

The NYCB's Grand

THERE ARE TWO WORLDS AT THE DAVID H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center, the home of New York City Ballet. Front of house is a bustling lobby of travertine stone, a sprawling and elegant atrium, and an auditorium designed to feel like the inside of a jewelry box. Backstage is floors of dressing rooms, rehearsal studios, and rooms for hair, makeup, costumes, and pointe shoes. The narrow corridors are cluttered with wardrobes, storage boxes and equipment. Musicians hunt around for quiet nooks in which to practice. And from here, in an office with the merest slivers of windows, Katherine Brown manages the Company.

But this is no average dance company; it is the iconic New York City Ballet, or "City Ballet" as it's



Jeté

Brunswick talks with **KATHERINE BROWN**, Executive Director of New York City Ballet, about the resurgence of an iconic cultural institution.

called by long-time aficionados. The Company was co-founded in 1948 by arts patron Lincoln Kirstein and one of the twentieth century's greatest choreographers, George Balanchine, who revolutionized ballet technique with his distinctive neoclassical style that emphasized speed, musicality and athleticism. Since then, NYCB has produced some of the most beloved ballets and dancers of our time, with an active repertory of more than 150 works, many of them considered modern masterpieces.

Until 2009, NYCB was led largely by its artistic directors. This worked—NYCB has long been one of the world's foremost dance companies—until it didn't. Ticket sales were declining and fundraising wasn't keeping up with expenses. The financial crisis made tough times even tougher—unlike in Europe, arts institutions in the US receive comparatively little in the way of government support, meaning organizations have to rely on private grants, donations and ticket revenue. So NYCB created a new position—



Principal dancer Sara Mearns captured in mid-flight in New York City Ballet's production of George Balanchine's "Serenade," set to music by Tchaikovsky.

Executive Director—to oversee the business side of the organization and steward the Company into a new era. Katherine Brown was exactly the person for the job. “I see my role as doing whatever I can to make sure that the management side and the administrative side of the organization is as strong as it possibly can be to support the artistic vision,” Brown said after being appointed.

She grew up just outside Washington, DC in a family of musicians, where gatherings often ended around the piano. She began her career working for a decade at the National Endowment for the Arts, the federal agency which supports artists and arts organizations through grants. That role helped Brown build a nationwide network of artists and arts-focused groups. Her next stop was New York and fundraising for NYCB. Never having done fundraising before, she quickly discovered that it was about far more than cold calls. “The through line is building relationships, and finding the match between the need and the interest of the donor. But it also requires different kinds of thinking, planning and strategic skills. You need to know everything that’s going on in the organization—the programming plans, short- and long-term objectives, financial and operational issues—so you can communicate the organization’s goals and challenges to prospective donors.”

She then spent four years in a similar role at the New York Public Library, before being tapped by a newly established organization at Lincoln Center. A popular series of jazz concerts had sparked interest in formalizing the presence of this most American art form, alongside opera, dance and classical music. The trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis became the Artistic Director, and the public face of a push to establish a new jazz constituent at Lincoln Center, and build a permanent home for the organization. Brown joined when the effort was in its early stages, a startup in effect. “We didn’t even know at the time exactly how much money we were going to need to raise, so we just started and went as fast as we

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could,” says Brown, who capitalized on Marsalis’ star power and skills as a communicator.

Brown quickly found her responsibilities expanding far beyond raising money. By the time the Time Warner Center venue was ready to open, she had been appointed executive director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, with broad management responsibilities. “I was very interested in making that transition, and was grateful to have that opportunity at JALC as it was so much easier to do in an organization I knew so well. It was a great, great learning experience.”

She took a similar role at the New York public radio station WNYC, before being lured back to Lincoln Center by the top job at NYCB. “The charge for me was how do we figure out how to turn around the negative trends the Company was experiencing? So, we went at it from every angle, with all kinds of analyses and initiatives. Due to the old structure there was a lot of low-hanging fruit, nobody had been looking at the operations from a business standpoint. Nobody was saying, ‘look we can get the same result doing it this way, which is 50% less expensive.’”

