

May 31, 2009

INTERVIEW BY JAY HARVEY | THE STAR

## Q&A: John Meehan

### Artistic adviser plans inaugural gala for new ballet company

John Meehan, 59, became artistic chairman of the new Indianapolis City Ballet earlier this year. One of his first responsibilities is putting together a gala performance Sept. 12 that will excite Central Indiana enough to enlist support for the professional ballet company in the city.

Born in Brisbane, Australia, Meehan joined the Australian Ballet at 20, rising quickly to the positions of soloist and principal dancer. He first became known in this country in 1975, as Margot Fonteyn's partner in a touring production of "The Merry Widow."

That led to his engagement in 1977 by the American Ballet Theatre, and, after he retired as a dancer, his appointment by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet as artistic director. After several years with the Canadian troupe, he went back to ABT as artistic director of its Studio Company, a position he held until he got the corresponding job with the Hong Kong Ballet in 2006.

That association ended last summer, and next September, in addition to continuing here if Indianapolis City Ballet supporters agree, Meehan will become head of the dance department at Vassar College in New York.

Meehan recently spoke by phone from his home in the Hudson Valley about the new ballet company and the gala, which will feature a piece choreographed by Dance Kaleidoscope artistic director David Hochoy.

**You've said that "this will be the equal of any gala anywhere in the world." What steps have you taken so far?**

I've contacted a number of dancers, and I'm working on the cast. There are three things (to work out): to manage schedules, find repertoire that will work and get permission from artistic directors for dancers to be released. We can't



John Meehan performs with Karen Kain in the National Ballet of Canada's 1986 production of "The Merry Widow." - Photos provided by Indianapolis City Ballet



John Meehan, Artistic Chairman, Indianapolis City Ballet.

proceed until we've dealt with that. We're close to signing 80 percent of the cast -- really stunning dancers.

**For how long have you been hired?**

I haven't looked at the contract, but I think it is through the gala. We're talking about plans for the future. The ongoing plan is if the community responds well, we will go forward. We can't start working on that yet. It will be too late then to start it up (with an inaugural season) right away. Even if I'm not too involved after the gala, I will definitely be artistic chairman for as long as they want me, even if I'm not on salary.

**How much will the company resemble what people see at the gala?**

As far as quality is concerned, that is the direction we'd like to go. The idea is for the company to look toward contemporary repertoire and repertoire created in the last 50 to 100 years. It will be more contemporary and neoclassical than anything else.

Will you be involved in smoothing the way toward ICB's acceptance by the ballet community already here?

I don't think I've been asked specifically to do that, but I know that we want to integrate into the community. We don't want to step on people's toes, if you'll pardon the pun. We want to collaborate with as many people as we can.

**Does this business model of having a home base here plus touring work for you?**

I think it makes sense. If we have partner presenters in nearby towns and think of them as our home base, or people there who will work hard to find dates for us, it makes a lot of sense. Until we build our audience enough to build a season by staying at home, we need to think about a touring model.

**What are the advantages and disadvantages of Indianapolis City Ballet's size of about a dozen dancers?**

The ABT Studio Company was exactly that number. Winnipeg was twice that. Hong Kong was twice what Winnipeg was. Some of the unique things and the most difficult things in the repertoire were done: You have to find repertoire that works for that company. You want pieces that look like company pieces, but are for 12 dancers.

Injury is one of the big problems -- a bigger percentage of the company is affected by a few injuries.

**What is the nature of the Midwestern audience for ballet? Is it unknown, untapped or in need of revival?**

It needs to be revived. Maybe in the days of the Ballets Russes, there was more interest throughout America, and ABT of the '50s and '60s. People aren't aware how exciting ballet can be, especially contemporary work. There's a sense of educating the public to the technical level that dancers have reached and the variety of contemporary choreography -- there's something other than "Swan Lake" and "Nutcracker." And once they are exposed to it, they will be fans.

**Additional Facts**

*An Evening with the Stars*

What: An inaugural presentation by the Indianapolis City Ballet.

When: 8 p.m. Sept. 12.

Where: Murat Theatre, 502 N. New Jersey St.

Tickets: \$65, \$45 and \$25 (general admission). For tickets, go to [www.murat.com](http://www.murat.com) or call (877) 598-8703. Group rates (10 or more tickets) are available by calling (317) 339-1413. Tickets for a post-performance meet-and-greet with the artists are \$250 per person and up; for more information, go to [www.indianapoliscityballet.org](http://www.indianapoliscityballet.org).