

Regional Dance America (RDA) was founded in 1988 to promote the artistic development of dance companies throughout the United States, continuing the important work that was started in 1956 by the National Association of Regional Ballet (NARB). The NARB contributed to the decentralization of dance and, under its auspices, regional companies grew in stature and quality nationwide. The five regional organizations of RDA (the Mid-States, the Northeast, the Pacific, the Southeast, and the Southwest) were established under the guidance of the NARB. Over two hundred companies, including more than two-dozen nationally recognized professional groups, have been NARB or RDA member companies. The main objectives of RDA are to promote its mission on a national level, to define and maintain the artistic standards of quality to which the regional organizations are held, and to provide uniformity of major policies amongst five regions.

Every year in each of the regions, member companies share four days of classes, lectures, seminars and social events. Evening performances are held showcasing the member companies, demonstrating the growth they have achieved throughout the year.

A significant milestone in the history of RDA was in 1997 with the first ever RDA National Festival. All of the RDA member companies came together for a five-day celebration of dance. RDA is looking forward to hosting a 2nd National Festival in the near future. Since 1990, RDA has been honored to sponsor an exhibition performance at the USA International Ballet Competition held every four years in Jackson, Mississippi. RDA's most significant project is its sponsorship of the annual Craft of Choreography Conference. Through the Conference, RDA focuses on the development of the fundamental underpinnings of the art of dance – choreographers and dancers.

RDA has and will continue to be an organization dedicated to promoting the artistic development of regional dance companies throughout the United States.

Presented by Barbara Crockett; Coordinator – Pacific Region; Secretary, Regional Dance America; Past President, National Association for Regional Ballet.

Scarcely two generations ago, only audiences in a few metropolitan centers could enjoy dance, beautifully and powerfully performed. For the rest of the country, it generally meant an agonizing evening of watching neighborhood children struggle through a recital. The talented ones soon left their home communities to expand and enrich their talents in those sparse urban centers. Today the tide has turned. Resident companies throughout our country are creating their own "Lincoln Centers" at civic centers, art complexes, municipal and school auditoriums.

This change in the national dance landscape is what the National Association for Regional Ballet began in 1956, and what Regional Dance America has continued since 1987. It's prime purpose is to serve decentralized dance throughout the United States by furthering the image of resident dance companies and fostering quality at all levels of development.

How was this accomplished? It was Anatole Chujoy, editor of Dance News, who first realized that a festival, bringing together dance groups within a certain specified area, could have the same significance for the United States as similar festivals he had experienced in Canada. He discussed this with Dorothy Alexander, artistic director of the (then) Atlanta Civic Ballet and a true visionary and leader. The seeds of the idea could not have been planted in a more fertile mind. Mrs. Alexander enthusiastically developed the idea, and in 1956 the Atlanta Civic Ballet hosted the first regional festival in its home city. Eight Southeastern companies were invited to participate.

The success of this event led immediately to the formation of the Southeastern Regional Ballet Festival Association (later called Southeastern Regional Ballet Association).

Among the important guests attending the first Atlanta Festival was Alexi Ramov, director of the Scranton Ballet Guild. He promptly set about organizing a similar association for his area. In 1959, the Northeast

region held its own first event. Barbara Weisberger, director of the Wilkes-Barre Ballet, joined Ramov in sponsoring the festival.

Word began to spread across the country - Ben Sommers, president of Capezio, Ballet Makers, but better known as "Mr. Capezio", was a great supporter and chronicler of the new phenomenon. In 1963, the Southwestern Regional Ballet Association was formed and held its first festival with Barbara and David Carson of the Austin Civic Ballet as hosts. This was followed in 1966 by the formation of the Pacific Western Regional Ballet Association, as it was first known. The first festival was hosted by Deane and Barbara Crockett of the Sacramento Civic Ballet. The Mid-States was regional association formed in Kansas City in 1972.

The development of the National Association for Regional Ballet came about through the evolving needs of its member companies. In 1958, it became apparent that there was a nucleus of persons consistently interested in the festivals and capable of objectivity concerning the aims of the regional movement. This group included Dorothy Alexander, Anatole Chujoy, founder/editor, Dance News; Doris Hering, associate editor & principal critic, Dance Magazine; Lydia Joel, editor, Dance Magazine; P. W. Manchester, managing editor, Dance News; Ben Sommers, "Mr. Capezio"; and Alice M. Bingham of Capezio. an advisory board. ~ Dorothy Alexander was elected chairman of what was then called an advisory board.

In 1963, at the urging of the regional associations, the National Association for Regional Ballet was incorporated as a non-profit organization and chartered under the laws of the State of New York. The original advisors became a board of directors, which continued to act in an advisory, rather than a legislative, capacity. The board was expanded and, most important, each region elected a coordinator to be its representative on the national board. Thus a strong bond between the regions and the board was formed.

The National Association's board existed and still exists (under its successor, Regional Dance America) because the regional associations require and want the services, both practical and artistic, of a national body with interest, experience, and vision. Through its own personal contacts and through its coordinators, the National Association learns of the needs of regional companies - their problems and their aspirations. Because the board's experience is broader, its perspective larger than that of any one regional group, it can guide the way toward solutions and progress.

Since the first festival in Atlanta, and under the guidance of the NARB, the regional ballet movement has gained impetus and has become one of the liveliest of all grass roots, cultural activities. At its beginning there were perhaps thirty-five local or civic companies spread throughout the United States. They existed in great isolation. Today, and in great part due to the NARB and RDA, the number is probably close to three hundred! The national organization has had an enormous impact on dance and its decentralization in this country and certainly shouldered a great deal of the responsibility for the much-talked-about dance boom of the sixties and seventies.

