

advertisement



N&R promotion



LOCAL STORIES | OPINIONS | CALENDAR | ARTS&CULTURE | MUSIC | DINING | FILM | CANNABIS | GUIDES | N&R EVENTS

local stories

Like 7 | Share | Tweet

The turning point

Shaking up 'The Nutcracker' and 'Hamlet,' can a new artistic director reinvigorate The Sacramento Ballet?

By Tessa Marguerite Outland

This article was published on 01.31.19.

Tchaikovsky's overture floats out of the orchestra pit, and children dash across a dimly lit stage. The scene is set, and the audience waits for Clara, a young girl with bouncing curls, to appear and receive her Christmas gift.

But this time, it's Marie who twirls in to accept the nutcracker. Unlike Clara, she's growing out of dolls and into womanhood, though the gentle girl still dreams of lands with sugar plum fairies, Arabian dancers and a toy prince.

In December, The Sacramento Ballet debuted a different version of *The Nutcracker*, this time under the leadership of a new artistic director, Amy Seiwert. Seiwert admitted that creating her own version was terrifying; looming over the production was the shadow of a beloved 30-year-old legacy, cast by her predecessors and former teachers Ron Cunningham and Carinne Binda.

The Cunninghams' *Nutcracker* sported classic choreography and casting, at one point boasting an ensemble of 500 children. Seiwert's production only had 100 kids per show, closer to other professional ballet companies such as the New York City Ballet, which uses about 50 a night.

She knew some wouldn't see hers simply because it was different, but she was eager to add her voice to a familiar chorus. It seems she succeeded. The production exceeded its projected ticket sales and was the most financially successful *Nutcracker* in recent years, a good sign for the 65-year-old ballet company, which struggled financially during the Great Recession but saw increased attendance in the last three years.

After putting her stamp on *The Nutcracker*, Seiwert is also changing another classic, *Hamlet*. The dancers are rehearsing for a modern rendition opening February 15.

Will Seiwert's vision for the 2018-19 season be enough to keep Sac Ballet on its toes? After a public feud over the termination of the ballet's two longtime co-artistic directors, Seiwert commands a longstanding arts institution in flux as it seeks to repair its finances and broaden appeal.

"A lot of people are very curious—which is great," she said. "And a lot of people, I hope, are going to support the art form and support this organization through the transition."

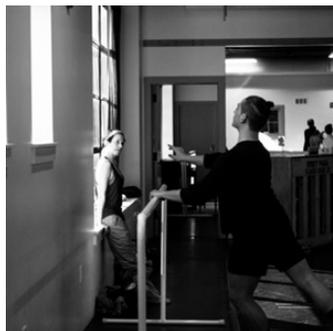
Curtain call

For three decades, the husband-and-wife-team of Cunningham and Binda guided The Sacramento Ballet. The company won national recognition, presented global premieres such as Cunningham's *Carmine Burana* and produced a high volume of commissioning works—ballets created here and exported to other companies around the world.

Binda, a renowned ballet mistress, founded the ballet's school in 2007, which teaches more than 300 students, some of whom have been hired into the company or gone onto dance with other organizations such as the Houston Ballet, Los Angeles Ballet and Pacific Northwest Ballet. Many former dancers of the Sacramento Ballet have become professional choreographers including Nicole Haskins and Rex Wheeler, both based in San Francisco, and Colby Damon, based in Philadelphia.

But in January 2017, the ballet's board of directors shocked Sacramento's arts community by announcing the couple would end their tenure after the 2017-18 season, exiting the stage for a new artistic director.

The succession plan was part of a new vision, dubbed "Sac Ballet 2.0" by former board president Nancy Garton and designed to increase the company's budget and ticket sales and also to define a fresh creative direction for the next 30 years. The new artistic director would shadow the Cunninghams in their final season, and they would thereafter be named artistic directors emeritus.



Sac Ballet artistic director Amy Seiwert (left) leads a company class at the CLARA, the dancers' new Midtown studio space, on January 17. PHOTO BY KARLOS RENE AYALA

Hamlet opens Friday, February 15. Tickets are \$30-\$75. Performances run through February 17. For show times and tickets, visit sacballet.org.

Photos by Karlos Rene Ayala

Related stories:

[Dance-dance evolution: Sacramento Ballet's succession plan exposes rift between board and its artists](#)
Longtime artistic directors say they're not ready to leave. SN&R, 03.09.17.

