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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**Ohio Contemporary Ballet Returns to Playhouse Square**

**with "Echoes and Innovations"**

*Honoring past choreographers and the paths they paved for 21st-century dance creators*

CLEVELAND, OH - Ohio Contemporary Ballet, formerly known as Verb Ballets, is thrilled to announce its much-anticipated return to Playhouse Square with "Echoes and Innovations." This captivating program will take the stage at Playhouse Square on Friday, February 28, 2025, at 7:00 p.m., highlighting both influential past choreographers and pioneering 21st-century visionaries.  Tickets can be purchased online at [www.playhousesquare.org](http://www.playhousesquare.org) or by phone at 216-241-6000.

"Echoes and Innovations" is a celebration of our commitment to honoring the rich history of dance while also exploring the boundaries of contemporary ballet. The program highlights a style that is distinct to our company and region," said Dr. Margaret Carlson, Producing Artistic Director, of Ohio Contemporary Ballet. "The return to Playhouse Square is a homecoming for us, and we are thrilled to share these powerful works with our dedicated fans and new audiences."

Donald McKayle's career as a dancer and choreographer spanned six decades. At a time when racial discrimination was pervasive, McKayle's works provided a voice and platform for African American narratives, focusing on themes of humanity, identity, and social justice. McKayle was one of the first African American choreographers to work within mainstream dance companies, paving the way for other minority artists. Ohio Contemporary Ballet is honored to present iconic choreographer McKayle's "Rainbow Suite." Featuring excerpts from his 1959 masterpiece "Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder", these selections of solos and duets depict prisoners' dreams of freedom through memories of their loved ones, all set to the haunting melodies of chain gang songs. His choreography, masterfully combining narrative storytelling with expressive movement, has made a lasting impact on the history of dance.

Gerald Arpino, choreographer, and co-founder of the Joffrey Ballet created "Light Rain" in 1981 for the company's Silver Anniversary. This ballet was designed to highlight the youthful energy and talent of the Joffrey's new dancers. Set to a mesmerizing score by Douglas Adamz and Russ Gauthier, which blends Eastern and Western music, the piece explores themes of young love through its sensual and athletic choreography. Renowned for showcasing dancers' technical skill and daring boldness, "Light Rain" continues to captivate audiences today. This work stands as a testament to Arpino's visionary style, challenging norms, and expectations in ballet. Ohio Contemporary Ballet is honored to perform this iconic duet on the program.

Award-winning choreographer Stephanie Martinez moves her audiences along a journey guided by the kinetic momentum of her work. Martinez was awarded Joffrey Ballet’s “Winning Works: Choreographers of Color” commission and the Chicago 3Arts Award in recognition for her work as a female artist of color. Her versatility expands the boundaries of contemporary ballet movement, challenging viewers to discover what is possible. During the pandemic, Ohio Contemporary Ballet commissioned her to choreograph a new work that was uniquely crafted through Zoom. Her work "World of Another," takes audiences through a story of shared emotions and connections. Critics have hailed it as "pure gold for the company." The ballet has not been performed since the pandemic and offers a poignant reflection on the importance of human connection.

Tommie-Waheed Evans is a queer Black dance maker, who creates works that explore themes of blackness, spirituality, and liberation. He was featured as one of "25 to Watch" by Dance Magazine and received the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, Princess Grace Choreography Fellowship and Guggenheim Award. His choreographic style blends street dance with contemporary vocabulary. ""Dark Matter" was commissioned by Ohio Contemporary Ballet in 2013, representing one of the first commissions in his early career. This audience favorite returns to the stage, known for its polyrhythmic score and mesmerizing lighting capturing chaos, beauty, and resilience.

Ohio Contemporary Ballet's Board President, David M. Dusek adds, "The program is a testament to the fantastic and diverse nature of the company. We are thrilled to share the best dance company in the region at Playhouse Square.”

**Performance Details:**

* **Event:** Echoes and Innovations
* **Date and Time:** Friday, February 28, 2025, at 7:00 p.m.
* **Location:** Playhouse Square, 1501 Euclid Ave, Cleveland, OH 44115
* **Tickets:** Available at [www.playhousesquare.org](http://www.playhousesquare.org) or by phone at 216-241-6000.

