

The Washington Ballet's 10 Year Commemorative Book: Wonderland

Design Army is a firm believer in creative before cash. We seek nothing less than excellence for our clients regardless of budgets. It is that philosophy which drove Wonderland, our most recent project with the Washington Ballet (TWB). Design Army has been the agency of record for TWB for six years – a period spanning good times and the current tough economic times. Despite financial hurdles, Wonderland helped make TWB the premier dance company on the East Coast, as well as elevate our design to an artistic level never before seen in Washington, D.C.

In 2010, The Washington Ballet will celebrate the 10th anniversary of artistic director Septime Webre's debut at the company. Septime's vision has helped shape TWB and we've had the pleasure to work with him and his team on numerous outreach projects and fundraisers over the past six years. Despite the long relationship, the work has never gotten stale over time; in fact, it has steadily pushed the creative envelope. The commemorative book Wonderland represents the culmination of our creative partnership.

Eighteen months ago we approached TWB to start planning for their 10-year anniversary. At that time, we wanted to let TWB know that Design Army was more than a creative vendor; we were also an enthusiastic supporter. Accordingly, we proposed to design, develop, produce and market a fundraiser if TWB could help coordinate dancers and cover a portion the print costs. Initially the idea was to do something basic and easy, like a calendar or note cards. But Design Army - and Septime - wanted more. We had seen TWB miss out on great opportunities over the years due to lack of funds, and it was time to capitalize on their talents and resources. We were poised to dive into uncharted creative waters and TWB was ready to take the leap with us.

After several meetings and brainstorming sessions, Design Army pitched something extraordinary - a coffee table book that would capture top dollars from their current supporters as well as generate a large-scale media buzz. We were confident both goals would be achieved because what we proposed had never been done before in the city - not by a ballet company, not by a notable photographer, not by a fashion magazine, and definitely not by any design agency. Indeed, this would be a first. After many discussions with TWB and outlining a few design concepts, we finally got them on board to go all in. Wonderland started to take shape.

The first step was assembling the perfect team. We were fortunate to be able to bring on the talented Cade Martin to handle all the photography. Cade shared our enthusiasm for the project's potential and was committed to making our creative vision a reality. In fact, he was so passionate about the project that he agreed to work pro bono. We set out in the early spring of 2008 to start scouting photo locations throughout Washington, D.C. Rather than typical urban landmarks, we sought out the more obscure and artistic portions of the city – enticing locations that were vaguely recognizable but impossible to place exactly. We ventured to every corner of the district looking for those perfect "wonderland" spots, and with the help of Cade Martin, we soon found what we were looking for.

After pinpointing locations, Design Army and Cade Martin Photography regrouped with the ballet to establish some production parameters. Since the book would commemorate Septime's 10 years at TWB, we decided to highlight the artistic director's 10 favorite performances from the past decade. This was no easy task: we were given a list of 30 performances to work from. We assessed each performance based on the costumes, amount of dancers, and the overall theme to see which ones were best suited to the locations we had in mind.

The scouting and performance selection alone was a three-month process that took us in to the early summer of 2008. At that point we had just finalized Septime's ten favorite performances and started to conceptualize all of the photography that would fill the pages. Once we had all this material gathered, we met with Septime and others to review the master plan. Everyone loved it – and as the creative momentum accelerated, so did the project's scope. What had started as a 48-page book soon grew to 64 pages, then finally to 84 pages. Everyone realized how special this project was going to be and we were ready to go the extra mile to make it happen.

But creative hurdles remained. We still needed to establish just the right concept - something to tie the very diverse collection of performances in to a single cohesive story. In the end, we chose a classic story that transcended time, place and imagination: Alice in Wonderland. The text was a perfect fit – the spectacle of the images, the transitions of the rhymes and the whimsy of the one-liners were all that we needed to intertwine the verbal and visual elements so that the readers could make all the connections. The perfect fusion of theme and aesthetics took Wonderland to the next level. That it what makes good design great.

By early fall of 2008 we had locations locked down; Cade had all permits pulled, RVs lined up, and storage unit filled with props. His team ready to go. We also had determined the book's story line - but did not share it with the ballet just yet. We wanted the dancers to perform their routines, characters and artistic dances true to the original scores – but their stage would be unlike anything they had ever seen. For a month we continued to visit locations, check lighting at different times of the day, and started to assemble and build props for every shot we had planned.

For five weekends we took the entire cast of dancers, truck rentals, costumes, light crews, and caterers all over the nation's capital. The locations pleasantly surprised many of the dancers as they were not city clichés; rather they were some of the most artistic and unknown places we could find. We visited the Old Soldiers Home, the old MacMillan Filtration Plant, The National Arboretum, the old Wonder Bread Factory in Shaw, The Meridian Center, Café Napoleon, and Pennsylvania Avenue.

I recall the first day of the shoot vividly. It was 5:45 a.m. We had closed down Pennsylvania Ave and were starting to set up some lights. One by one the dancers started to arrive to the location, bewildered by the small army of trucks, RV's, equipment, props, and other oddities on the street. I can still see the confused but energized look on the dancers' faces as they wondered what in the world was going on. Septime arrived soon after and his face registered the same bemused reaction. At 7:00 a.m. it was time to start

shooting. We powered up all the lights, placed the VW bug, activated the fog-machines, fluffed the tutus, and told the police to hold traffic. The next 45 minutes flew by in the blink of an eye: we shot a variety of poses, dancer combinations, leaps, points and countless improvised scenes before the police released traffic. Just as quickly as we set up, we were tearing down, packing the gear, loading the cars and cabs and heading to the next location. After that very first day, we knew that the Wonderland book would be something special.

We would repeat this surreal yet well choreographed process multiple times as we moved from site to site - each shot getting more complex, more artistic and more creative. The dozens of images we captured at seven locations exceeded all our expectations – striking and sophisticated, impulsive and daring. The photographs were like nothing we had ever seen.

We spent the next year pulling test proofs, tweaking colors and adjusting layouts - perfecting the images and story as best we could. We scoured the ballet's archives for some complementary photos to include in the back of the book to accompany personal thoughts of the dancers. But, as the project's long-awaited completion was finally in sight, we faced daunting logistical obstacles. After expending so much time and energy, how would we get the book printed and produced within the budget? After countless calls to vendors, we were able to secure all the paper from an in-kind donation from Neenah Papers, and Worth Higgins and Associates in Richmond offered to print the book at a reduced cost. The next step was fine-tuning quantities and budgets. After one last look at color proofs and a quick copy check, the plates were made and a three-day press inspection the project was near the end. After nearly a year and a half of creative inspiration and determined collaboration, Wonderland was finally born.

The first shipment of Wonderland arrived just in time for the ballet's October 15 season opening. The limited edition book (only 2,000 books were printed) has not only received rave reviews, it has cast the Washington Ballet in a new light, reinforcing the high caliber of its soaring performances and bolstering its image in the nation's capital. Wonderland represents a true elevation of creativity in D.C. and Design Army is certain that it will prove to be a great fundraiser - and brand-raiser - for the ballet in 2010 and beyond.