Regional ballet offers dancers a chance

Regional ballet is sweeping the country.
Quietly, perhaps, but both dancers and the dance are discovering that the muse doesn’t live only in drafty Manhattan rehearsal halls. Dance is everywhere. And this new, only-in-America cultural phenomenon will descend on Baton Rouge this weekend as the Southwest Regional Ballet Association convenes its 12th annual festival.

Playing host to the 17 performing member companies, three intern companies and almost 600 dancers are the Louisiana Ballet Company and its artistic director Phoebe Brantley, the current president of the Southwest Regional Ballet Association. She couldn’t be happier.

“Well, you know, the whole regional thing is a wonderful development,” she said last week, as planning for the festival was being finalized. “It has changed everything.”

“It has decentralized dance. Before, it was always a matter of going to New York — when I was dancing, it surely was. We still lose a lot of dancers, and we will until we grow. But the success of regional ballet has proven to dancers that they can dance without taking off for New York.”

The National Regional Ballet Association, of which the southwestern group is a member, has spearheaded this development. It now has 100 companies as full members and 300 companies with associate memberships. Brantley said that the association means a lot to both dancers and teachers.

“It is such an advantage for the kids and for me,” she said. “They are exposed to so many good teachers through festival and the programs the association sponsors. And, of course, I learn, which means so much to me as a teacher. The contact with other companies, dancers and teachers enriches your own work.”

As it has in the past, this year’s festival will be an intensive four-day round of classes and performance.

Individual member companies have been judged over the past few months on selections they will present at two gala performances, set for Friday and Saturday in the Centroplex Performing Arts Theater.

Afternoons and mornings will include workshops and classes in ballet, jazz, character, pointe and pas de deux, along with sessions on management and direction of regional ballet companies.

The guest faculty includes Robert Joffrey, founder of the Joffrey Ballet; ballerina Melissa Hayden, formerly of New York City Ballet; Alexander Minz, the great character dancer with American Ballet Theater, and Marina Stavitskaya of the faculty of the New York Conservatory of Dance.

Brantley said that the comprehensive training offered in the annual festival has had a powerful effect on the quality of regional choreography.

“I believe that choreography is the hardest of the arts,” she said.

“You have to move and you have to put that movement on different bodies. And you have to understand how that works. It’s a gift. But not for me. There is a craft to it — and the good ones can learn by studying. And our festivals have done a great deal to encourage young choreographers.”

Among Brantley’s responsibilities as director of the host company has been selecting an adjudicator — someone from a different part of the country — to visit member companies and decide which would perform. This year’s guest judge was Jon Rodriguez of the Dayton (Ohio) Ballet Company.

“It’s his job to visit the companies, watch their class and select a piece to perform,” she said.

“He told me he was amazed at the quality of the training down here. The gala performance is really for the kids — a chance for them to dance. This year, we decided there were enough good companies with enough strong pieces that we would have two galas.”

“The chance to perform for an audience is so important,” she added, “and that, I think, is another benefit of regional ballet. Most serious dancers go to New York at some point for training. But when they stay there, they often don’t get the performing experience. That’s just crucial. Regional ballet presents its dancers with so many opportunities to dance that they are, in many cases, better performers than dancers who have decided to stay in New York.”

Both galas will feature works that showcase the companies to their best advantage. One of the qualifications in the selection is that the work may not be in the repertoire of a major ballet company. So many of the pieces on the gala programs will be original — products, of course, of the success of regional ballet.

Registration for the festival begins Thursday at the Baton Rouge Hilton, which is festival headquarters. Tickets for the gala performances, which are open to the public, are available from the Centroplex box office.