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## **South Carolina's Largest Performing Arts Company Turns 60**

*Founded in 1961, Columbia City Ballet has grown into an icon of performing arts in the Palmetto State.*

**COLUMBIA, S.C.** – Columbia City Ballet, the largest performing arts organization in the state of South Carolina, turns 60 years old this year. Columbia City Ballet is among the oldest ballet companies in the country - older than Boston, Miami, Nashville, Orlando, Pennsylvania, Memphis, Charlotte, Houston, and Pacific Northwest Ballets. At 60 years old, Columbia City Ballet continues to innovate, grow in popularity, and expand its audiences for both its main stage and Educational Outreach Series ballets.

“Seeing this company fully mature has been one of the biggest joys of my life,” Executive and Artistic Director William Starrett said. As an internationally acclaimed dancer and choreographer who got his start at Canada’s Royal Winnipeg Ballet and NYC American Ballet Theatre under the direction of both Lucia Chase and Mikhail Baryshnikov, Starrett’s career has been devoted to the art. “Ballet is so much more than words - it is combining the human body and spirit as the art itself - and I’ve given my life in the service of bringing this city the art it deserves.”

Initially a community dance group staging only two performances a year, Columbia City Ballet has transformed itself into South Carolina’s largest professional performing arts organization with 28 professional dancers, and a rigorous performance and touring schedule that rivals any professional arts company in the Southeast.

Among the most notable milestones in its extensive history, in 1986, Columbia City Ballet appointed Starrett as Artistic Director. The following year, Columbia City Ballet received the Elizabeth O’Neil Verner Award, the most prestigious arts award in South Carolina. In 1989, Columbia City Ballet consolidated its operations under one roof on Columbia’s Main Street, renting rehearsal, administrative, and costume warehousing spaces within the Columbia Conservatory of Dance building.

Beginning in 1989, Columbia City Ballet began performing at the Koger Center for the Performing Arts and has the distinction of clocking the most hours of any organization at that venue. In 1991, Starrett created the Educational Outreach Series which has educated more than a



half million school children in the Southeast and which continues to be one of the few arts programs which is fully coordinated to SC state standards for arts education.

In 2005, Columbia City Ballet premiered *Off the Wall & Onto the Stage: Dancing the Art of Jonathan Green*, a revolutionary ballet exploring the Gullah culture of the South Carolina sea islands and which brings to life 22 of the paintings by renowned artist Jonathan Green. *Off the Wall & Onto the Stage* incorporates themes such as diversity, inclusiveness, and spirituality and continues to provide Columbia City Ballet opportunities for extensive touring throughout South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Chicago, New York City and Washington, D.C.

It is also notable that during the holiday season, Columbia City Ballet's production of *Nutcracker* has been a holiday tradition for the last 35 consecutive years. Even during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Columbia City Ballet found a way to perform this holiday favorite safely and responsibly with socially distanced audiences and COVID-19 safety protocols in place.

Later this year, Columbia City Ballet will be present *Off the Wall and Onto the Stage: Dancing the Art of Jonathan Green* on March 5-6; *Cinderella* on March 26-27; and *Beatles: the Ballet* on April 17<sup>th</sup>, all at the Koger Center for the Performing Arts. The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Performance Season will conclude with a gala celebrating the company's longevity and successes, following the 7:30 pm performance of *Beatles, the Ballet* on April 17<sup>th</sup>.

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*Columbia City Ballet's mission is to offer South Carolina and Southeastern audiences the highest quality ballet. We in South Carolina can proudly claim one of the strongest and most versatile ballet companies in the Southeast. Since the Columbia City Ballet's founding in 1961, it has fully integrated the world of dance within the community as the largest performing arts organization in the state.*