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ARTS & LIFE

THE PLAIN DEALER

DANCE

Why Csardas founder left for Houston

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Plain Dealer Dance Critic

Richard Graber stunned the dance community three weeks ago when he sent out an e-mail announcing that he had resigned as director of Csardas Dance Company, closed the Movement Arts Center, or MAC, in Medina and relocated to the Houston area, where he is working in a high school marching band program.

"It was a very difficult decision. It's bittersweet," he said. "I dedicated 12 years to Csardas. I learned a lot. But it was difficult to have an ethnic professional resident company in Cleveland. Everybody in the arts community is struggling. I'm leaving for better opportunities."

In the e-mail, he also cited strong personal reasons.

The Cleveland-born son of Hungarian immigrants, Graber, 36, founded Csardas immediately after graduating from Ohio State University with a bachelor of fine arts degree in dance.

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Richard Graber, founder of Csardas Dance Company, has put most of the ensemble's handmade costumes in storage. Here, he wears a peasant shirt and embroidered vest from western Hungary.

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FROM E1

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Having worked with Zivili, the professional ethnic company in Columbus, he had a clear plan for building a Cleveland ensemble that would perform new choreography based on Hungarian traditions.

With support from the Ohio Arts Council, he established the company as a nonprofit organization, recruited dancers from the region, brought in guest choreographers from Hungary and commissioned handmade costumes from skilled artisans in Hungarian villages.

During his tenure, Csardas performed throughout Northeast Ohio, developed a successful outreach program and made three tours to Budapest. Three years ago, Graber opened the MAC as a

home for Csardas and a school with a varied curriculum of dance, fitness and movement classes.

Fund raising was problematic, however, and Graber also had trouble finding and keeping qualified dancers.

"There is not a big talent pool in Cleveland," he said. "The question for the dance community is: How do we get dancers to stay here?"

Last year, he disbanded the 12-member adult company but maintained the Csardas Youth Ensemble, a group of eight girls, ages 8 to 16.

Though discouraged by the lack of financial support, Graber was delighted with the talent of the youth ensemble, pleased at the quick growth of the MAC and happy with the dedication of area high school kids who worked with him in after-school color guard programs headed by Csardas artistic director Christopher Smith.

When Smith landed a part-time job as color guard teacher at Pearland High School near Houston, he invited Graber to join him as a staff member. The offer was irresistible.

"The opportunities in education and the arts are better in Houston," Graber said. "It's a bigger city with lots of live music and live dance every night of the week. There's lots of money in Houston, and people like to spend it."

"Cleveland is a sports town. It's tragic to have lost the ballet. The dance community has got a hard time ahead of it."

Since purchasing a home in Pearland this summer and moving there with his three golden retrievers, Graber has begun getting acquainted with the Hous-

ton arts community. Because of lower back problems, he no longer performs athletic, boot-slapping Hungarian dances. But he takes an interest in social and ballroom dancing, and he has an impressive resume as an arts administrator.

He has already been welcomed to town by the administrative staff at Houston Ballet, the artistic director of Ad Deum Dance Company and the former director of a local Hungarian dance troupe. He has also discovered fellow Hungarian speakers who respond to his license plate, CSARDAS, and he is using his language skills to help promote Csardas: Tango of the East, the Budapest ensemble that will tour North America this fall.

One of his greatest disappointments in Cleveland was the lack of financial support from the Hungarian community. "It's a huge community, 80,000 to 100,000 people," he said. "But I couldn't rely on them. They saw Csardas as competition to recreational dance groups."

When Graber was a teen, he began dancing with a recreational company, the Hungarian Scout Folk Ensemble. Like other ethnic troupes, it was founded to preserve the heritage of the home country and to perform at church festivals and community events.

When Csardas made its professional debut at Cuyahoga Community College's Western Campus, it attracted an overflow crowd. Although audience members were pleased with the performance, they were disappointed that the \$12 ticket price did not include dinner.

Over the years, only a handful of individuals from the Hungarian community made donations to Csardas, Graber said, and local

foundations were also reluctant to support an ethnic troupe.

"They thought if they funded us, they might have to give money to the Slovak, Polish and Ukrainian companies, too," Graber said.

Nonetheless, Csardas won grants from the Ohio Arts Council, received contributions from local businesses and earned income from performances and outreach programs. Last season, it operated on a budget of about \$100,000.

So far, no new directors have been named to succeed Graber and Smith. But the Csardas Youth Ensemble will continue under the management of board President Toni Gras. Two former adult company members will help with rehearsals, and Graber will fly in periodically to choreograph new works.

The MAC, which Graber owns, is up for sale or lease. Karen Gabay and Raymond Rodriguez, co-artistic directors of Pointe de Departure, considered taking over the school. But they decided the location was too far from Cleveland.

Some of the studio's equipment has been purchased by Verb Ballets and Crossroads Dance Center in Hinckley. The company's \$40,000 costume collection is in storage at the Drake Center in Medina.

"I was setting very exciting new pieces to Hungarian music with a techno beat for my young kids," Graber said. "They are wonderful kids. The costumes will be altered for them as they learn the dances. I will help long distance. Maybe there will be an adult company again."

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