

## Innovative Eugene Ballet Perform in Dhaka

### "Children of the Raven" Evokes the Past Of America's Northwest Coast Indians

The performance of "Children of the Raven", a legendlike story in dance, based on the legends of four Northwest tribes: Haida, Tsimshian (Sim-she-an), Tlingit, and Kwakiutl (Kwa-cue-til).

Archaeological evidence has shown that these peoples inhabited an area that extends from Gray's Harbor in Washington State to the Malaspina Glacier in southeast Alaska (about 1,050 miles) for over 7,000 years. Theories have suggested that these tribes may be of Asiatic or Pacific Islander origin. At one time, over 75,000 native people lived in the region, but the arrival of Europeans and the introduction of smallpox killed over 60% of the population.

The area in which these tribes lived was heavily wooded with cedar, fir, and spruce trees that provided clothing, transportation, and shelter. Because of dense forests, travel was most often by boat, usually cedar canoes. Tribal members even ventured into the ocean in nine-man, twenty-foot cedar canoes to hunt whales. Food was plentiful in the rivers and ocean, consisting mostly of salmon and other seafood, supplemented by occasional hunting of animals. Food was so abundant that there was no need to cultivate crops, or, like the Plains Indians, to lead a nomadic existence following herds of buffalo.

Shelter was also provided by the forest. Cedar trees were cut with stone tools and fashioned into lodges supported by large, decorated house poles. The interior and exterior of these houses were painted and carved with tribal or clan symbols. Totem poles often framed the dwellings.

Cedar, pounded and softened in water, and woven to fashion clothing, gave them excellent protection from the common Northwest rain. Conical hats were made of spruce roots and cedar bark to keep the rain off during daily activities like fishing or food gathering. These hats also had clan symbols painted on them. Northwest Coast Indians commonly wore nothing on their feet or legs, which attests to their hardiness, particularly on the Alaskan coast where the waters are frigid and the winters cold. Decorated hides were used by the tribes for ceremonial purposes and carried crest of different clans and family groups.

Coast Indians' beliefs included a respect for all living things. All sea and land creatures were considered "human" and consequently to have an "inner spirit" or soul. That spirit was able to take human form, making animals "transformers", that is, able to communicate directly with the tribal people, often through the spiritual leaders of the tribe. These leaders used costumes representing the spirit of an animal to cure physical and spiritual ills.

Over a period of hundreds of years, Coast Indian societies expanded throughout the Northwest. With the desire to excel and to gain possessions and prestige, a need to communicate that attainment

arose. A crest system (like the European coat of arms or heraldry system) solved the problem. Crests were chosen to define family ties, as well as to represent personal mysticism. Guardian spirits were selected that incorporated certain characteristics that a group felt suited it. The guardian spirits were bear, beaver, dogfish, eagle, frog, hawk, mountain goat, raven and wolf. These became the personal identifications of the chiefs who owned the totem poles.