[Bread and ballet roses: Amid leadership furor, Sacramento Ballet dancers look to unionize](#)

Board names ballet co-founder Barbara Crockett as head of search committee for new artistic director. SN&R, 03.23.17.

The final bow

In its final production by co-artistic directors Ron Cunningham and Carinne Binda, Sacramento Ballet presents scenes from works by American dance legend George Balanchine. SN&R, 05.31.18.

Advertisement

The plan mostly happened, but not without a fight. The Cunninghams publicly complained they didn't want to leave. Some dancers protested, donors threatened to pull money and more than 700 ballet supporters signed a petition calling for the couple to remain at the helm for another five years.

In an interview with SN&R, Cunningham said while he was not ready to leave, he believed that Seiwert had put in the necessary work to take over.

SEARCH THE SITE

Google Custom Search

TOOLBOX

[PRINT FRIENDLY](#) [E-MAIL THIS STORY](#)

ADJUST FONT SIZE: [SMALLER](#) [LARGER](#)

[LINK TO THIS STORY ON YOUR SITE](#)

[RSS FEEDS](#)

[BOOKMARK](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Print](#)

free stuff!
SIGN UP HERE TO BE NOTIFIED WHEN SN&R IS OFFERING FREE STUFF, CONTESTS OR GIVE-A-WAYS!



SN&R sweetdeals

Be Your Own Hero- SAVE 40% at Oblivion Comics and Coffee with SN&R Sweetdeals! <https://snrsweetdeals.newsreview.com/Microsite/9023> (Photos from SN&R sweetdeals's post)



sign up

TEDESCHI TRUCKS BAND
SIGNS 2019 TOUR
NEW SPECIAL MERCH! LAUNCHING

SACRAMENTO MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM
MAY 21

Squarespace Website Builder
Everything you need to build or grow your business. Create your online store today.



Seiwert became The Sacramento Ballet's artistic director last year after a contentious transition from her longtime predecessors, Ron Cunningham and Carine Binda. PHOTO BY KARLOS RENE AYALA

"She was quite talented and she's really done her homework over a number of years," said Cunningham, who is being commissioned to choreograph for other ballet companies throughout the country.

Still, the controversy also exposed a financial house in disrepair. Dancers complained they were overworked and paid near poverty-level wages. An unforeseen \$80,000 shortfall had caused the 2014-15 performance season to be cut short to avoid bankrupting the company. Also in 2015, the state attorney general threatened to revoke the ballet's charitable status after the board failed to pay registration fees and properly file annual reports.

Andrew Roth—who led the hiring committee that selected Seiwert in 2017 and became board president in August 2018—said while the company hit difficult times, it's in a better place now. Two-thirds of the board are new members who joined within the past two years.

Roth said a few donors who pledged around \$200 a year each pulled funding, and that Sac Ballet has since added donors. Roth said the ballet had another \$20,000 shortfall for the 2017-18 season, but this year, it is expected to end \$21,000 in the black. The overall budget was increased from \$3.15 million last season to \$3.76 million for 2018-19.

"We're trying to heal the company, and trying to heal whatever has happened in the past and focus on the future and success," Roth said.

The journey

Seiwert returned to Sacramento to try to turn around Sac Ballet.

After dancing professionally in New York and New Jersey after high school, she moved here in 1991. She danced for eight years under Cunningham and Binda, then continued at the Smuin Ballet in San Francisco until the age of 38, when she retired as a dancer and became the company's choreographer-in-residence. In 1999, she opened a contemporary ballet company, Imagery, in San Francisco, and was named one of "25 to Watch" by Dance Magazine in 2005.

Now, Seiwert says she wants to improve the ballet world by helping younger dancers, correcting what she calls the "right-wrong ballet paradigm." As a student, she noticed ballerinas were expected to do things in a particular way and have a certain "look," with their hair in a tight bun.

"I would love to blow that paradigm out of the water," Seiwert said. "You don't just need to mimic what you think you're supposed to be, who you think you're supposed to be."

It may be because of that paradigm that some say that ballet worldwide is dying—or dead.

In a 2011 article in Dance Informa Magazine, one author argued that classic works such as George Balanchine's *Divertimento No. 15* were "trivial" and could no longer move audiences. Others said that ballet was too limited in the modern art world and urged companies to engage new audiences with newer works, despite tight budgets and a typically affluent ballet audience ever loyal to full-length classics.

Others, however, dismiss the argument. "To say ballet is dying is the same as saying 'classical music is passe' or 'surrealism is dead.' It's an art form with a wonderful heritage and a rich history," Robert Kelly, a choreographer, dancer, ballet master and director, said in the article.

