of the arts." What else is important to McFall as he looks ahead? Without missing a beat, he replied: "Mentoring and teaching and collaborating and looking forward to the arts leaders of tomorrow here in Atlanta." 🌟

Atlanta Ballet performs at the Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree Street at the intersection of Ponce de Leon and Peachtree Streets. For ticket information call (404) 892-3303 or visit www.atlantaballet.com. Kevin Madigan is an Atlanta writer, translator and teacher. His articles have appeared in Creative Loafing, Atlanta Business Chronicle and MTV Online.