

American
MASTERS



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American Masters
American Ballet Theatre: A History

*Premieres nationwide Friday, May 15 at 9 p.m. on PBS (check local listings)
in honor of the company's 75th anniversary*

Company History
(Courtesy of American Ballet Theatre)

American Ballet Theatre (ABT) is recognized as one of the great dance companies in the world. Few ballet companies equal ABT for its combination of size, scope, and outreach. Recognized as a living national treasure since its founding in 1940, ABT is the only major cultural institution that annually tours the United States, performing for more than 450,000 people. Over its 75-year history, the company has appeared in all 50 states and also made more than 30 international tours to 50 countries as perhaps the most representative American ballet company. It has been sponsored by the State Department of the United States on many of these engagements.

When American Ballet Theatre was launched in autumn 1939, the aim was to develop a repertoire of the best ballets from the past and to encourage the creation of new works by gifted young choreographers, wherever they might be found. Under the direction of Lucia Chase and Oliver Smith from 1945-1980, the company more than fulfilled that aim. ABT's repertoire, perhaps unmatched in the history of ballet, includes all of the great full-length ballets of the 19th century, such as *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Giselle*, the finest works from the early part of the 20th century, such as *Apollo*, *Les Sylphides*, *Jardin aux Lilas* and *Rodeo*, and acclaimed contemporary masterpieces such as *Airs*, *Push Comes to Shove* and *Duets*. In

acquiring such an extraordinary repertoire, ABT has commissioned works by all of the great choreographic geniuses of the 20th century: George Balanchine, Antony Tudor, Jerome Robbins, Agnes de Mille and Twyla Tharp, among others.

In 1980, Mikhail Baryshnikov became artistic director of American Ballet Theatre, succeeding Lucia Chase and Oliver Smith. Under his leadership, numerous classical ballets were staged, restaged and refurbished, and the company experienced a strengthening and refining of the classical tradition. In 1990, Jane Hermann and Oliver Smith succeeded Baryshnikov and immediately established an agenda that was dedicated to maintaining the great traditions of the past while aggressively pursuing a vital and innovative future.

In October 1992, former American Ballet Theatre principal dancer Kevin McKenzie was appointed artistic director. McKenzie, steadfast in his vision of ABT as “American,” is committed to maintaining the company’s vast repertoire, and to bringing the art of dance theater to the great stages of the world.

In keeping with ABT’s long-standing commitment to bring the finest in dance to the widest international audience, the company has recently enjoyed triumphant successes with engagements in Abu Dhabi, Brisbane, Hong Kong, Havana, Tokyo and Beijing.

On April 27, 2006, by an act of Congress, American Ballet Theatre became America’s National Ballet Company®.

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