Brown also had to address institutional complacency, a sense that “if you build it they will come.” People were not flocking to the Ballet as they once did. Every major cultural institution was seeing shifts in consumer habits. During Brown’s first turn at the Ballet, the Company would send out two brochures a year, offering subscriptions to each half of the season. Most tickets were sold this way before the box office even opened, but fewer and fewer people wanted to commit to multiple performances a year. They wanted more flexibility and there was more competition for their leisure time, which meant the Ballet would have to work much harder to sell every seat.

In 2011, New York City Opera left Lincoln Center, leaving the ballet as the sole tenant of the theater they had once shared. Brown’s experience building Jazz at Lincoln Center had impressed on her the value of controlling your own theater. The additional expenses and managerial responsibilities would





require a big lift, but were more than offset by the flexibility to set your own schedule and control your own operations. “The reason I felt this was doable was because it was exactly the model we had at JALC.”

One of Brown and her team’s earliest innovations was demand pricing: using digital technology to adjust the price of tickets based on demand. But there were many less obvious routes to financial health.

NYCB doubled down on strategies to attract new audiences and change perceptions of the Ballet. In 2013, the Company launched the NYCB Art Series, commissioning artists to create an installation on the Theater’s Promenade during the annual winter season. NYCB chooses contemporary artists with large, younger followings who might be enticed to attend the ballet. Three NYCB Art Series performances, with cheaper-than-average tickets, are marketed to the artists’ followers. The program has been successful in attracting new, younger audience members and has generated a large distribution list of potential ballet fans. Another program, “\$30 for 30,” offers people ages 30 and younger \$30 tickets anywhere in the house available, has grown to 20,000 members.

Brown’s changes meant that NYCB was in relatively good health when COVID struck. And under her leadership, the organization survived despite losing out on \$50 million in revenue. When they emerged on the other side, Brown and her team accelerated preparations to mark the 75th anniversary of NYCB during the Company’s 2023-24 Season. It was an opportunity to tell the Company’s story in new ways to new audiences. To open the season, NYCB invited back all the dancers from NYCB’s history, including four women in their 90s who had danced in the very first season in 1948.

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Katherine Brown

Brown is supported by the NYCB Board of Directors, with whom she is in frequent touch. “We are fortunate to have an incredibly dedicated Board. You need the firepower of people who are passionate advocates and can contribute financially, and offer access to their networks to connect us to potential donors, audience members and sponsors, and in some cases, their professional expertise.”

Meanwhile the creative side, led by former NYCB dancers Jonathan Stafford, Artistic Director, and Wendy Whelan, Associate Artistic Director, has continued to evolve and flourish while remaining true to the Company’s legacy and existing repertory. Stafford and Whelan are committed to cultivating the next generation of dancers and choreographers through commissioning new works and bringing in fresh voices, including Resident Choreographer and Artistic Advisor Justin Peck and Artist in Residence Alexei Ratmansky. Additionally, their focus on cross-collaborations with artists in other fields—from music and visual arts to design and fashion—is bringing new and diverse audiences to the ballet. This reimagining of NYCB’s purpose and presentation is backed by a vibrant social media presence, which renders the art more accessible and the dancers, choreographers and artists more human.

One of the key challenges running an arts organization is finding ways to attract and retain today’s audiences while remaining true to the artistic mission, Brown is helped by her long background in the arts. “What really motivates me is the creative process, and I feel that should absolutely lead everything.”

Under Brown, the entire concept of a night at the ballet has been brought up to date. NYCB has shortened the overall length of performances, starting them earlier and reducing intermission times when possible to better meet the needs and expectations of today. “There has been a sea change in society around how people consume culture,” says Brown. “When people ask me, ‘who’s your competition in New York?’ they start reeling off other dance companies. I have to stop them and say ‘no, it’s TV, it’s Netflix.’”

Her approach is producing measurable progress. NYCB’s budget in 2023 was larger than it was before the pandemic, ticket sales revenue has increased and contributions and grants have grown compared to 2019. Since 2008, the median age of NYCB’s ticket buyers has dropped by a decade (to 44), and last year nearly three out of four seats were filled, on average, for its performances.

In many respects, NYCB has never leapt higher—heights that, from her backstage office, Brown is focused on continuing to surpass. ♦

PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON is a former Editor at Large for Brunswick Group based in New York. His books, including *Ahead of the Curve*, have appeared on *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists.