

Ballet from page C1

Since the elimination of touring grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984, few dancing companies have been able to afford to tour.

But that's changing as successful dance companies become more savvy about seeking an audience and attracting private funding.

Until last year's critically acclaimed "Swan Lake," ABT hadn't performed in Detroit since the mid 1980s.

Blending an eclectic dance schedule of classic ballet and contemporary dances like last year's "Blue Suede Shoes" and "Dracula," MOT's Stroud has set out to attract classical productions while tapping into the growing mainstream appeal of dance, thanks in part to the recent success of "Riverdance."

"Everything we're doing is based on building an audience," he said.

"I'm a believer in all types of dance. We're also interested in contemporary dance companies like Paul Taylor and David Parsons."

For dance purists, who believe

the future of the art form rests with reverent interpretative performances of the classics, Stroud offers a dose of reality.

"If you don't appeal to the masses, you're going to be reading about ballet rather than watching it," he said.

Quite likely, the impact of ABT's presence will also have a positive spinoff on local dance companies since building a broader audience for dance translates into greater demand at all levels, said Stroud.

Dance of fateful love

Symbolically, ABT's "Giselle" presents an appropriate introduction to classic ballet for local audiences.

In the repertoire of nearly all the major ballet companies in the world, "Giselle" is the oldest continuously performed ballet.

In addition to "Giselle," ABT's repertoire includes "The Sleeping Beauty," "Swan Lake," and 20th-century classics "Apollo," "Les Sylphides," "Jardin Aux Lilas," and "Rodeo."

The current production of "Giselle" was created in 1987 for Cannon Films "Dancers," featuring

Baryshnikov. Two other productions were staged by Baryshnikov in the early 1980s.

Both the *Saturday Review* and *The New York Times* called the current production the best ever.

"Giselle" is the story of a charming young peasant girl who falls in love with a villager, Albrecht, who is actually a nobleman.

Amid a series of mistaken identities and unintended communication, Giselle's mother warns her daughter that if she dies unmarried, she will be forever cast as a spirit of unrequited love.

The shock of her love's errant duplicity has the effect of making Giselle's mother's warning come tragically true.

But rising from her grave, Giselle has the power to save her love, Albrecht, from a similar fate through the power of her dance.

ABT's large-scale production includes a cast of 120, and sets that recreate a peasant village along the banks of the Rhine.

Compared to last season's ABT performance of "Swan Lake," Stroud said ticket sales are way ahead of expectations.

Ellington from page C1

"It was amazing, like a fairy tale. It was another world, and then I would go back to my grandmother, with an escape route in mind," she said.

She remembers her grandfather as a kind man.

"He always had a way with words," she said. "I was fascinated by the way he interacted with people and his use of language. He was charming, not just with women as everyone knows, but also with men and with members of his band."

Her fondest memories are from a time when she was a performer herself and joined the band on a tour of Russia.

"We met musicians who emulated musicians in the orchestra. One played like Paul Gonsalves, another like Harry Carney and Johnny Hodges. They knew intimately the history of the orchestra," she said.

Ellington's touring was "essential" to him, Mercedes said. "He used the sound, the complete sound. His instrument was the piano, of course, but his real instrument was the entire orchestra. He heard the entire sound, the same way Mozart and other composers would. I find that utterly terrific, amazing to be able to hear that."

Mercedes' own creative drives were fulfilled by dance.

"What got me into dance was that I was anemic as a child and the doctor recommended some kind of exercise to my grandmother and she carted me off to dance school," she said.

"It was love at first sight—love for the shoes, the tutus and the freedom of movement."

"When I heard music I always saw people dancing," she said.

After graduating from the Juillard School, Mercedes became a Juno Taylor Dancer on "The Jackie Gleason Show," in 1963 and was the first and only woman of color to fill that position.

"Those were frustrating times, when you couldn't get a job because of your color. All of these things you hungered after but knew were unreachable. There was always this barrier," she said.

She spent eight years with the show in New York and Miami and went on to perform in 10 Broadway shows including "No, No Nanette," "Hello Dolly" and "Sophisticated Lady," based on music composed by her grandfather. After "Sophisticated Lady," Ellington moved to choreography with "Danceclington," a company

she formed with tap dancer Maurice Hines to attract a younger audience to tap. "We wanted people to know that tap wasn't just Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple."

She said she is happy with the recent explosion of interest in tap, and especially the choreography of Savion Glover. "It's great, fabulous. It's an American art form, manufactured here like jazz," she said.

The program with the DSO will feature both Ellington's famous songs ("Take the A Train," "Satin Doll," "Don't Get Around Much Anymore") and lesser known compositions ("The River," "Come Sunday") in a symphonic setting. Four dancers and two singers will perform with the orchestra. Mercedes will reminisce and present slides. She has given similar programs across the country.

"People had this impression that he never got frustrated or hurt, but he was human and he did, but he never showed it to the public. That was the aura of Ellington," she said. "He was an American composer; yes he was a jazz composer, but he thought of himself as an American composer with an international audience."

Conversations from page C1

Rolf characterizes the current phase at Paint Creek as "at the cusp of major growth."

Until 10 years ago, Ruessdick was the only full-time employee with a staff of three part-timers.

Today, Paint Creek has a seven-member staff, expanded programs, several galleries and a growing list of volunteers.

There's evidence that Paint Creek might further expand in the direction recently taken by

the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association, which nearly tripled its building space and substantially increased its classes.

With talk of a capital campaign and a new full-time development director, could a renovated or new facility be in the plans?

That impenetrable, monstrous bull rolling toward Paint Creek is a thing called progress. And progress always comes at

a price.

"At this stage in my life, I'm not looking for more hours," said Rolf. "There's a certain energy level that goes with that. I'd rather spend more time with my family."

Retiring? Rolf is just making a transition. Although she's reluctant to receive any public attention, there's no denying that without people like Rolf, the arts might only be known — or access-

ible — to a few.

Always prepared, polite and persistent, Rolf is an arts writer's delight. She is someone who understands hectic deadlines and pressure and respects the choice of stories in a newspaper typically short on space and long on content possibilities.

After 10 years, Rolf's parting words as she faces another of life's transitions is simply that she's grateful to have been given

the chance.

On behalf of many artists whose works were brought to public attention through Rolf's effort, it's time to recognize a behind-the-scenes promoter whose name appeared as the "contact person" on hundreds of press releases about the arts.

Something to prove? Not to us. Frank Provenzano is an arts reporter for the *Observer & Eccentric Newspapers*.

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