

# Orchestra teams up with ballet company

**T**HERE'S a synergy between ballet and orchestra — an extra dimension derived from dual performance. The great news for lovers of both is that from now on the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra (JPO) will accompany all ballets staged in Gauteng by the South African Ballet Theatre (SABT).

The joint announcement came at the year's final performance by the orchestra — a season that ended, appropriately, with an extract from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*.

It's a co-operation made possible by new funding for the orchestra — R7m from the National Lottery, and R3m a year from the arts and culture department. The ballet theatre doesn't have the resources to pay for regular orchestral accompaniment, but the JPO, now full-time, will extend its repertoire and support both ballet and opera. It's also a return to the norm before 1994.

Both SABT and the orchestra are six years old, and much-changed from their lily-white predecessors. But this milestone in the consolidation of music and dance reflects a turnaround after roller-coaster years of financial difficulties, particularly for the JPO, which was formed by musicians after the closure of the National Symphony Orchestra.

It is also one of the better transitions the ballet company has had to make over the past two decades, and SABT director Iain MacDonald reflects on some of the other transitions, and his own career, so closely tied up with the company he helped create.

A product of the National School of the Arts, where he met his wife, former ballerina Karen Beukes, MacDonald was a brilliant young dancer with some memorable performances in the former Pact Ballet and State Theatre Ballet companies before the State Theatre closure in 2000. He was then offered a position in America, but he and Karen decided to stay in SA. "Our lives were here, we didn't want to go abroad. We thought it was time to give back — dancers are usually so selfish, thinking about their own careers, me, me, me. That was a big wake-up call, we'd been given so much.

"One of the reasons why we stayed was that if we'd jumped ship, who would have taken on the job of keeping ballet alive?"

And so the SABT was really conceived at their wedding in January 2001, by a group of guests including Esther Nasser, Anzie Hancock (who became SABT's fundraiser) and Pretoria doctor Mike Dove.

"We're not business people, we're trained as dancers, so it was a big learning curve. At our first board meeting, we had no idea about the etiquette of meetings and how they are run. I remember Angela Malan tying ribbons on her shoes. But dancers are quick to learn, and our board members guided us — especially Don MacRobert. Thank goodness for their patience. Look at the past seven years and where we've gone — we're not in our comfort zone."

Together with Fiona Budd, he and his wife took over when former CEO Dirk Badenhorst, who put SABT on the map, left last year to pursue his own interests in Cape Town.

MacDonald must be one of the few

principal dancers in the world who also wears a director's hat, and confesses that it's not easy to handle the physical demands of rehearsing together with the time-consuming activities of publicity director and fundraiser.

"I realise more and more that in the business world, it's who you know that matters," he says. He's had to learn how to put a spin on their product, and practise an oblique approach to possible donors. And as if that's not enough, this elegant, versatile and very macho dancer has also had a hip replacement.

"Initially when I decided to have the operation, I thought it was the end of the road, that I'd been blessed with some wonderful roles and that it was time to move on. Once I'd had it done I didn't want to be seen as a cripple; also, there were very few big men in the company. This was a major driving force, as new male dancers are not easy to find."

This shortage of male dancers is the weakest link in the company, and it's a problem not unique to SA. "We don't poach dancers," he says, "though we've lost some to the *Lion King*. We'll see what happens in January when their season ends."

One of MacDonald's most memorable roles, and certainly the most unusual, was as the Southern Cape Zebra in *Still Life* at the Penguin Café, from David Bintley's choreographic presentation of endangered animals in the *Doomsday Book*.

Ironically, it's one of the roles we won't see again, as it was part of the extensive State Theatre Ballet repertoire that was lost when the company closed in 2000. Yet, prophetically, this zebra with its black and white stripes is also a metaphor for ballet's survival.

**HEATHER MACKIE**

**HISTORY: Southern Cape Zebra in *Still Life* is one of Iain MacDonald's most memorable roles. Picture: EDZARD MEYBERG/COURTESY OF THE SOUTH AFRICA STATE THEATRE**

