

HOUSTON BALLET

STANTON WELCH - ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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CONTACT: SHAUNA TYSOR
KIM ESPINOSA
713 535 3226

HOUSTON BALLET LAUNCHES ITS 40TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON WITH THE EPIC LOVE STORY *MANON*

**Performances Highlight Choreographer Kenneth MacMillan's
Key Role in Houston Ballet's History**

Principals Amy Fote and Melody Herrera Debut In Title Role

Houston, Texas – From September 10 – 20, 2009, Houston Ballet launches its 40th anniversary season with a revival of the epic love story **Manon**, choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan and featuring scenery and costumes by the acclaimed British designer Peter Farmer. Houston Ballet will give six performances of **Manon** at Wortham Theater Center in downtown Houston. Tickets may be purchased by calling 713 227 2787 or by visiting www.houstonballet.org.

Launching Houston Ballet's 40th anniversary season with **Manon** is an acknowledgment of the key role that Sir Kenneth played in Houston Ballet's history and his influence on Houston Ballet's repertoire during his time as the company's artistic associate from 1989 until his untimely death in 1992. During this period, Houston Ballet took five of his works into its repertoire: the one-act ballets **Song of the Earth**, **Gloria**, **Elite Syncopations**, and **Solitaire**; and the full-length, **Manon**. These performances will also commemorate Sir Kenneth's upcoming eightieth birthday; he was born on December 11, 1929 in Dunfermline, Scotland.

Houston Ballet has become the leading exponent of MacMillan's works in America. Sir Kenneth's widow, Lady MacMillan, who oversees the staging of MacMillan's work throughout the world, has served as a member of the national committee of the board of Houston Ballet Foundation since the mid 1990s.

Based on the famous eighteenth century French novel *Manon Lescaut* (1731) by Abbé Prévost, the ballet depicts the romantic adventures of the irresistibly beautiful Manon and her one true

love, the impoverished student Des Grieux, from the demi monde of Paris to the bayous of Louisiana. Sir Kenneth has created a brilliant dance drama that explores the relationship between love, sex, and the corrupting power of money. The passion and danger of **Manon's** central pas de deux have proven irresistible to audiences around the world and have made it one of the most popular full-length ballets of the second half of the twentieth century.

MacMillan commented that he created **Manon** because "The characters fascinate me. You have a sixteen-year-old heroine who is beautiful and totally amoral, and a hero who is corrupted by her and becomes a cheat, a liar, and a murderer. Not exactly your conventional ballet plot, is it?"

Houston Ballet's performances of **Manon** are generously underwritten by The Wortham Foundation, Inc. and Buick LaCrosse.

Houston Ballet:

Emerging as a Powerhouse Company Over the Last Four Decades

Houston Ballet's performances of **Manon** are an ideal way to showcase how the company has grown over the last four decades, developing into a superb company of dancer/actors capable of performing theatrically demanding, large-scale narrative ballets that are classics of the international repertoire.

On February 17, 1969, a troupe of 16 young dancers made its stage debut at Sam Houston State Teacher's College in Huntsville, Texas. Since that time, Houston Ballet has evolved into a company of 53 dancers with a budget of over \$20 million, a state-of-the-art performance space built especially for the company, Wortham Theater Center, and an endowment of just under \$46 million (as of July 31, 2009), making it America's fourth largest ballet company. Under the administrative leadership of managing director C.C. Conner since 1995, the company has maintained an enviable financial position, emerging as one of the only Houston performing arts organizations to maintain a balanced budget for the last decade.

Houston Ballet has toured extensively both nationally and internationally. Over the last decade, the company has appeared in London at Sadler's Wells, at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, in six cities in Spain, in Montreal, at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in New York at City

Center, and in cities large and small across the United States. Houston Ballet has emerged as a leader in the expensive, labor-intensive task of nurturing the creation and development of new full-length narrative ballets. The company has also commissioned new one-act ballets from some of the world's most respected choreographers, including Julia Adam, Christopher Bruce, James Kudelka, Trey McIntyre, Paul Taylor, Glen Tetley, Natalie Weir, and Lila York.

Writing in *The Financial Times* on March 6, 2006, dance critic Hilary Ostlere praised Houston Ballet as "a strong, reinvigorated company whose male contingent is particularly impressive, a well-drilled corps and an enviable selection of soloists and principals." *Dance Europe* editor Emma Manning observed of the company in November 2004, "One of the first things that hits you about this company is the technical strengths not just of the principals, but throughout the ranks. Watching artistic director Stanton Welch take class on a Sunday morning before a matinee, one could not help but marvel at the multiple turns tossed off by the young women in the corps....The three new works shown in this program will be followed by no fewer than four more Houston premieres. Can any other major ballet company in the world match that?"

