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By CHRISTOPHER REARDON

**N**OTHING draws a crowd in Columbus, Ohio, like college football, a civic ritual that combines choreographed steps with seat-of-the-pants improvisation. Concert dance is a much harder sell, but faced with a tight economy, BalletMet, the local ballet company, is rewriting its playbook in a bid to win bigger, younger audiences.

Last year this 28-member troupe performed onstage with Ohio State University's marching band. This spring it began dancing to music by Moby, whose pulsating beats are more commonly heard at nightclubs and frat parties than at the ballet.

Gerard Charles, BalletMet's artistic director, agreed that such moves might have raised a few eyebrows back at the Royal Ballet School in London, where he trained as a dancer in the 1970's. But he insisted that the company, which will make its Manhattan debut on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, was not selling its soul.

"Our constant source of frustration is the inertia of getting people out of their homes and into the theater," Mr. Charles, 48, said in a recent telephone interview. "Once they're in their seats they can't understand why they haven't been before."

New Yorkers might also find something to like. This week's program at the Joyce features commissioned works by two highly regarded choreographers, James Kudelka and Stanton Welch, and one emerging talent, Deanna Carter.

"BalletMet is a very strong regional ballet company with a unique voice," said Mr. Welch, 34, an Australian dynamo who is artistic director at the Houston Ballet and moonlights as artistic associate at BalletMet. "I've been impressed by its dramatic flair as well as its dancing ability."

Columbus, after all, is not exactly a cultural backwater. This rapidly growing city is home to the Wexner Center for the Arts, a lively playground for experimental artists who come — often from New York — for more creative time and space.

BalletMet, with an annual budget of \$5.2 million, ranks among the country's 15 largest professional dance companies. Its affiliated school is also one of the nation's biggest, with about 1,000 students each week.

Now in its 26th season, the troupe has never run a deficit, said Cheri Mitchell, its executive director. But in recent years it has seen a decline in corporate and government support. Ticket sales also slumped before rebounding in January. Luckily, individual donors have picked up much of the slack. But even so, Ms. Mitchell said, BalletMet must raise an additional \$100,000 by June 30 to stay in the black this fiscal year.

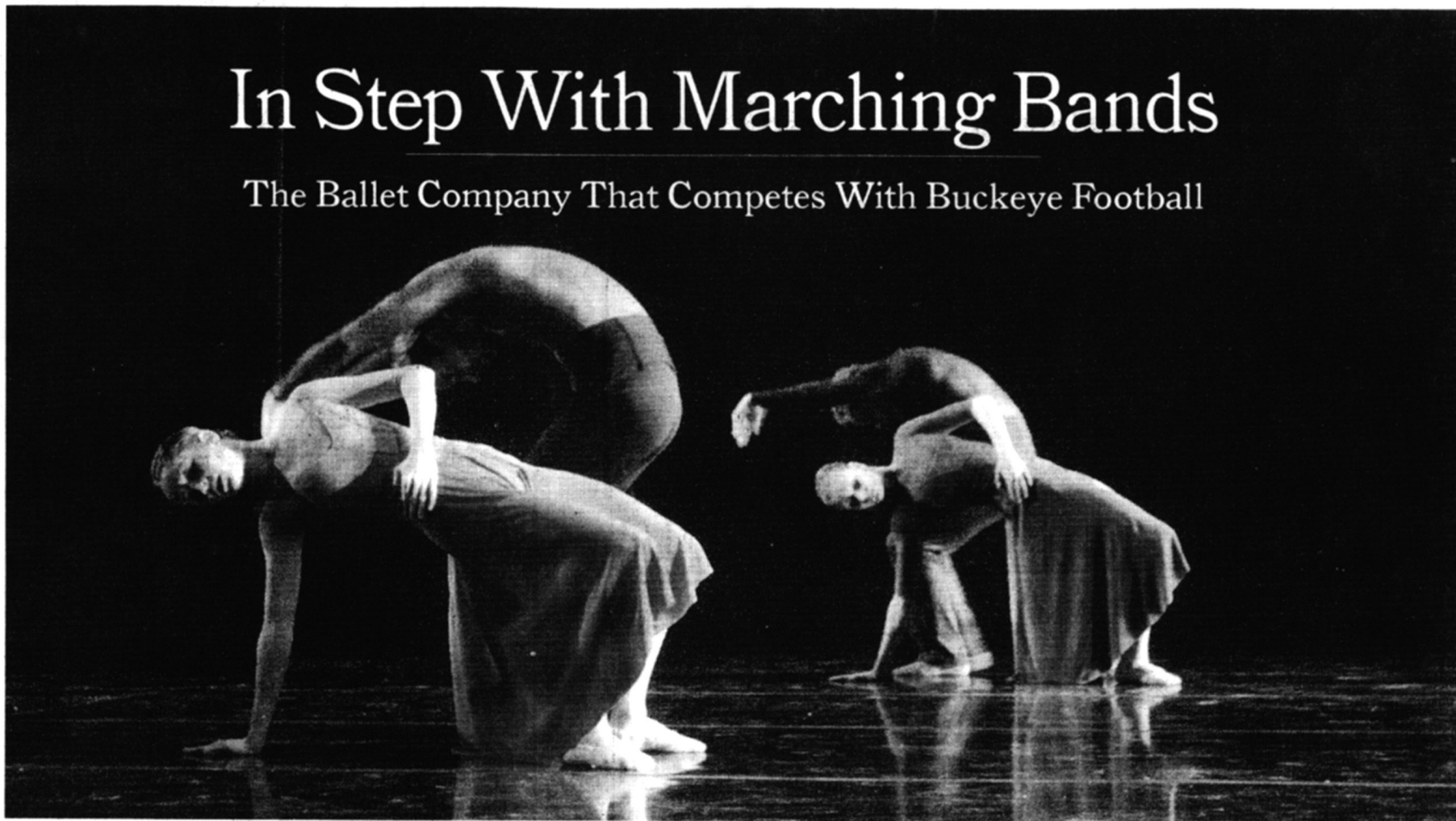
At home the company performs large-scale story ballets at the 2,800-seat Ohio