Seiwert said the biggest issue confronting modern ballet is equity—a lack of diversity, good pay and women in leadership positions.

The Cincinnati Enquirer recently released a study of the country's largest ballet companies, with annual budgets of more than \$5 million. It showed that of the 290 staged ballets in the 2012-13, only 25 were choreographed by women. According to The Sacramento Ballet, there are only seven female artistic directors at professional companies in the United States, and only two of those companies put on *The Nutcracker*.

"I love this art form deep within my soul," Seiwert said. "And as wonderful as it is, there are some faults, too ... The older I got, the more I wanted to address them."

At Sac Ballet, she'll have her chance. Seiwert said she wants the company to have its own identity, not just present "hot ballets." She wants to push ballet forward, but without giving up its history.

"There's something about these dancers and the culture that has been cultivated by the predecessors and how they work with people," she said. "They're willing to dive in deep with the choreographer not necessarily knowing if this is going to be a successful idea or not. That's something that's here that's pretty special, and I want to continue to cultivate that."



PHOTO BY KARLOS RENE AYALA

The transition

In the ballet world, leadership changes are often difficult. When The Washington Ballet's board replaced its longtime artistic director with former American Theatre Ballet's Julie Kent in 2016, it didn't go well. Many dancers left, and audience attendance decreased. At the close of last year's season, The Washington Ballet, notably larger than Sac Ballet, struggled with \$3 million in debt.

Ballet companies, as nonprofit organizations, hold dual economic and artistic obligations, so it's acceptable for them to lose money, argues Angela Ma, a dancer and Harvard student in a study published in the Harvard Economics Review in 2014.

"The monetary loss incurred by companies that advance their artistic mission but expend more resources than are recouped is accounted for by the social benefit of bringing the mission to fruition," she wrote.

Seiwert recalled the transition after the death of her former employer, Michael Smuin of Smuin Ballet. A cluster of dancers stayed through the leadership change, but about half left the company after one year.

In April 2017, Sac Ballet dancers, stage managers and apprentices voted 23-1 to unionize under the American Guild of Musical Artists, in part to raise what they call extremely low wages.

Roth said the dancers are compensated consistent with the industry. Nationally, the top 10 percent of professional dancers earn about \$13.74 per hour with a median income of about \$30,000 a year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Last year, the Boston Ballet paid its first-year corps de ballet members \$1,262 a week for a 40-week season, while members of the St. Louis Ballet earned just \$325 per week for a 28- to 30-week season.

In 2017, half of Sac Ballet's 23 dancers made near-poverty level wages, or around \$16,000 a year. Roth said that the board is committed to pay increases. "We're making sure we do the best we can as one of the crown jewels of the Sacramento dance scene and paying dancers as much as we're able to," he said.



PHOTO BY KARLOS RENE AYALA

Julia Feldman, in her ninth season with company, said that since unionizing, there have been day-to-day changes, such as mandatory five-minute breaks and lunch breaks after six hours, and are now scheduled raises for dancers.

"It's nice to have a forum and a little representation," said Feldman, who performed as the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* in December, and will be playing Ophelia in *Hamlet*.

Jonathan Harris, who has danced with Sac Ballet since 2015, said revenue is the main issue, with 45 percent of the company's revenue coming from ticket sales, 55 percent from donor support. He said that amid the leadership transition, Seiwert's support and wealth of knowledge were refreshing.

"She has handled the complications of the transition with incredible grace," he said.

Seiwert rehired all of last year's dancers and commends their work ethic and support of one another. "It was always my intention to work with the company here," she said, though she is prepared to lose some of them in the coming years.

"The transition is ongoing," Seiwert said. "But a lot of it is really exciting. I have been so on fire with how our rehearsal day has gone, or when you look at what we can all create together. Our work is making art, and that's the best single part of the job."

The future

In the upstairs studio of CLARA on January 25, the ballet's rehearsal space in Midtown, choreographer Stephen Mills watches intently as the dancers glide gracefully across the floor through the final scene of *Hamlet*, while also portraying grief, jealousy, confusion and visible anguish.

After four weeks of rehearsals, the dancers are prepared to two audiences with this 400-year old Shakespearean tragedy. Set in Denmark, the play dramatizes the revenge Prince Hamlet is called to exact upon his uncle Claudius by the ghost of Hamlet's father, murdered by Claudius to seize the throne.