Four Interpretations of the Seductive Temptress

MacMillan created **Manon** in 1974 for England's The Royal Ballet. Since its premiere, **Manon** has received critical acclaim in performances by Paris Opera Ballet, Vienna State Opera Ballet, The Australian Ballet, English National Ballet and The National Ballet of Canada. Houston Ballet first performed **Manon** in 1994, and revived the work in 1998 and in 2002. Houston Ballet and American Ballet Theatre are the only American companies that perform the work.

"Dancing the role of Manon has become a rite of passage for dancers, like performing the title role of Odette/Odile in **Swan Lake**. There are so many wonderful roles to dance in the work and it showcases how MacMillan kept classical ballet alive, by taking it in a new direction," says Mr. Welch, who himself performed the leading male role of Des Grieux in **Manon** while a young dancer with The Australian Ballet in the early 1990s.

Houston Ballet Principal Dancers Amy Fote and Melody Herrera will make their role debuts as the young heroine in **Manon**. Returning to the title role of Manon are principal dancers Mireille Hassenboehler and Sara Webb, who first performed the role in 2002.

Amy Fote joined Houston Ballet in 2005 as a first soloist and was quickly promoted to principal in 2006. Reviewing her performance in the title role of Stanton Welch's **Cinderella** in March 2008, Molly Glentzer of the *Houston Chronicle* praised Ms. Fote as "a little dynamo of exuberant sweetness". Ms. Fote has distinguished herself in numerous leading roles including Cio-Cio San in Stanton Welch's **Madame Butterfly**, Odette/Odile in Mr. Welch's **Swan Lake**, Kitri in Ben Stevenson's **Don Quixote**, and Tatiana in John Cranko's **Onegin**.

Melody Herrera joined Houston Ballet in 2001 and was promoted to principal in 2008. That same year artistic director Stanton Welch created one of the lead roles in his one act ballet **The Core**, set to the music of George Gershwin, and the role of spring in **The Four Seasons** on Ms. Herrera. In her review of **Cinderella**, Molly Glentzer, *Houston Chronicle* Lifestyle Editor and Arts Critic observed, "Lyricality can't be taught...it comes from the soul. Melody Herrera had this down perfectly and brought such exceptional delicacy to her dancing, the whole production had a powerfully tender appeal." Her repertoire includes the leading roles of Olga and Tatiana in John Cranko's **Onegin**, Odette/Odile in Stanton Welch's **Swan Lake**, Swanilda in Ben Stevenson's **Coppelia**. Most recently, she created the title role in Mr. Welch's world premiere of **Marie**, a full-length ballet inspired by the life of Marie Antoinette.

Mireille Hassenboehler joined Houston Ballet in 1992 and was promoted to principal in 2000. In 2005 Ms. Hassenboehler won the *Houston Press* Best Ballet Dancer award and that same year graced the cover of *Pointe Magazine's* February issue. Reviewing the opening night of **Giselle** in 2005, *Houston Press* critic Marene Gustin praised Ms. Hassenboehler's "stellar performance as the innocent village girl whose taste of first love goes bad when her sweetheart turns out to be royalty -- engaged royalty, no less. Not only does Hassenboehler have the long, delicate limbs and technique needed to portray Giselle's girlish dancing, she also has the acting chops to transform, without chewing the scenery, into a deranged, heartsick woman whose frantic dancing causes her weak heart to give out. In Act II, when she becomes a Wili -- which is a ghostly spirit of a wronged woman, dead before her wedding and doomed to dance men to death -- she is ethereal and floating, yet strong in her resolve to save Albrecht from his doom. Giselle is one of

the most coveted roles in ballet, and Hassenboehler holds up well against those who have danced before her.” Ms. Hassenboehler’s classical repertoire includes the title roles in **Giselle**, **The Firebird**, and **Manon** and the ballerina role in Harold Lander’s **Etudes**. In 2006, she created the roles of Odette/Odile in Stanton Welch’s new staging of **Swan Lake** for Houston Ballet.

Sara Webb joined Houston Ballet in 1997 and was promoted to principal in 2003. *Houston Chronicle* critic Molly Glentzer calls Ms. Webb "a ballerina who dances from the soul, bleeding musicality, technical virtuosity, speed, fearlessness and spunk through her gracefully arched feet and liquid arms. Her lightness of being is so palpable, she seems to float even when she's standing; and when a partner lifts her, you almost wonder if she's attached to flying wires." In 2002, Trey McIntyre created the role of Wendy for her in **Peter Pan**, and in 2003 the role of Thumbelina in **The Shadow** on Ms. Webb. She has also been featured in such leading roles as Aurora in **The Sleeping Beauty**, Juliet in **Romeo and Juliet** and in the title role of Stanton Welch’s **Madame Butterfly**.

