

Arts & Entertainment

A guide to events, organizations and people in the arts community

From Russia, with love

Hermitage Ballet dances through Queen City

by Sean O'Connell
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The show will be enormous – maybe not in size (not this year, anyway), but certainly in stature. Michael Donnelly cannot emphasize enough how historic this show is for Charlotte.

“No group of Russians has ever brought a higher-ranked Russian ballet to the United States,” he said.

Donnelly is referring to the world-renowned Russian Hermitage Ballet of St. Petersburg, which will perform at Ovens Auditorium Monday, Feb. 18, at 7 p.m. The performance is part of a longer Southeastern tour that includes Savannah, Atlanta, Columbia, Spartanburg and cities in Alabama and Florida.

“This truly is a world-class performance,” said Donnelly, a spokesman for the group. “This is the best ballet Russia has to offer. To experience the artistry and the history of the best classical ballets all through these incredible performers is

quite a treat, and one not found in the (United States).”

A new calling

Donnelly's own story is equally incredible. The first (and, to date, only) American to attend the Russian Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Donnelly moved to Russia shortly after retiring from the Army. He spent two years convincing the school to admit him – he was an American in his mid-50s and therefore not an ideal candidate. But he eventually earned his Master and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in the History of Art.

“To their amazement, I truly was a decent scholar,” Donnelly said. It was the beginning of his second career, his second life and his new passion: Russian art and dance.

“This started because Russians at the (Army) academy began to besiege me to expose their art in the West,” said Donnelly. “I'd bring the art back and show it and people here would besiege me to take them (to Russia) to meet the artist. So I started a touring company.”

He estimates he has made 190 trips to Russia since 1993. In 1998, Donnelly took one of his tours to the Hermitage Ballet. A ticket snafu put him in touch with ballet representatives, where the group's commercial spokesman – who recognized Donnelly as a graduate of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts – approached him about joining the Hermitage's board of directors. He accepted the position eight years ago and has spent each day on the job trying to convince Hermitage Ballet dancers to tour the United States. Finally, his plan is coming together.

An annual event

This debut performance will be performed as it is in the historical theater of Catherine the Great in the Winter Palace of old Imperial Russia. The show offers the entire classical repertoire of the Mariinski Theater (the Imperial Theater of Ballet under the Romanov dynasty): two numbers from “Swan Lake;” scenes from “Sleeping Beauty,” “The Nutcracker,” “Giselle,” “Don Quixote” and “Corsair;” and the concert item “The Dying Swan,” created for Anna Pavlova by Mikhail Fokin at the direction of Sergei

Diaghilev in 1903.

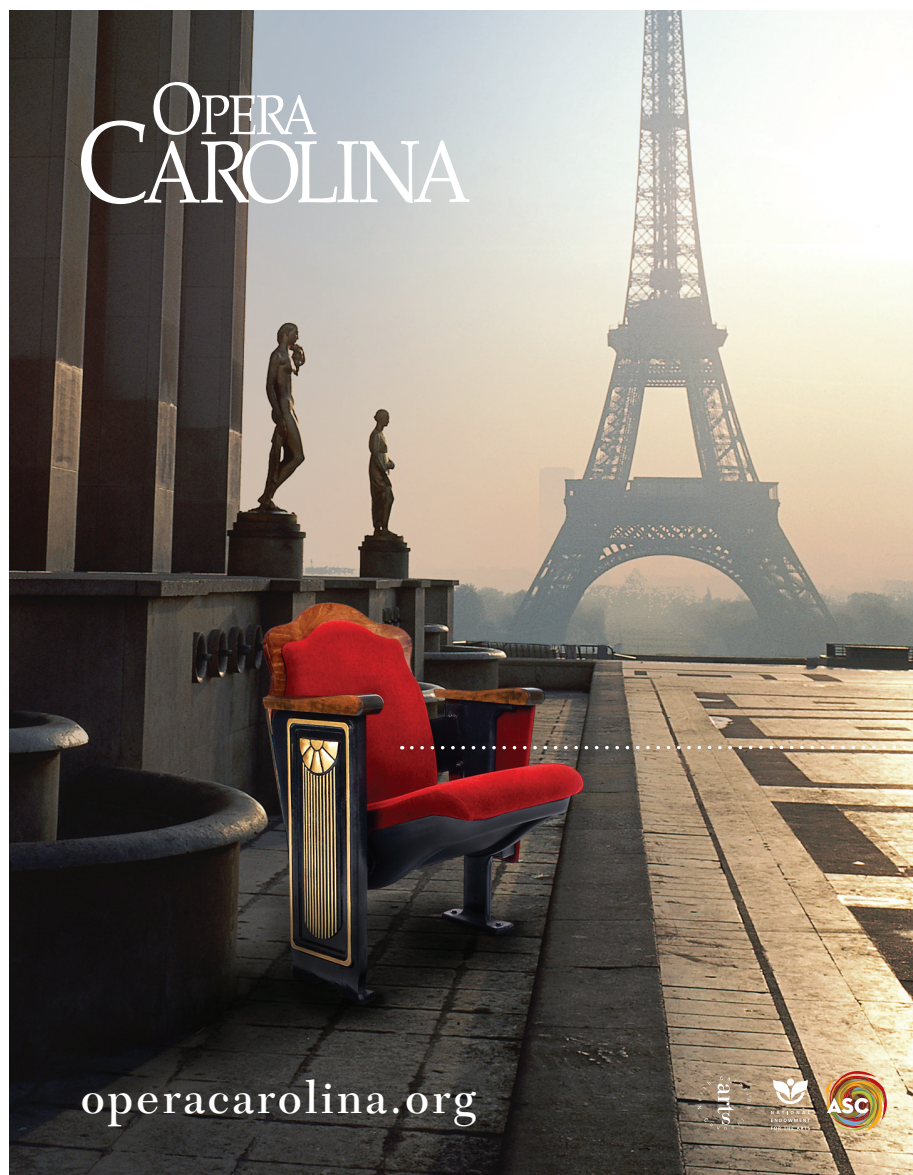
This will not be a one-and-done performance. Donnelly envisions this as an annual presentation. He said they “want to come in ever-increasing numbers.”

“This year we're bringing 40 (people),” he said. “Next year, we want to bring 50. In 2010, we want to bring our 48-piece orchestra and about 50 performers. From that time forward, we want to bring 157 dancers and 48 orchestra people, plus our technical crew.”

Ticket sales will help fund a scholarship program for a local ballet student and teacher to visit Russia to study ballet (see page 13). In addition, the Hermitage Ballet will reach out to local dancers and host master classes for local students at Ovens on the day of the performance. □

Want to go?

The Russian Hermitage Ballet will perform at Ovens Auditorium on Monday, Feb. 18, at 7 p.m. Tickets, \$45-\$65, are available at www.ticketmaster.com or by calling 704-335-3100 or 704-522-6500. Tickets for the postevent reception, \$20, also are available at www.ticketmaster.com.



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