

ARTS

Dance leader focuses on return to normal

Matt Carney, executive director who led San Diego Ballet through the pandemic, is excited to get back to in-person events

BY NINA GARIN

Just before the pandemic, San Diego Ballet named a new executive director: Matt Carney.

Carney, a longtime dancer and arts administrator, moved to San Diego from Missouri in 2008 for his first professional job at Malashock Dance. Soon after, he was also performing with the other dance companies in Liberty Station's Dorothea Laub Dance Place building: San Diego Ballet and Jean Isaacs San Diego Dance Theater.

Eventually, Carney also started working on the administrative side of dance, where he discovered a passion for arts engagement and advocacy.

In 2019, Carney took over as San Diego Ballet's executive director, a role previously held by company founder, Robin Morgan. Along with figuring out budgets and programming, Carney had to see the company through the COVID-19 pandemic, coming up with creative ways to continue putting on shows, including video and drive-in performances.

But for the 2021-2022 season, San Diego Ballet is back to more traditional, in-person performances, kicking off with a local favorite, "Ritmos Latinos," a show that merges ballet with Latin music. The shows feature "Que Bonito Amor," a ballet set to mariachi music, and "Mambomania," one of the company's signature works.

Before the whirlwind of the new season begins, Carney took some time to reflect on his days growing up as a dancer in St. Louis, as well as what kept him motivated even in the most difficult times.

Q. Before going into administration, you were also a dancer. Tell us about how you discovered dance.

A. I was a musical theater kid and was always in some type of show whether it be a play, musical, chorus or show choir for as long as I can remember. I took an adult beginning modern dance class at a community center in St. Louis to help me with the dance portion of auditions, and honestly, I was instantly struck and enamored by the art form. I dropped everything else, focused on dance, and never looked back.

Q. When did you realize you had a talent for dance?

A. As you learn dance and grow, you realize how much you must learn and the space there is to grow. I sit with reverence that I continue to be a student in dance and strive to fine-tune my instrument. Partnering work — or pas de deux in ballet — has always been my anchor in dance. It is the space where I've felt most alive in performance and in rehearsals. The connection, the touch, the eye contact is all so intimate, and those are the moments onstage I cherish the most.

Q. When did you join San Diego Ballet, and what are some of the roles you performed?

A. I joined San Diego Ballet in 2009. Any choreography I've danced by artistic director Javier Velasco I've loved no matter the part. His movement is rhythmic, cross-disciplinary and simply feels good doing. I'm a sucker for a character or dramatic role, too, and you may even see me being Father of the House for our annual presentation

of "The Nutcracker."

Q. What is the best costume you ever wore?

A. "The Rhinoceros in Carnival of the Animals." I danced a duet with the sensational principal dancer Stephanie Maiorano, who was the role of the Flamingo. We had great fun and often were flat out laughing onstage.

Q. What made you shift into arts administration?

A. At some point in my dancing, I started to wonder how to keep the lights on and how to be part of the creative economy to support local artists.

Q. Does having a performer's perspective help in your role as executive director?

A. The dance studio is still a sacred place for me. Seeing the dancers in the studio as we embark on our 2021-2022 season invigorates me to keep pushing, keep growing, and keep nurturing what we have. With the pandemic, I didn't realize how much I appreciate seeing bodies move through space and being present in the studio.

Q. How would you describe San Diego Ballet to someone who doesn't follow dance?

A. We are as our name directly implies: San Diego Ballet. Under the leadership of Velasco — born and raised in South Bay — we strive to authentically reflect the Southern California sensibility where we celebrate Latin music and jazz and keep things of professional quality yet accessible. With San Diego Ballet, you don't just see the dance, you feel it. First step for anyone who doesn't follow dance ... just come to a show.

Q. San Diego Ballet is known for collaborating with musicians outside of classical music. Tell us about that.

A. San Diego Ballet has a rich history of honoring live music and commissioning original compositions. Annually, we work with our resident composers, including the nationally recognized Latin jazz musician Gilbert Castellanos and jazz icon Charles McPherson. Look out for our show in February over Valentine's weekend. It's like two shows in one with an evening of live music plus a fully choreographed night with our professional company.

Q. Describe your relationship with artistic director Javier Velasco.

A. Javier has played many roles for me, and our relationship continues to evolve and grow. As a dancer he was my boss, and he showed up in a way that I really needed when I joined the company. He is direct, highly creative, not too nice but never mean, and he has



Above: Matt Carney is executive director of San Diego Ballet.

Left: Dancers from San Diego Ballet rehearse for "Ritmos Latinos."

CANELA PHOTOGRAPHY

'Ritmos Latinos Afuera/Outside'

When: 2:30 p.m. Oct. 30-31 and Nov. 6-7

Where: Ingram Plaza at Liberty Station, 2751 Dewey Road, Point Loma

Tickets: \$10 to \$40, plus fees

Online: sandiegoballet.org

pleted an organizational cultural assessment and are focusing our lens on what we do and what we say that we do authentically. Dance is the embodiment of social change, and the work always continues.

Q. What are your thoughts on San Diego's dance community?

A. The San Diego dance community is my home here, and after 14 years, I still feel like I'm getting my feet wet. The dance community is made of a group of individuals, not necessarily a group of companies. It is not about one company or the other, but rather the collective group of talented artists that are here doing the work to better the cultural landscape in San Diego.

Q. What is your favorite ballet?

A. "Giselle" is my favorite. It is everything I live for in ballet: a love story, drama and a death scene. I look forward to seeing Velasco's version this spring where he shifts the locale to the pueblos and ranchos of Spanish Colonial California.

Q. Do you have advice for young artists hoping for a career in dance?

A. To be a dancer you must actually dance. You must take classes and you must stay inspired. It's important to know that you are joining a community. You have must be able to work well with others and be open to collaboration. Yes, technique and pushing yourself to fullest potential is important, but simply put, you must be nice to work with to really thrive in a career of dance.

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fostered a supportive environment where I had space yet structure to blossom as an artist. Over the years, we've always chatted about the company and share the same core values on what impact we hope to make. I guess now we are colleagues, but I still call him Mr. Velasco.

Q. What did San Diego Ballet do during the pandemic?

A. We refused to go dark. Classes were outside, inside, then outside again, and now we are still running a hybrid of indoor and Zoom classes. The company carried on with gorgeous film projects in collaboration with the San Diego Museum of Art; presented a nationally recognized drive-in "Nutcracker"; and purchased a swanky outdoor stage with our neighbors in Dance Place: Malashock Dance and San Diego Dance Theater.

Q. What can we expect for San Diego Ballet's 2021-2022 season?

A. We want to help our audiences transition to in-person shows and will be presenting an outdoor performance, "Ritmos Latinos: Afuera/Outside," in Arts District Liberty Station featuring sizzling company favorites "Mambomania" and "Que Bonito Amor." Then, we head into the holidays with our "Nutcracker" at the newly renovated Magnolia theater. Spring shows include our collaboration with Castellanos and McPherson, and our "Giselle" at the Balboa Theatre.

Q. Has the pandemic changed your approach to anything?

A. The pandemic has widened my perspective and reminded me the value of pausing, along with asking people, "How are you doing?" If anything, it has reinvigorated my love for moving and for producing shows.

Q. Has San Diego Ballet reassessed any goals or ideals in the wake of the social justice movement?

A. Annually, we reassess our short-term and long-term goals. The last year has rallied our board of directors to grow and update its board demographics. We have com-

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