Sir Kenneth MacMillan: Pushing Back the Frontiers of Ballet

Hailed by *The New York Times* as “one of the century’s great choreographers” (September 12, 1993), Sir Kenneth MacMillan was born in Dunfermline, Scotland in 1929. His strength of purpose can be traced back to the very beginning of his career when he read an advertisement announcing that scholarships for boys were available at the Sadler’s Wells (now Royal) Ballet School, where he completed his dance training and in 1946 became a founding member of the Sadler’s Wells Theatre Ballet, a new company formed by Ninette de Valois. In 1966, MacMillan received an invitation to direct the ballet company at the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin. Encouraged to accept by Dame Ninette, he took over the company and staged his own productions of **The Sleeping Beauty** and **Swan Lake**. He also created the one-act ballet **Anastasia** which was subsequently to become the third act of his full-length **Anastasia**.

Sir Kenneth had proved himself as the natural successor to Sir Frederick Ashton as director of The Royal Ballet, a post he assumed (at first in association with John Field) at the beginning of the 1970-1971 season and held until 1977, when he was appointed the company's resident choreographer. He received his knighthood in 1993.

MacMillan, along with Ashton, has been hailed as one of the greatest choreographers of full-length ballets of the twentieth century. Mary Clarke, editor of *The Dancing Times* of London has observed, "It is no exaggeration to say that Kenneth MacMillan, through his choreography and through his choice of subject matter, pushed back the frontiers of ballet. Other choreographers before him explored human relationships but none ventured so bravely and so widely into complex and often tragic situations, with some characters culled from literature, some from his own imagination and some from real life."

The Story of Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*

Manon is set in eighteenth century France, and opens in the courtyard of an inn near Paris. In the first scene the audience is introduced to several characters who play key roles throughout the ballet. The beautiful Manon arrives in a coach, on her way to a convent. She is to meet her brother Lescaut, a young adventurer with a fondness for drink, women, and gambling. During her journey, Manon has attracted the attention of a rich older gentleman. A rich man of the world, Monsieur G.M., also has his eye on Manon, and he speaks to Lescaut about engaging Manon as his mistress. Des Grieux, a young divinity student at the inn, is struck by Manon's beauty, and falls in love with her, persuading her to elope with him.

In the second scene of the ballet, Manon and Des Grieux dance their love for each other in a pas de deux at Des Grieux's lodgings in Paris. Des Grieux leaves briefly to mail a letter to his father. Lescaut arrives with Monsieur G.M., who brings Manon jewels and opulent clothes to lure her into becoming his mistress. Enchanted by the vistas of wealth that she can imagine, Manon stifles her regret at leaving Des Grieux, her first love, in the consoling touch of fur and jewels. She and Monsieur G.M. depart. Lescaut awaits Des Grieux's return to convince him that there will be a huge financial reward if Manon remains with Monsieur G.M.

The second act of the ballet unfolds in a private house in Paris, where the proprietress madame is pairing her courtesans off with various gentlemen. Lescaut, already drunk, enters with Des Grieux just in time to witness the arrival of Manon, magnificently dressed in a sumptuous gown, on the arm of Monsieur G.M. Manon is the envy of every man present at the party. Des Grieux takes her aside, and reminds her of his love for her. At first unmoved by his pleas, Manon eventually relents, telling Des Grieux that she will run away with him if he can win a great deal

of money from Monsieur G.M. at a game of cards. She supplies him with the cards that will enable him to win by cheating.

The third act of the ballet follows the disgraced Manon to New Orleans as she and Des Grieux pursue their romantic destiny to its ultimate conclusion in the bayous of Louisiana.

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HOUSTON BALLET
MANON
FACT SHEET

WHAT: MANON

Music by Jules Massenet (1842 - 1912)
Orchestrated and arranged by Leighton Lucas,
with the collaboration of Hilda Gaunt
Choreography by Sir Kenneth MacMillan
Designs by Peter Farmer
Lighting by Christina R. Giannelli

Generously sponsored by:

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**ABOUT THE
PROGRAM:**

A modern classic, **Manon** charts the romantic adventures of an irresistibly beautiful *femme fatale* and her one true love, the impoverished student Des Grieux, from the *demi monde* of Paris to the bayous of Louisiana. Sir Kenneth has created a brilliant dance drama that explores the relationship between love, sex, and the corrupting power of money. The passion and danger of **Manon's** central pas de deux have proven irresistible to audiences around the world, and have made it one of the most popular full-length ballets of the second half of the twentieth century.

WHEN: At 7:30 pm on September 10, 12, 18, 19, 2009
At 2:00 pm on September 13, 20, 2009

WHERE: Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center
501 Texas Avenue in downtown Houston

TICKETS: Start at \$17. Call (713) 227 ARTS or 1 800 828 ARTS
Tickets are also available at www.houstonballet.org and the Houston
Ballet Box Office at Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas Avenue (at Smith Street).

FOR MORE

INFORMATION: Visit Houston Ballet on the Web at www.houstonballet.org

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