Mills, of Ballet Austin, created this ballet 20 years ago, telling a classical story in a contemporary landscape with modern costumes and music by Phillip Glass. Sacramento Ballet's California premiere is "pure emotion given form through movement, light, and music," he said.

The remainder of the 2018-19 season, given the theme "Roots and Wings," will also be new to Sacramento.

When Seiwert became artistic director in August, she created a work that interspersed a Neil Gaimon poem with a Benjamin Britten cello sonata. During the performance of "Instructions," a dancer read the poetry—while dancing—as a cellist played onstage. Seiwert said she received one of her biggest

Take Action, Sacramento!

THU 31	Volunteer Mixer	Lavender Library Sacramento, CA
THU 31	Black and African-American ...	Dr. Ephraim Will... Sacramento, CA
FRI 1	California Black History Mon...	California State... Sacramento, CA
SAT 2	Native Garden Workday	American River P... Sacramento, CA
SAT 2	Paradise Regained Rocks (@...)	@the Grounds - J... Roseville, CA

THU 31 FRI 1 SAT 2 SUN 3 MON 4

See all events Add your event

blogs

Most Recent Posts:

- [A dying child, a distant mother and the Trump travel ban that stood between them](#) Page Burner 12.18.2018 1:37pm
- [In Their Own Voices: SN&R's video interviews with Hmong survivors of 'the Secret War' in Laos](#) Page Burner 11.15.2018 5:16pm
- [New release: After 26 years in prison for homicide, Sac rapper X-Raided on parole](#) Page Burner 9.24.2018 10:50am
- [All-ages music venues Cafe Colonial and The Colony to shutter in November](#) Page Burner 9.13.2018 10:07pm

SN&R Calendar

SAT 2	According to Bazooka at Fat...	Father Paddy's L... Woodland, CA
THU 31	Slowgirl	Capital Stage Sacramento, CA
THU 31	Volunteer Mixer	Lavender Library Sacramento, CA
THU 31	Joel Kim Booster	Punch Line Sacramento, CA
THU 31	Exhibition: Xicanx Futurity	jan shrem and ma... Davis, CA
THU 31	WIT at Big Idea Theatre	Big Idea Theatre Sacramento, CA
THU 31	Drunk Poetry	Blue Lamp Sacramento, CA
THU 31	Garrett Masterson: Elementa...	Pence Gallery Davis, CA

THU 31 FRI 1 SAT 2 SUN 3 MON 4

See all events Add your event

[Listen to SN&R's picks](#)

compliments when a father repeated what his 15-year-old son told him after the show: "Dad, when can we go to the ballet again?"

Harris, a dancer, said this season represents Seiwert's vision for the ballet by "honoring the past and using that as the foundation by which we explore the next era in ballet." "I have observed that the dancers have really embraced this idea," he said. "We are giving her vision a chance, and I think we are already reaping its rewards."

Seiwert said she intends to honor The Sacramento Ballet's history—and look forward. Although this season will see new and modern ballets, she still loves the classics, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Swan Lake*.

"I'm not leaving any of that," Seiwert said. "But I want to be able to surprise people; I want people to feel things they didn't know they could feel."

"People think ballet and they say, 'Oh, I saw the ballet once and I didn't like it,'" Seiwert said. "And I'm like, 'You saw one!' I always say that's like hearing a song on the radio and saying 'I didn't like it. I don't like music.'"

Like 7 Share Tweet

[Contact us about this story.](#)

RELATED LINKS:

[See all stories published in Feature Story.](#)

[See all stories published in Local Stories](#)

Reader Comments

No comments yet. Be the first by posting your comment below.

Sign in to submit a comment:

e-mail:

password:

Don't have a login yet? [Join now!](#), it's fast and free!

Help! I [forgot my password](#)

Post anonymous comment:

If you wish to comment anonymously, provide your valid email address here and you'll be allowed to do so.

e-mail:

You will be sent an email confirmation with a link that you must follow to validate your email address before your comment will appear on the site.

[LOCAL STORIES](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [CALENDAR](#) | [ARTS&CULTURE](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [DINING](#) | [FILM](#) | [GUIDES](#) | [N&R EVENTS](#)
[CHICO N&R](#) | [RENO N&R](#) | [SAC N&R](#) | [PRIVACY STATEMENT](#) | [TERMS OF USE](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [ADVERTISER SERVICES & INFO](#)

COPYRIGHT ©2019 CHICO COMMUNITY PUBLISHING, INC.