The NARB remained a volunteer organization until 1972 when a service organization grant was obtained from the National Endowment for the Arts. This enabled the board to hire an executive director and an assistant, who opened an office in New York City. Doris Hering was persuaded to relinquish her position at Dance Magazine to take over the directorship.

For the first time, the five regions had a clearing house for information they needed to share with each other, as well as disseminate to others who wished to know about regional dance. The office was also a repository for valuable historical materials concerning their activities and accomplishments. And because the executive director traveled to the regions in spring and fall, artistic and administrative information was constantly being circulated. The executive director also represented the association at meetings and national conferences of other arts organizations and at the National Endowment. For the first time America's regional companies had a unified voice.

One of the principal needs of regional companies is new choreography. The national office saw the annual festival as a rich resource of works to be shared. Using a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Choreography Plan was distributed. Additional grants from the Southern Arts Federation, Pennsylvania Arts Council, New York State Council on the Arts, California Arts Council, Michigan Arts Council, Florida Arts Council and the L. J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation enabled forty-six member companies to obtain quality ballets. Choreographers' fees and transportation were absorbed by the national office.

Other services to members included a loose-leaf Company Handbook supplemented quarterly, the newsletter Dance America, the Directors' Bulletin, the Choreographers' Video Service, a Set and Costume Referral Service, an Artistic Placement Service, and in 1986, assisted by Mellon and Skaggs, a two-week Artistic Directors Seminar was initiated,

In 1977 a Professional Wing was established to service the needs of those companies who were members but who, through artistic growth and expansion, were becoming professional. There were perhaps a dozen NARB companies who made this transition. Tremendous credit and gratitude are due Doris Hering for her years of unwavering devotion, dedication and intelligent guidance to the cause of regional dance in America. The NARB was fortunate to have her at its helm.

The annual festivals are the focal point of the entire regional ballet movement. Without them, it is unlikely that there would be much public knowledge of the scope of regional ballet in this country. With them, there is an ever-increasing awareness of the importance of a movement that for years was growing in isolation. Through performances, master classes, seminars, the adjudication process and networking, the festivals truly serve to raise the standards of those companies and individuals who are open, receptive and hard working. The-festivals are, for both dancers and directors, the season's grand finale!

The Summer Choreography Conferences were first developed in the Northeast Region under the guidance of Josephine Schwarz, artistic director of the (then) Dayton Civic Ballet. They were found to be so successful that, at the insistence of the five regions, the national office, with the assistance of the board, assumed the role of running the conferences, making it a national project. With funding from the NEA as well as other sources, the conferences were successfully presented for fifteen years, generally using the format of two conferences per year in alternate regions. This method of encouraging and raising the standards of choreography, has helped develop many, young choreographers who have gone on to productive careers as free lance choreographers and/or artistic directors. Dancers also find it exciting and helpful in learning to work well with many types of choreographers.

The Conferences continue to function today because the Regions feel so strongly about it. One has been held each season since the transition of the NARB to Regional Dance America in 1987. The regional movement has been, and continues to be, the source of some of America's most meaningful choreographers.

As for the future of the Regional Movement - I still "See America Dancing"! More regional companies have turned professional. Inherent quality, foundation grants, and the readiness of their communities to assume responsibility have made this possible. As time goes on (and artistic development cannot and should not be forced), more of the stronger companies in many parts of the country will become professional. The smaller companies in outlying communities are beginning to feed their dancers into these companies, rather than into the two or three urban centers overcrowded with would-be dancers as in years past. New pre-professional companies are joining the regions through a careful process of consultations and evaluations. There is much that can be done to assist these companies, both professional and pre-professional and it is the intent of the RDA Board to fulfill that mission. Funds must be raised, a national office and a director must be re-established - the RDA Board must get on with the business of guiding and assisting all companies, large and small, professional and pre-professional, to strengthen and grow and fulfill their potential

In closing, another thing must always be kept in mind. The purpose of the regional ballet movement is only partially to produce professional dancers and professional companies. Equally important are its audience-building functions and the outlet it gives to the teenage dancer, who, once out of high school, may never dance another step, but surely will have learned to love dance and will purchase tickets to see it for the rest of his life!

I touched on the unfortunate dissolution of the NARB in 1987, but let me bring you up to date with what is happening nationally. First of all, all five regional associations are continuing to function, are reasonably healthy, have not missed a festival and as noted before, have continued to hold the Choreography Conference annually. As for the National Board, the coordinators and presiding officers of the five regions have continued to meet semi-annually. Feeling that it is important in fact vital, to the welfare of the regions to have contact with each other, a new board was formed in the name of Regional Dance America. It has been incorporated, in the State of Texas and it's tax exempt status. Without a paid staff services to the regions have been necessarily curtailed, however, with the assistance of volunteers, some services are being continued, including the adjudication committee services and other festival communications, support of the annual choreography conference, including scholarships, and most importantly, networking between the five regions. An Advisory Committee of eighteen interested and experienced dance aficionados has been formed and plans are under way for further assistance to the regions, including a reworking of the company handbook.

Regional Dance America was very fortunate to be asked to participate in the International Ballet Competition at Jackson in June, 1990. This invitation by Thalia Mara, Artistic Director of the IBC at Jackson, resulted in a mini national festival for RDA. Through an adjudication process, one company was selected from each of the five regions and an RDA Concert was presented on the single free day of the competition. It was a welcome break in the competition activities and was received with great enthusiasm by the dance world present and with great pride by the RDA members who were in attendance. This also gave RDA the opportunity to have a truly meaningful general membership meeting as more than thirty-five members from all five regions were in attendance