

James Sewell Ballet Announces Its Farewell Season

The company will close at the end of its current season in March 2025

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MINNEAPOLIS - James Sewell Ballet (JSB), currently in its 35th season, today announced its final performances and cessation of operations at the end of its current season in March 2025. After a successful 35-year run, JSB is no longer able to survive, much less thrive, in the current environment. The decision was made after a decade of declining philanthropy for dance, a changed touring market, and the additional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performing arts.

Although the company will begin winding down operations, it is excited and grateful to be able to finish out its current season, which includes a 35th Anniversary Retrospective, March 14-15, at The O'Shaughnessy in St. Paul.

"Now is the moment when an intentional, celebratory sunset can still take shape, with respect to timing of messaging and realistic fundraising goals to close out the season," said Eve Schulte, executive director of JSB.

"We are immensely grateful to everyone along the way who has believed in us and supported us," said James Sewell, founder and artistic director of JSB. "We hope you can join us in this farewell season as we celebrate 35 years of moving works."

"A Polished Gem"

JSB's playful and elegant repertoire mixed contemporary ballet with trademark theatricality. A regular, favorite note of feedback following a performance (often from a dragged-along sibling or partner) was, "wow, I didn't expect to like that, and I loved it!" In its second and third decades, the company regularly performed student matinees that hosted over 10,000 children and families per season, and enjoyed sharing public performances that spanned two or three weekends per run. Anna Kisselgoff of the *The New York Times* described JSB as, "a polished gem of a chamber dance troupe from Minnesota...Mr. Sewell is...one of American ballet's most inventive choreographers...Different and unpredictable, this is the company to see." Jennifer Homans, in *The New Republic*, stated, "Sewell is daring and original, with a broad grounding in classical ballet and modern dance...[willing] to unearth

genuine emotions and grapple seriously with how ballet relates to more organic styles of movement."

James's background in music, magic, and gymnastics, and his use of choreography to explore contemporary issues and sometimes difficult topics were unusual in the world of ballet at the time. An ethos of "lights and tights" kept them affordable and tour ready. By the early 2000s, the company had greatly expanded its touring. Highlights included performances at New York's Joyce Theater, tours to Iceland, Canada, Bermuda, and France, and lengthy residencies in Montana, Utah, and New Hampshire. While JSB elevated the profile of Twin Cities art scene nationally, it also travelled state-wide to many communities who would otherwise not be afforded the opportunity to engage with professional contemporary ballet.

JSB's Role in the Dance Ecosystem

JSB dancers have gone on to careers with other top dance companies, including Alonzo King Lines Ballet, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Andrea Miller's GALLIM, and Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo; to roles on Broadway and in television; and into communities locally and across the nation as leaders of their own dance companies and schools. The long-held company value to expand people's notions about ballet was implemented in many ways, and was influenced greatly by the ambitions and pursuits of the ensemble members. JSB often hired and supported mid-career, mature artists, and often featured artists that did not fit the "ballet mold." It regularly extended opportunities for its dancers and guest artists to set choreography as part of its Ballet Works Project, often debuts. Nearly 100 new works from artists other than the artistic director were supported in this model.

Before the pandemic, JSB was a reliable, salaried position for professional dancers in the Twin Cities, but is no longer able to line up the weeks at the pay level standard the company has valued with increasing reliance on highly competitive project-based grants. A typical contract was 28-32 weeks a season, 40 hours a week, with a robust seasonal itinerary involving class, rehearsal, performances, tours, and outreach engagements. In its heyday, JSB employed three year-round full-time administrators plus had professionals on retainer in marketing and financial oversight. Since the pandemic, it's been operating with a lean administrative staff of two. The company has fostered long-term employees in both leadership and artistic staff over the years, a testament to its way of doing business and to the opportunities it was able to curate for its employees until recently.

