


*Celebrating*

**25<sup>th</sup>**

**ANNIVERSARY**

Founder/Executive Artistic Director  
of State Street Ballet



**RODNEY GUSTAFSON**

*Dance Mogul Magazine >>> Exclusive*

**Dance Mogul:** What does it mean to be celebrating 25 years in the arts?

**Mr. Gustafson:** This 25th Anniversary has been a very interesting experience for me. I attribute much of the success to a wide number of artistic advisors, strong knowledge of the business of dance from on-stage and behind the scenes and attaining graduate degrees in business in helping State Street Ballet get to where it is today. During my tenure at American Ballet Theatre, my great admiration grew for Kevin McKenzie as Artistic Director, following a short tenure by Mikhail Baryshnikov. Watching Kevin's quiet strength as a leader, how he made well thought out decisions rather than lead with the somewhat traditional ego-driven style common in the world of classical ballet, was invaluable to me. This 25th Anniversary feels much more significant than the 10th and 20th-year celebrations. It has been the joy of my life to know we have created original, relevant dance, and performed throughout the US, China, Taiwan,

and Chile. In addition to the artistic excellence, I am very proud that we have long-term financial sustainability. We are compelled to continue and grow for at least 25 more years!

**Dance Mogul:** With the emergence of the corona virus, how have things changed for your company, what is your advice for dancers during challenging times?

**Mr. Gustafson:** I must admit that it has shaken me to the core. My Co-Artistic Director William Soleau lives in NYC with his wife, NYC Ballet Master Chris Redpath, and we have great concerns about how this might affect the future of dance permanently. Four weeks ago, I was about to travel to NYC for the annual company auditions; we had a tech-scout trip to Geneva, Switzerland planned for the spring 2021 European Premiere of our original ballet, CHAPLIN; our entire spring calendar of performances was cancelled, including at our home base in Santa Barbara, a six-city, three-week tour across New Mexico,

and our May contemporary program. Our ballet school and Pro Track program are also shut down, of course. We have just decided to present a Virtual Summer Series via the interactive, on-line CYA.Live platform.

It allows our patrons, friends, and family to connect with our dancers and artistic staff simultaneously while watching some of the greatest moments in our artistic history; and helps us all stay connected! Dance is a very physical art that demands such intimate contact and we are working on solutions for our dancers and students. We can only encourage them to follow the recommendations and guidelines to stay healthy, practice social distancing yet at the same time, continue moving, maybe do on-line class, stay in touch with one another digitally, and so on. As dancers, like athletes, it is unimaginably hard to have their daily training and rehearsing routines cut-off so abruptly.



**Dance Mogul:** How do you introduce ballet to this new generation of kids?

**Mr. Gustafson:** We treasure and love bringing the art of dance to young audiences through a wide array of outreach performances in addition to our professional training programs. Library Dances is State Street Ballet's unique and innovative arts education program, the Founder/Director of the program is Cecily Stewart. Library Dances is an integrative experience for students that have successfully combined two different fields of study - literature and dance - into one valuable teaching forum. Created with a linked-learning objective, State Street Ballet's professional dancers go into junior high and high school and work with students to develop dance/theatre productions that are based on their required reading assignments. This has brought the arts back into the classroom by bringing literature to life through dance and has also allowed students to have a more kinetic understanding of the world around them. Our dancers serve as positive role models to the students, provide one-on-one mentor-

ing, and assist in creating fully produced shows that not only build self-esteem but create a sense of unity and camaraderie amongst students from a wide range of backgrounds. Each season, State Street Ballet also treats over 6,000 elementary school students to interactive, in-theater performances in many of the cities to which we tour. In addition to getting a preview of State Street Ballet's family programming, students learn about the mechanics of a working theater, the many artists who collaborate to create a production, dance history, and more. Each experience includes mini-dance lessons for the whole audience as well as a hosted question and answer session. For many attending students, this marks their first time in a theatre, and their first time seeing live professional dance.

**Dance Mogul:** Where do you see the future of dance going in the next 10 years?

**Mr. Gustafson:** I believe dance is a nimble art form that has an amazing way of changing and adapting with the times. We will begin to see more virtual performances with online streaming after the

scare of this current virus.

**Dance Mogul:** What do you want your company's legacy to be and is there anyone you would like to thank?

**Mr. Gustafson:** One of the most important elements of State Street Ballet, that I hope will continue, is an incredible loyalty and healthy atmosphere we have been able to create. Not wanting to be an "old school authoritarian director," I created a new horizontal management style based on the mental and physical well being of our artists. I feel our success will continue if we-keep this in place. Our legacy is also a pioneering collaborative, supporting an international ensemble of dancers, consistently striving for new and innovative artistic opportunities that serve a broad audience. Besides offering our twist on classical ballet favorites, we are known for original works that reflect the contemporary nature and talent of the ensemble. The company is comprised of 20 dancers and represents six countries, and they each have an outlet to express their creative talents and goals.



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*State Street Ballet would not be in existence without my main mentor, Michael Towbes, a philanthropic legend in Santa Barbara. He made our rehearsal studio and school space, the Gail Towbes Center for Dance, possible. Now that Michael is gone, the family philanthropy is under the guidance of his daughter, Carrie Towbes, who serves as an Executive Advisor to our Board. We will be forever grateful to the Towbes family.”* -Rodney Gustafson

