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Mayor Emanuel Interviews Joffrey Ballet Artistic Director Ashley Wheater Live on "Chicago Stories"

On this week's episode of [Chicago Stories](#), Mayor Emanuel visited the Joffrey Ballet's artistic director Ashley Wheater in the company's downtown studio for a live conversation on this season's new works and reinvented classics, the importance of craft, his own influences and inspirations, and how he plans on taking the celebrated dance troupe to even greater heights.

A native of Scotland, Ashley trained at the Royal Ballet School in England and danced for Covent Garden, the Australian Ballet, and other companies, including the Joffrey Ballet beginning in 1985.

Thankfully for everyone involved, Ashley rejoined the Joffrey two decades later in 2007, this time as artistic director, and hasn't looked back, leading the company through exciting new works such as last season's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the upcoming world premiere of *Anna Karenina*, as well as inspired reinventions of classics, like *The Nutcracker* set in the White City of the 1983 World's Fair.

Ashley's also extended the company's impact in Chicago through performances and outreach in our city's parks and public schools. In fact, education and community engagement has been among the hallmarks of Ashley's tenure as artistic director.

"Because we are a leader, we have a responsibility to support all the other members of the dance community here in Chicago," Ashley told Mayor Emanuel. "We've been able to be really thoughtful about what is our responsibility, what is our mission, and what we want our legacy to be."

Yet, for all his vision for the company, at Ashley's core is an emphasis on craft and the fundamentals of technique, both within the Joffrey Ballet and throughout the dance world. As Ashley told Mayor Emanuel--a former ballet dancer himself--craft is something he finds missing in a lot of work.

"When I look at dance globally, we have to maintain an integrity about our work," Ashley said. "I think that sometimes people are asking 'where's the new work,' and 'we should be inviting these people to do new work,' and I think what it really comes down to is you need really talented choreographers who really understand the craft that they're working in."

As artistic director, that's meant being immersed in every aspect of the company on a daily basis. In other words, there's no faking excellence, whether in dance or any other discipline.

"You need to be in the studio with your company every day," Ashley said. "I teach the company a lot. I'm in rehearsals with them all day. To be a really great dancer, a really great anything, takes a lot of work, and you have to be up for the work. If you're not up for the work, you can't expect the rewards that come with that. So yes, I push really hard."

Looking out to future of the company, the sky is the limit for Ashley and the Joffrey as they move their performance residence to the Lyric Opera House, giving them the resources to think bigger in the productions as they explore new means of expressing the art of dance.

"I think we are expanding with working with different mediums of dance," Ashley said, "and different mediums of artists that bring something other than what we consider to be ballet."

Tune in to the entire episode as Ashley and Mayor Emanuel talk about some of Ashley's favorite artists of the past, the process of putting together a new production, representing Chicago on the world's stage, and much more.

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