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DANCE

## In Step With Marching Bands

The Ballet Company That Competes With Buckeye Football



BalletMet in Deanna Carter's new work "Colores de Alma," set to flamenco music. It had its premiere in Columbus, Ohio, the company's home, in February.

Theater; it presents mixed bills of shorter dances at the 800-seat Capitol Theater. Still, BalletMet sells fewer tickets each year (about 75,000) than the university's football team does for a single home game (more than 100,000).

One way to bring in more money down the road might be to focus on story ballets, which cost more to produce but fill more seats. But Mr. Charles cautioned that there are only so many worth staging. "We don't want to end up doing 'The Three Musketeers' and 'Peter Pan,'" he said. "That could kill you artistically."

Instead he reaffirmed his intention to commission shorter works and to reach out to new audiences. In a novel endeavor, the troupe performed on campus last year with the marching band in "Ballet in Scarlet and Gray," whose title refers to the school colors. The piece coincided with BalletMet's 25th anniversary, as well as the school's recent national championship in football, but it was no mere pat on the back.

With the United States then on the brink of war with Iraq, the choreographer Susan Hadley, a veteran of the Mark Morris Dance Group, was wary of striking a righteous or triumphal tone.

"The question was: how could I make a work that I could stand behind artistically?" said Ms. Hadley, a Columbus native who now teaches in the university's dance department. "Ultimately, I chose to celebrate qualities I admire in my community and in my country. We are a culture that is still trying to be religiously tolerant, for example, and we are still working on our experiment in pluralism."

To convey such values onstage, she enlisted a cantor from a local synagogue and a pair of dancers familiar with Islamic and Christian prayer. Together they performed a trio that suggested, through stylized movements, these different spiritual traditions. In another section, as the musicians marched in formation to spell the name Ohio, she brought on a diverse group of local

### BalletMet

Joyce Theater, Tuesday-next Sunday

residents to dot the "i", a role usually reserved for a sousaphone player.

Mr. Kudelka, the artistic director at the National Ballet of Canada, also created a piece for the program, which was presented at the Wexner Center. Called "Gazebo Dances," it was set to music written by John Corigliano, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, and performed by the university's acclaimed Wind Symphony. (BalletMet will reprise it, with recorded music, during its run at the Joyce.)

The program drew 5,500 people over two nights. "They came for the marching band," Mr. Charles said. "But they ended up seeing a world premiere by Kudelka and hearing a live rendition of Corigliano."

Since then, he said, more students are buying tickets to see BalletMet perform downtown. The company is also making

plans to return to campus next year.

Also on the bill this week is an excerpt from Mr. Welch's newest dance, "Evolution," which had its premiere a few weeks ago at the Capitol Theater. In New York the troupe will perform the first section, "Play," a flurry of pedestrian movement that evokes contemporary urban life. The dancing is accompanied by songs from Moby's album of the same name, which was released in 1999 and went double platinum.

The third piece on the program, "Colores de Alma," was first staged in Columbus in February. Choreographed by Ms. Carter, a Seattle native who works chiefly in Germany, it casts Spanish flamenco dancing in a modern light.

Mr. Charles hoped that, both in New York and back home, such dances might spark new interest in his chosen field. "There will always be some people who don't like ballet," he said. "I don't get that. But then I don't attend a lot of football games either." □