Corporate and foundation giving has largely shifted toward other causes in the past decade. Individual charitable contributions buoyed the company as it sought to fill in the gaps left by corporate and foundation departures. Some government funding during the pandemic assisted with cash flow while the company attempted to stabilize and find solid

footing again. But a lack of sustainable funding, particularly operating support, along with shifts in earned revenue potential have led the company to its sunset season.

Going smaller toward the pick-up company model would be a method for survival, but the leadership and board of trustees were resolute that too much of the company's values would be lost selecting that route.

"An instrumentalist will purchase their instrument and carry it with them for life," says Sewell. "In my craft, a dance company is my instrument, and I've been blessed to have folks make possible that investment every year for 35 years." The chamber troupe was most frequently composed of six to eight members.

The company will issue its current employed dancers holiday bonuses to help offset costs in the upcoming audition season. The company revives last fall's choral ballet hit, *Unfashioned Creature*, with MPLS (imPulse) as part of the Westminster Performing Arts Series, November 15, 2024. It then travels to Tucson, AZ, for a three-performance run with True Concord Voices and Orchestra. Rehearsals resume in late January as JSB looks toward its final performance, a 35th Anniversary Retrospective, at two long-time venue partners: The Warren Miller Performing Arts Center in Big Sky, MT, March 8, 2025; and The O'Shaughnessy in St. Paul, MN, March 14 & 15, 2025. Special post-show receptions will follow each performance.

History of JSB

In New York City in 1990, James Sewell and Sally Rouse together re-imagined what a contemporary ballet company could look like: a chamber dance troupe that blends the elegance of classical ballet, the freedom of modern dance, and the can-do spirit of vaudeville. The young JSB was a pick-up company with a roster of performers that changed with each project, often drawing dancers from American Ballet Theater and the companies of Lar Lubovich, Murray Louis, and others. Free rehearsal and performance spaces at the David Howard Dance Center and the LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts helped support James's and Sally's vision.

In 1993, JSB moved from New York to James's native Minnesota and became a full-time organization. In the artistically rich and supportive climate of the Twin Cities, James refined his choreographic voice and developed his craft. JSB worked in collaboration with the Saint Paul Chamber and Minnesota Orchestras, Ballet Arts Minnesota, Children's Theater Company, the Minnesota Opera, In The Heart of the Beast Puppet Theater, VocalEssence, the Ahn Trio, A Prairie Home Companion's Garrison Keillor, acclaimed documentarian Frederick Wiseman, and other local and regional artists and organizations.

What Comes Next

Consider a **Last Hurrah Gift** to JSB. Lead gifts - and gifts of all sizes - will help JSB meet a remaining budgeted goal of \$140,000 to honor its 35th year of programming - and to support its people.

Contact Tom McNamee or Eve Schulte at 612-672-0480 to pledge your financial support, or visit <https://jsballet.org/contribute/> to make a safe, electronic contribution. We thank you!

Unfashioned Creature

- MINNEAPOLIS, MN: November 15 (Friday), 7pm
- Tickets: <https://www.westminstermpls.org/worship/music/wpas/>

- TUCSON, AZ: November 22-24 (Friday-Sunday)
- Tickets: <https://trueconcord.org/celebrate-season-2024-25/frankenstein-brahms/>

35th Anniversary Celebration, including post-show receptions

- BIG SKY, MT: March 8 (Saturday)
- Tickets will become available at: <https://warrenmillerpac.org>

- ST PAUL, MN: March 14 (Friday), 7:30pm; March 15 (Saturday), 2pm
- Tickets:
<https://oshag.stkate.edu/events/category/series/james-sewell-ballets-35th-anniversary-season/the-oshaughnessy-at-st-catherine-university/st-paul-minnesota/>

Regular morning open classes continue at JSB through March 2025.

Details on costume, prop, and other asset liquidation forthcoming.

Connect to the MN DANCE TASK FORCE

- Focused to generate a framework & implementation steps to create a service organization to support MN dance artists in an equitable dance ecosystem.
- Facebook: MN Dance Task Force
- Instagram: @mn_dance_task_force

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