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**About Ohio Contemporary Ballet formerly Verb Ballets**

For over three decades Ohio Contemporary Ballet, formerly Verb Ballets, has connected with the community in Northeast Ohio through dance performances and educational programs. The company is currently led by Dr. Margaret Carlson, former principal dancer for the original Cleveland Ballet, and Richard Dickinson, MFA, former Ohio Ballet dancer. Our vision is to bring reliably excellent performances that delight audiences with a variety of choreographic works. We invest in dance as an artform for international cultural exchange. Ohio Contemporary Ballet seeks to engage top dancers and choreographers that reflect diverse backgrounds across the country and globe. We see ourselves as not just a dance company, but as a valuable asset that enriches the lives of our community through providing access to dance opportunities, classes and education. Housed at the Ohio Contemporary Ballet Center in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, we are committed to be a leader of artistic vibrancy in the Great Lakes region.

Ohio Contemporary Ballet

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**Choreographer Bios**

**Gerald Arpino (1923-2008)** was the Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer of The Joffrey Ballet, the company he co-founded with Robert Joffrey in 1956. Born on Staten Island, New York, he met Robert Joffrey while stationed in Seattle with the Coast Guard. He studied with Mary Ann Wells, at the School of American Ballet, danced with Graham dancers May O’Donnell and Gertrude Schurr, and was a principal dancer with the original Joffrey company.

As resident choreographer, Arpino created over one third of the commissioned repertory for the Joffrey Ballet, including Sea Shadow, Viva Vivaldi, Olympics, The Clowns, Trinity, Kettentanz, Suite Saint-Saens, and Light Rain. He also had wide experience in Broadway musicals, on television, in opera, and staged musicals for the country’s leading festivals. Arpino’s ballets have been performed at the White House on several occasions, as well as around the world, to critical acclaim as well as controversial appraisal. So varied was his output, that one critic commented, “He’s not a single artist. He must be an alliance.” As one of the recipients of the 1974 Dance Magazine Award, his citation read: “To Gerald Arpino – more than any other choreographer, he has recognized the spirit of the times. His work speaks clearly of the anguish and the joy of being young in America today.” Upon Robert Joffrey’s passing, Arpino directed the Joffrey Ballet from 1988 until 2008, continuing Joffrey’s vision for the company by restaging important dance historical works, such as Léonide Massine’s symphonic ballet Les Presages (1933), and Frederick Ashton’s Cinderella (1948), as well as taking risks with new commissions such as the rock ballet Billboards (1993) to music by Prince. In 1995, Arpino moved the Joffrey Ballet to Chicago, where he established the Joffrey as a world-class company in the heart of the American Midwest, which continues to thrive today.

**Tommie-Waheed Evans**

2021 Guggenheim Fellow Tommie-Waheed Evans is a queer black dance maker, born and raised in Los Angeles, California, amidst racial divide, gang warfare, and earthquakes. His work explores blackness, spirituality, queerness and liberation. He began his formal training with Karen McDonald before receiving a fellowship at the Ailey School, and a Master of Fine Arts in Choreography from Jacksonville University. He has toured and performed nationally and internationally as a company member of Lula Washington Dance Theater, Complexions Contemporary Ballet and Philadanco. Since 2004, he has created more than 50 original dance works that range widely in scope, length, tone and subject matter. *waheedworks*, his Philadelphia based dance company, is the primary vehicle for his creative research. The company’s mission is to create a radically collaborative body of work that speaks to the human condition. His work brings together urban street dance styles and contemporary dance vocabulary through bold and raw movements propelled by gospel music and polyrhythmic sounds. He has also been commissioned to create works for BalletX, Dallas Black Dance Theatre, PHILADANCO, Verb Ballets, Ballet Memphis, The University of the Arts, Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Lula Washington Dance Theatre, Louisville Ballet, among others. He has received accolades and honors including 2020 Center of Ballet and Arts resident fellow, 2019 Princess Grace Honoraria Award in Choreography, New Music Project Grant, Howard Gilman Foundation Fellowship, Joffrey Ballet Winning Works 2019, and Ballet Memphis New American Dance Residency 2019.

**Stephanie Martinez**

With over 30 years professional performing experience, Stephanie Martinez has danced for Amaranth Dance Company, The Lyric Opera of Chicago, Luna Negra Dance Theater, Concert Dance, Inc, Same Planet/Different World Dance Theater and Dance Chicago amongst many others. In 2009, her choreographic debut, AviMar for Luna Negra Dance Theater instantly secured her status as a sought-after dancemaker.

​Over eleven years of award-winning choreography, Stephanie moves her audiences along a journey guided by the kinetic momentum of her work. With original creations for Joffrey Ballet, Ballet Hispanico, Luna Negra Dance Theater, Charlotte Ballet, Sacramento Ballet, Eugene Ballet, Nashville Ballet, Ballet Memphis, Kansas City Ballet, and National Choreographers Initiative among others, Martinez’s versatility expands the boundaries of contemporary ballet movement. Martinez has created over 60 ballets on companies and collegiate programs across the country.

