

Irving in the studio with OBT's Candace Bouchard



Having It All

Oregon Ballet Theatre's Kevin Irving isn't satisfied with ballet's status quo. **By Heather Wisner**

Kevin Irving is a man of eclectic

tastes. It showed in Oregon Ballet Theatre's 2015–16 season, which opened with *Napoli* Act III, the company's first turn with Bournonville, followed by Balanchine's *Nutcracker*. Then came *Romeo & Juliet*, as envisioned by OBT founding artistic director James Canfield. The season closed with *Beautiful Decay*, an OBT premiere that Irving's partner, contemporary choreographer Nicolo Fonte, created featuring local contemporary dancers.

"A salient fact is that I'm very much a mongrel," says the 55-year-old OBT artistic director. As a Long Island teen, Irving aspired to be a jazz dancer, studying at The Ailey School and performing with Elisa Monte Dance before leaping seriously into ballet at 24. He joined Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal and was promoted to soloist, then principal. He finished his performing days with Twyla Tharp, then moved on to European posts, including associate director at the Madrid-based Compañía Nacional de Danza, artistic director of Sweden's GöteborgsOperans Danskompani and guest ballet master for the Royal Danish Ballet. His ever-changing circumstances taught him to adapt quickly, he says.

Irving had plenty to figure out when OBT named him artistic director in 2013. The situation he inherited, following Christopher Stowell's resignation, included substantial amounts of debt. The day he arrived, he learned the box office manager had quit, the latest in a string of departures.

"It was a shambles," he says. "Nothing could prepare you for that, except that I had lived something very similar in Sweden: a long period of stress, a major exodus, a lot of dysfunction to overcome."

Irving set about rebuilding trust and offering a vision for the company, married with a pragmatic sense of what he thought was possible. The idea was to give patrons and stakeholders a sense of why OBT mattered. It wasn't always an easy sell.

"We have it tough here, because the culture of the Northwest is being out in nature," Irving says. "Our whole thing is that you can think of going to a ballet performance as a way to have fun." The trick in Portland, as elsewhere, is programming material that feeds the desire both for tradition and idiosyncrasy. Irving's programming for the upcoming season twines classical (*Serenade*, a new *Swan Lake*) with contemporary (two company premieres from Nacho Duato, William Forsythe's *In the middle, somewhat elevated*).

Although OBT's roster had been reduced from 26 dancers to 20 and contracts from 36 weeks to 30 before he arrived, both are creeping back up: This season, there will be 22 company members, 5 apprentices and a 34-week contract. In 2015, he inaugurated OBT2; 10 to 12 students are chosen for it at the end of the School of Oregon Ballet Theatre's summer intensive and perform with the main company.

Peter Franc, a 29-year-old soloist, says Irving's wide-ranging experience makes him

at a glance

Oregon Ballet Theatre

Number of dancers: 27, including 5 apprentices

Length of contract: 34 weeks

Starting salary: Inquire with company

Performances per year: 42

Website: obt.org

an insightful director and coach. "His attention to detail keeps everyone honest and working hard." Franc, who danced with Houston Ballet and Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, likes that OBT falls somewhere between his previous employers in terms of size and style. Company artist Emily Parker, who came to OBT after graduating from Indiana University, agrees: "I wanted somewhere that had a mixed rep and that I would fit into—not a huge company."

"Articulate" is the word Irving uses to describe what he looks for in new hires: "the ability to draw on your technique, to be precise," he says. "That's a fundamental tool, and I try to help dancers develop it. During 'Waltz of the Flowers,' I look at every girl, making sure they're feeling like a flower. It has to be alive. Otherwise, it's a bunch of mannerisms that don't mean anything."

Along with grooming dancers, Irving plans to nurture new dance-making talent through the first-ever Choreography XX competition. A panel recently chose three North American female choreographers to receive a commission to stage their work in 2017.

"There simply are not enough opportunities for new work—period—and even less for women. Ditto for American choreographers," he says. "As enamored as I am with contemporary European choreography, I feel there is an imbalance. The American perspective in ballet is wonderful, so it's a pleasure to try and bring more of it to greater attention."

That goal dovetails nicely with Irving's balletic worldview. "In the 21st century, dancers can do everything—and audiences want everything," he says. "I have a real respect for classical ballet done well—I just don't see it as an end point. I say the same thing about Balanchine. Every season we're going to have a journey." **P**

Audition Advice

OBT auditions are by invitation, Irving says: "We're screening to make sure we get professional-caliber candidates." The company holds auditions in San Francisco each January and in New York each March. "I want dancers who can dance—that's something that can't be taught," he says. "I'm as much a sucker for a beautifully shaped foot or a great line, but I'm always drawn to people, even when they're young, who can embody that poetry."