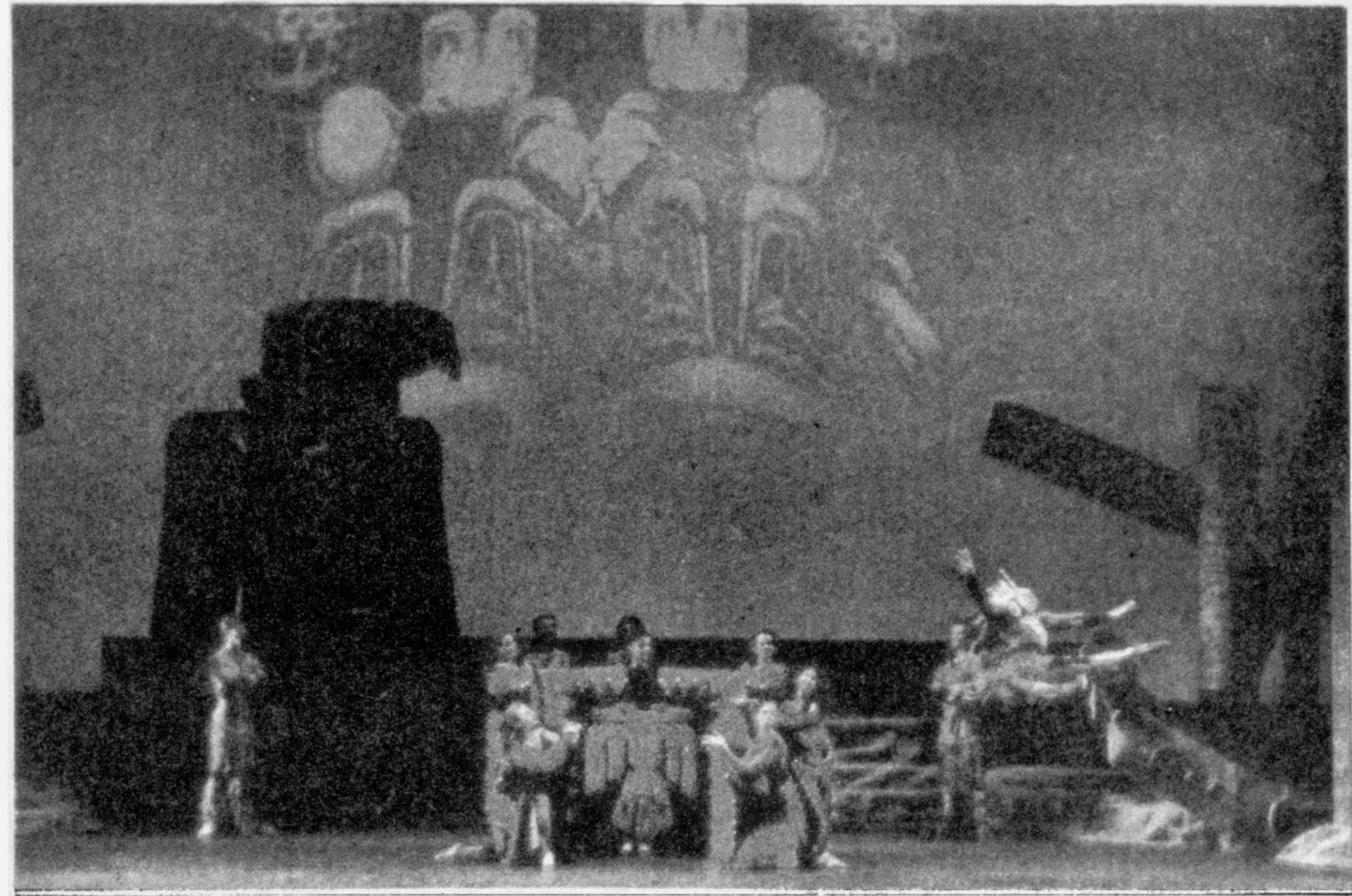
Totem poles are posts, poles, or pillars that are carved and painted with symbols or crests and placed in front of dwellings. The totem pole was a signboard, genealogical record, or memorial which would identify a man of distinction within his family, his clan, and occasionally his tribe. Symbols on the totem pole were substitutes for the printed word, as none of the tribes' languages were written. These tribes did not worship the poles, but used them to communicate information. There were memorial poles, grave figures, house posts, and welcoming poles. Poles often included the crests of both sides of the family. Often the complete stories of the poles have died with those who constructed them, but a few remain in historical records.

A special "potlatch" would often take place at the erecting of a significant memorial pole. Potlatch was a time of feasting, with guests often numbering a hundred or more. Old friendships were renewed and new friends made, ancient tales were recounted, people gambled, watched dramatic performances, and continued to feast. This event was also an opportunity to make alliances and arrange marriages. A few potlatches still take place today for special events, but on a much smaller scale.

The Northwest Indians were great storytellers. During the long rainy winter, tales would be told about Raven, Wolf, and Bear, along with stories of the supernatural. Special dances and chants were performed for these events with masks and costumes devised for the characters.

The Eugene Ballet's "Children of the Raven" does not try to copy Indian dance or music, but is an impressionistic approach to their culture using ballet and modern dance techniques to tell the stories, which are narrated by Native American storyteller Ed Edmo. Evocative music, composed by Bern Herbolzheimer, uses wind and percussion instruments such as Northwest Indian music uses these sounds. Masks designed by Lynn Bowers capture the spirit of tribal masks, but using modern, lightweight materials. Each of the four parts of the dance shows how a crest was adopted by a certain tribe and how it came to be represented on the totem pole. Raven, Wolf, Beaver, and Bear legends are performed, with a celebratory potlatch-style final concluding the performance.

—USIS



THE eight dancers of the Eugene Ballet Company (EBC) represent a cross section of America, hailing from six states and Mexico. Like most American dancers, they have criss-crossed the country, performing with ballet companies, large and small — from the heartland states of Iowa and Indiana to the big city ballets of New York and Chicago.

