La. Folkloric Ballet to Depict State's History from Genesis

By JOAN TREADWAY

The Louisiana Folkloric Ballet exists now only on paper and in the minds of those who are planning it. But one year from now, it might be born—an extravaganza of dance, music and song, depicting past and current state history.

The idea was conceived by two brothers, Sam Price Jr. and Lionel F. Price of New Orleans, after they saw the famed Ballet Folklorico of Mexico City, and thought it could be translated into a local production.

They formed the Louisiana Folkloric Ballet Inc., in September, 1973, as a moneymaking venture, with Sam as president, and Lionel as producer of the ballet itself. But they are now in the process of turning it into a non-profit company.

Once it becomes non-profit, possibly in a few months, they plan to start soliciting contributions toward a goal of $750,000, which, Lionel said, "would get us to the first performance."

This money will go, first, toward securing contracts of the primary creative people who will put this thing together," Lionel said. Composer-conductor Paul Weston has agreed to write the score, if funds are secured, he said.

Weston was asked to write the music, he said, because of his impressive credentials and particularly because of his composition, "Crescent City," which "captures the moods of the city." But the ballet will be based on the entire state's history, not just on New Orleans', Price stressed, "from the time the French and Spanish were exploring the area until the present."

It will consist of 25 to 30 separate numbers performed within a two-and-one-half hour period, he said. Bienville, founder of New Orleans, Lafitte the pirate, the birth of jazz, Storyville's history and Mardi Gras will all be touched on.

Price said present plans for a tour of about 200 performances of the ballet annually, half of which would be done locally and half on tours across the U.S. and in foreign countries. The ballet would be modified, slightly, each year, he said.

Most of the local performances would be at the New Orleans Theater of the Performing Arts, he said, though some might be scheduled at the Municipal Auditorium and in the superdome. Performances will be held two days a week, with a matinee and night show each day, he said. They would require about 150 people to stage, including 30-45 musicians and about 35 dancers.

"We will use as many local people as musicians and dancers as we can and for other positions as possible," Price said. However, he stressed, "They have to be professionals and of top quality."

The ballet would be the first of its kind in the U.S., Price said he's been told by representatives of the Association of American Dance Composers, and he said the concept has received warm support from state and local officials. Choreographers and lyricists for the ballet—still have to be chosen, Price said. Choreographer Agnes de Mille of "Oklahoma" fame is being considered, as are Academy award winning lyricists, he said.

Price said he, his brother and the board of directors of the company decided recently to make it a non-profit organization because their attempts to get loans from conservative local institutions for a money-making proposition failed.

The only other way to finance a profit venture—selling stocks—would be "too time-consuming," Price said. Also, he said, more doors, including the federal government's, are open to non-profit organizations.

The first lump of money raised will also go toward paying the staff necessary to run the organization, he said. Noting the Mexican ballet is constantly sold out, he said he expected the local ballet to become self-sustaining.

The target date for the first performance here is November, 1975, which would be in time for the event to be part of bicentennial celebrations, he said, "but it all depends on how fast the money can be raised."

Price said he believes the company, once performing, will glean five or six dollars for each dollar put into it annually. If any excess profit is made, it will be used to support other performing arts and charities in Louisiana, he said.

What the ballet will do for the state, Price said, besides provide employment for scores of people, will be to stimulate tourism and, indirectly, bring in new residents and industry.

"It will also teach Louisiana a lot they didn't know about their state, in an entertaining manner," he said.

Two local people, Gaspar J. Stall and William Bertrand, will give Weston assistance in revealing an authentic history, he said.

"New Orleans is one of the few cities of its size that doesn't have a year-round, performing arts attraction, and the ballet would provide this," he said. It is also hoped it would boost the low summertime tourist trade, he said.