

# Emanuel Wants Chicago to Be 'Heartbeat of Dance'

By CARYN ROUSSEAU Associated Press

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Rahm Emanuel is bringing his longtime passion for dance to his new job as Chicago mayor.

"I want Chicago to be one of the cities where dance is one of its great art forms," Emanuel said in an interview with The Associated Press this week, the same week as the city's fifth annual Chicago Dancing Festival, which ends Saturday.

Emanuel, a former dancer, was 17 when he was offered a scholarship to study at Chicago's renowned Joffrey Ballet. He danced in at least one show at his alma mater, Sarah Lawrence College. Today, he is honorary chairman of the Joffrey Ballet board of directors.

That resume gives Emanuel, 51, a unique perspective among mayors of a major American city that boasts a scene with everything from larger dance companies to smaller ethnic dance groups.

"What's going to bring attention is the talent and skill of the dancers," Emanuel said. "The only thing I have to contribute is that it's not just another art form for me, given my background."

In June, Emanuel spoke to the conference of the national organization for professional dance, Dance/USA, in Chicago. He told the attendees that Chicago "will be the heartbeat of dance for the entire country."

Chicago has everything it needs to become a dance center, Emanuel said, including an eager audience, performance and rehearsal spaces, talented choreographers, dancers and stagehands.

Nationally, the dance community sees Chicago as an active and important scene, said Amy Fitterer, Dance/USA's executive director, with a range of companies that specialize in ballet, modern, contemporary, jazz and percussive dance.

She calls Chicago a "hot spot" where emerging dancers and choreographers are nurtured.

"Having Rahm Emanuel speak up so much for dance is great not just for Chicago, but great for dance and our country," Fitterer said. "It's inspiring to hear from a major political figure that they recognize the intrinsic value of dance."

Emanuel says he's "an audience goer and a reader of reviews" and has an appreciation for the art form.

The mayor's excitement for dance is very much in Emanuel's present, not just his past, said Jay Franke, director of the Chicago Dancing Festival, which brings dance companies from around the country to Chicago for free performances every August.

"In the last few months I received a few emails from Mayor Emanuel saying, 'Have you considered the San Francisco Ballet for this year's performance?'" Franke said. "He's just very much in the know of what's going on in the dance world."

Over the last four years Chicago has seen growth and appreciation for dance, said Ashley Wheeler, artistic director at the Joffrey Ballet.

"There are a lot of people in this city who are embracing it," said Wheeler, who danced all over the world before coming to Chicago in 2007. "Chicago, when I compare it to some other cities, it is a major



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city and I think it is becoming a very comparable city for the arts and for dance."

According to Dance/USA, Chicago has about 26 nonprofit, professional dance companies with budgets just under or more than \$100,000 annually and three companies with budgets of more than \$1 million a year.

In New York, there are 90 companies with budgets just under or more than \$100,000 annually and 22 companies with budgets of more than \$1 million a year.

This doesn't faze Emanuel, whose ideas for dance in the city extend to bringing the art into neighborhoods.

"Chicago's climbing in the space," he said. "Yes, we have three, but they don't have what we have: a community that wants to come together and build."

Leaders in Chicago's dance community say it's Emanuel's high-profile status that can help launch the city's reputation as a center for the art form.

"It's easy to say, 'Wow if Mayor Emanuel loves ballet then maybe I should go take a look,'" Wheater said.

Gustavo Ramirez Sansano, artistic director of the Latino company Luna Negra Dance Theater in Chicago, says the mayor "is in one of the positions that actually can really help put this art in the place it should be."

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