What unites them is their extensive training in the universal language of classical ballet and modern dance. For example, five of the dancers have performed in the holiday classic ballet, "The Nutcracker", but Frank Affrunti performed it in Minnesota. Verna Carter, Juan Carlos Diaz-Velez and Jennifer McNamara in Oregon and Jairus Owens in Mississippi!

Of the four men and four women dancers, Ms Carter's association with Eugene, Oregon, the city where EBC resides, is probably the longest. She began her dance training there with the EBC's director, Toni Pimble, at the age of 10. Mr. Diaz-Velez, of Guadalajara, Mexico has danced with EBC since 1989, and Ms. McNamara, from New York, since 1990. All three have performed many leading roles for EBC.

## Of the Dancers

Collectively, the dancers are the product of dance training at over 19 dance schools, across the United States and Mexico. Dancer Brett Mills alone has trained with five different companies in four states. All the dancers must continue their training with daily rehearsals of up to four hours, even during their strenuous international tour. Some have stepped up to teach dance as well. Ms

McNamara spent the summer of 1994 as a counselor at the DanceAspen Festival in Colorado.

Dancers may also hope their skills and showcase their talents by competing in international competitions. Julie Grooters performed roles from four classical ballets in the 1990 Fourth USA International Ballets Competition in Jackson,

Mississippi. Prior to this multi-country tour, Verna Carter had the opportunity to perform outside the US as a member of the American Ballet Company in Scotland in 1991. Matthew Hope, of Boise, Idaho performed with Hubbard Street Dance Chicago in Europe, Singapore and Canada. Mr. Diaz-Velez's international credentials are obvious. However, Dhaka takes the prize for being the farthest point from Eugene, Oregon that most of these dancers, have visited.



(L-R, top row) Jairus Owens, Jennifer McNamara, Mathew Hope, and Britt Mills and (L-R, bottom row) Julie Grooters, Frank Affrunti, Verna Carter and Carlos Diaz-Velez.

## The Lure of Ancient Indian Legends

IN the latest entertainment in town, arranged by USIS, there was no flourish of pink ballet slippers, romantic stage props or the heroine pining for her lover. In "Children of the Raven", performed by the Eugene Ballet Company at the Osmani Memorial Hall, one found a clever interweaving of five Northwest Red Indian legends of birds, animals and people, which existed before the European hunters invaded the serenity of the native tribes. The dance and the music did not attempt to copy the originals but rather conveyed impressions of the subjects.

There was the lore of the raven, who was full of mischief, and stole light from its hiding place and flung it across the sky, bringing daylight. After the great flood he teased humans to leave the water and people the earth. The special relationship of the beaver with the Red Indian was brought out in the story of the hunter and his wife. One day he went away to the woods for work and came back to find his wife missing and later transformed into a beaver.

The story of the chief's daughter who fell in love with

### A Report by Fayza Haq

the bear was brought in with subtlety and savvy. Although the bear was eventually killed the children lived on to be great warriors. The legend of the pet wolf who fed the tribe with caribou meat was also brought in, much to the delight of the viewers, who revelled in the ingenuity of the choreographer and the drive, skill, and enthusiasm of the dancers. The final dance of the arrival of guests and giving of gifts in "Potlatch" had remarkable finesse that went down with the spellbound audience.

The "Children of the Raven" was humorous, innovative and very new for ballet viewers, who do not get a healthy measure of viewing dances in Dhaka. Dance, music and drama lovers have to be satisfied with dance from India and Sri Lanka at best. The performers kept in mind the details and authenticity of Pacific Northwest Indian folklore.

The tales recaptured the stories of three tribes and how the people flourished. The steps, which were originally classical, used twentieth century ingenuity to denote elements such as the beaver's passion for the water and the bear's overwhelming personality. The symbolically impressive dances also rendered well the mischief of the raven peopling the earth and their huddling together before the wolf rescued them. The expanses of water, sky and snow covered ground were all presented on a single stage, within a matter of minutes. Among the many admirable elements of the dances was economy of stage props, costume and make-up.

The rhythm of the dances kept in tune to the narration on stage by Ed Edmo, wrapped as he was in his boyant orange and black blanket. The effect of the story telling was moving and gracious. It added strength and dignity to the ballet per-

formance. The tales on stage were like ancient legends anywhere in the world — in China, Scandinavia or in Iran. These legends celebrated the world of animals and people, uniting the past with the present.

