

HOUSTON BALLET

STANTON WELCH - ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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HOUSTON BALLET LAUNCHES 40TH SEASON WITH THE REVIVAL OF SIR KENNETH MACMILLAN'S EPIC LOVE STORY *MANON*

Houston, Texas – From September 10-20, 2009, Houston Ballet launches its 40th 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.

Based on the famous 18th 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 20th century.

MacMillan commented that he created **Manon** because "The characters fascinate me. You have a 16-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?"

“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.

Launching Houston Ballet’s 40th anniversary season with **Manon** is an acknowledgment of the key role that Sir Kenneth MacMillan 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**.

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.

Hailed by *The New York Times* as “one of the century’s great choreographers” (September 12, 1993), 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 20th century. Mary Clarke, editor of *The Dancing Times* of London commented, "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."

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.

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

The Story of Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*

Manon is set in 18th 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:
Buick LaCrosse, and The Wortham Foundation, Inc.

**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 20th 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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