

# KAREN CHARLES

photo by Summer Street Photography

## The Threads That Connect Us: Karen Charles

*Threads Dance Project*

*Year Founded: 2011*

[www.threadsdance.org](http://www.threadsdance.org)

"I knew over twenty years ago that I wanted to start a company. I recall writing down my idea for a company including the name 'Threads' and the mission to examine, expose, and celebrate the threads that connect us. I also recall sticking the notes in a drawer because I felt like I was not capable of starting a company. The first step to bringing the dream to fruition came when my father died from colon cancer in 2010. I found out he had dreamed of becoming a doctor and never pursued this dream. I was then nudged to not let my dream of a dance company go unfulfilled. My dad lent me \$10,000 and I decided to honor him by starting a dance company despite all of my fears and doubts."

With concert work that shows great sensitivity to themes of humanity, it's no surprise that the origin story of Karen Charles' company feels so human as well. Threads Dance Project has become recognized for tackling issues of race, death, and injustice. Particularly since Karen Charles' recent work, *The Secrets of Slave Songs*, was nominated for the 2015 Sage Award for Outstanding Dance Performance.

For her, the need to address these issues is imperative. "I think I always focus on the personal impact first and I am also very passionate about laying bare my truth in regards to these issues. I am unabashed because I think the only way we can make the earth better is by honestly approaching issues and being honest about how we really feel, knowing that some will agree with us and some will disagree. But by getting people to experience these issues through dance opens a different mode of dialogue, which can only lead to better human relationships."

## Ballet's Fresh Take: James Sewell

*James Sewell Ballet*

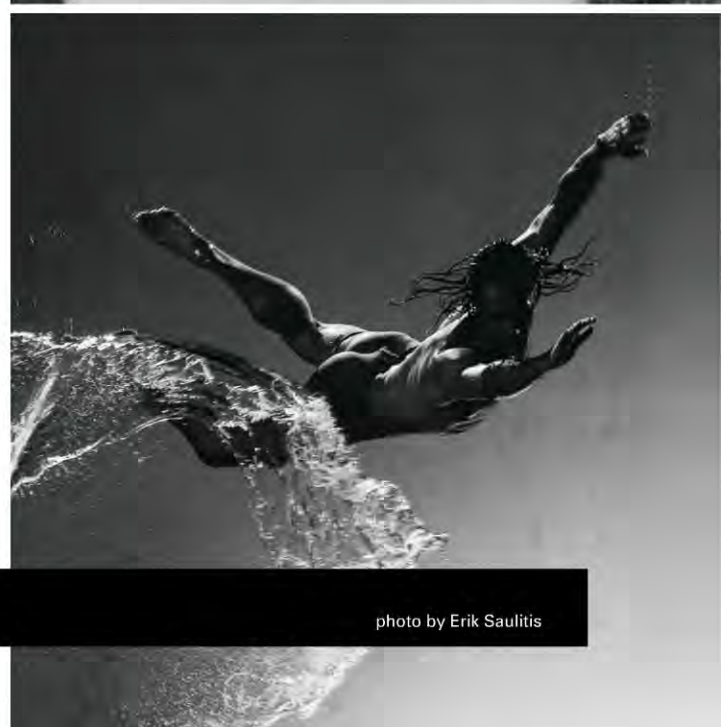
*Year Founded: 1990*

[www.jsballet.org](http://www.jsballet.org)

James Sewell Ballet first began in New York City in 1990, before moving to the Twin Cities in 1993. As Sewell explained, "The years in New York City immersed us in the international scene of dance as everything seems to come through that city. Those years were an important launching point for us, but bringing that back to the Twin Cities allowed us to grow, mature and flourish in a way that is actually very difficult in New York City."

While the majority of the company's dancers have a strong classical background, Sewell enjoys taking ballet vocabulary outside the box, and his dancers must follow. "When I'm looking for dancers, I'm looking for people who first have a strong ballet technique and base to work from. From there they need to be open to trying anything, because I never know in which direction I'm going to want to lead them. For me, pushing ballet to deal with subject matters that are not traditionally explored within the ballet vocabulary is exciting and challenging. When I started out as a choreographer I would outline everything in my head before I would begin rehearsals. But now I find it more interesting to collaborate with the dancers in the moment and follow the creative line to places that surprise us all."

True to his explorative tendencies, Sewell is pursuing some remarkable projects in 2016. "This spring I'm looking forward to working with the Edina High School Marching Band on a piece called *Band It*. This will be an energetic piece where I'll be utilizing hover boards and moving musicians on stage. In the fall, we'll be working with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra in presenting Mendelssohn's *Octet*, a piece I will begin choreographing this summer in Big Sky, Montana and complete in Minneapolis. We are also working on presenting our version of the movie documentary, *Titicut Follies*, filmed in Bridgewater prison for the criminally insane in 1966. I will be collaborating with filmmaker Frederick Wiseman to explore this amazing film and find a way to translate the essence of this challenging world to the ballet stage."



# JAMES SEWELL

photo by Erik Saulitis