A great deal of the excellence of the ballet performance was due to the artistic director, Toni Pimble, who was a student at the Royal Elmhurst School of Ballet and Dramatic Arts and at the Royal Academy of Dancing, London. Since becoming artistic director and resident choreographer of the Eugene Ballet, Ms Pimble has choreographed over 40 works for the company. Her works have brought her fellowships including two Oregon Arts Commission Artist Fellowship awards. Recently she choreographed, "May Dances", "Columba Aspetix", "Two's Company" and "Common Ground". With Ms. Pimble's guidance the Eugene Ballet Company has toured ten western states, Canada, Taiwan and other international destinations.

A fair measure of the success is also due to Lloyd Sobel, the technical/lighting director who has worked for highly successful productions such as "Swan Lake", "Don Quixote" and "Giselle". He has worked for many EBC productions such as "The Nutcracker", "The Sleeping Beauty" and the "Skinwalkers".

The company also boasts of the poet and actor Ed Edmo, whose poetry has appeared in Blue Cloud Press and in Dell releases. He deals intensively with native American cultures, histories and legends.

Among the main performers there was Frank Affrunti who began his formal training at the age of 13, and has been the principal dancer with Jeffrey Concert Group, Ballet Iowa, Tulsa Ballet Theatre,

Ballet South and American Folk Ballet. He has performed in ballets like "Swan Lake", "The Sleeping Beauty" and "Nutcracker". This is his second season with the Eugene Ballet Company.

The cast included Verna Carter, who began at the age of ten. She has been the Sugar Plum Fairy in "The Nutcracker", Emily in "Our Town", Odette/Odile in "Swan Lake" and has danced the title role of "Alice in Wonderland". She played the part of the wife and one of the Haida people in "Children of the Raven".

Juan Carlos Diaz-Velez, who was the principal dancer with Spokane Ballet before copying to EBC took the role of one of the brothers in "The Bear" and as one of the "Haida People". He has played leading roles in "Nutcracker", "Dracula", "Beauty and the Beast" and "Romeo and Juliet".

Julie Grooters who has a role in both "The Beaver" and "The Bear" has been trained at Hartford Ballet and two other schools. She has been a soloist with Ballet Iowa and Alabama Ballet. She has played important roles in "Giselle", "Swan Lake", "La Bayadere" and "Symfonia".

Matthew Hope, who had roles in "The Haida People" and "House Poles", began his training while at high school. He has danced for various companies such as Idaho Dance Theatre and Hubbard Street Dance, Chicago. He has appeared in performances in Europe, Canada and Singapore.

Since Toni Pimble and her husband Riley Grannan founded the ballet company in '79, the Eugene Ballet Company has become a lucrative business with dancers casting a magic spell on their viewers — whether they be performing overseas or at home. The Dhaka viewers, meanwhile, lapped up the enthusiasm and elegance of the young performers.

## Behind the Stage

THE Eugene Ballet Company, arrived in Dhaka on July 23 on its South Asia and Middle East tour to present performances and educational seminars designed to promote interaction between dancers and the audience.

The group is traveling under the auspices of the US Information Agency's (USIA) Arts America Programme. The company began its tour on July 6 with a workshop in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and then went to India. From Bangladesh, it goes to Syria, Jordan, and Tunisia.

Eugene, Oregon, the company's home city, is a university city of 112,000 located in the Pacific Northwest. Founded in 1978 as the offshoot of a dance training school, by 1980 the Eugene Ballet, under the leadership of its British-born artistic director, Toni Pimble, had

grown quickly. It had evolved into a fully professional ballet company and begun receiving funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. The 20-member company now gives more than 100 performances throughout 11 western states each year. The Eugene Ballet is also noted for imaginative, educational programmes in dance technique, choreography, mime, sports medicine and technical theatre. It provides dance appreciation and demonstrations for school children, dance teachers and the general public.

The company's repertoire is a mixture of such classics as "Romeo and Juliet" and contemporary works created by Toni Pimble. Every December, the Company tours British Columbia to perform the "Nutcracker" Ballet, the traditional crowd-pleaser and box-office attraction presented during the

Christmas holiday season by many American dance companies. The Eugene Ballet has also undertaken three tours to Taiwan, where they performed to outstanding critical and audience acclaim.

"Two's Company" will be one of the works featured on the upcoming tour. In an interview with USIA, Pimble explained that South Asian and Middle Eastern audiences can look forward to "a diverse programme with something for everybody. People will be exposed to lot of different forms of dance: Jazz, lyrical, and modern," she said.

The ballet will be narrated by Ed Edmo, a native, American actor, teacher, traditional storyteller and author, whose works have been published in the US and abroad. Joining Pimble and Edmo on the tour is Lloyd Sobel, lighting and technical manager of the company.



All photographs: USIS