In 2015, Martinez was awarded Joffrey Ballet’s “Winning Works: Choreographers of Color” commission and the Chicago 3Arts Award in recognition for her work as a female artist of color. More recently, Martinez was awarded an NEA grant for her premiere of Bliss! with Joffrey Ballet. Dubbed “a chameleon” of choreography by the Chicago Tribune, Martinez’s psychologically revelatory works challenge the viewer’s notion of what’s possible.

Stephanie Martinez is the founder and artistic director of Chicago-based repertory company PARA.MAR Dance Theatre. Founded in July 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. PARA.MAR was created together, with, and for diversity and access to excellence in contemporary dance - created, curated y hecho en Chicago.

**Donald McKayle (1930 - 2018)**, recipient of honors and awards in every aspect of his illustrious career, has been named by the Dance Heritage Coalition as “one of America’s Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: The First 100.” His choreographic masterworks, considered modern dance classics, *Games, Rainbow Round My Shoulder, District Storyville,* and *Songs of the Disinherited* are   performed around the world. He has choreographed over ninety works for dance companies in the United States, Canada, Israel, Europe and South America. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley, the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, and the Lula Washington Dance Theatre serve as repositories for his works. He is the Artistic Mentor for the Limón Dance Company. Ten retrospectives have honored his choreography. In April 2005, Donald McKayle was honored at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and presented with a medal as a Master of African American Choreography.

In 2001, he choreographed the monumental ten-hour production of *Tantalus*, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in collaboration with the Denver Center Theatre Company. Five Tony Nominations have honored his choreography for Broadway musical theater: *Sophisticated Ladies, Doctor Jazz, A Time for Singing,* and for *Raisin*, which garnered the Tony Award as Best Musical, and for which he received Tony nominations for both direction and choreography. For *Sophisticated Ladies* he was also honored with an Outer Critics Circle Award and the NAACP Image Award. His most recent choreography for Broadway was showcased in *It Ain’t Nothing But the Blues*, that earned a Tony nomination for Best Musical. He received an Emmy nomination for the TV Special, *Free To Be You and Me*. His work for film included Disney’s *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, *The Great White Hope,* and *The Jazz Singer*. His other media awards include a Los Angeles Drama Logue Award for *Evolution of the Blues* and a Golden Eagle Award for *On the Sound*.

In dance he has received the Capezio Award, the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival Award, the American Dance Guild Award, a Living Legend Award from the National Black Arts Festival, the Heritage Award from the California Dance Educators Association, two Choreographer’s Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Dance/USA Honors, an Irvine  Fellowship in Dance, the Martha Hill Lifetime Achievement Award, the Annual Award from the Dance Under the Stars Choreography Festival, the Black College Dance Exchange Honors, the Dance Magazine Award, and the American Dance Legacy Institute’s  Distinguished and  Innovative Leadership Award. In May 2008, Cornish College of the Arts conferred an honorary Doctorate Degree on him. On May 22, 2009, the Juilliard School awarded Donald McKayle an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts. On May 20, 2011, California Institute of the Arts presented him with an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts.

For his work in education, he has earned the Balasaraswati/Joy Ann Dewey Beinecke Endowed Chair for Distinguished Teaching, UCI’s Distinguished Faculty Lectureship Award for Research, and he is a recipient of the UCI Medal, the highest honor given by the University of California, Irvine. At the University of California, Irvine he has also been awarded the title of Claire Trevor Professor in Dance, an endowed chair, and is a Bren Fellow. Mr. McKayle has served on the faculties of numerous international forums and many prestigious national institutions including the Juilliard School, Bennington College, Bard College, Sarah Lawrence College, the American Dance Festival, Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, and was the Dean of the School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts.

His autobiography, [*Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*](http://www.donaldmckayle.com/autobiography-and-archives.html), published by Routledge was honored with a Society of Dance History Scholar’s de la Torre Bueno Special Citation. A television documentary on his life and work, [*Heartbeats of a Dance Maker*](http://www.donaldmckayle.com/autobiography-and-archives.html), was aired on PBS stations throughout the United States.

**Playhouse Square**, home to the largest Broadway season ticket holder community in North America, is Northeast Ohio's destination for entertainment. A not-for-profit performing arts center, Playhouse Square is a champion of arts education and downtown Cleveland, and proud to be the home of The City Club of Cleveland, Cleveland Ballet, Cleveland International Film Festival, Cleveland Play House, Cleveland State University Department of Theatre and Dance, DANCECleveland, Great Lakes Theater and Tri-C JazzFest.