



MEDIA RELEASE

CARNIVAL BALLET TO MARK 50 YEARS OF LEEDS CARNIVAL

July 8th 2015

With just over 50 days to go until this year's Leeds West Indian Carnival, organisers have announced the first plans to celebrate the event's 50th anniversary in 2017.

Europe's longest running authentic Caribbean carnival will partner with the critically acclaimed Leeds based Phoenix Dance Theatre to stage **Carnival Ballet** – a unique, world class dance production which will share the spirit, history and heritage of the Carnival with national and international audiences.

Set for an autumn 2017 world premiere in Leeds, Carnival Ballet will bring together leading artists in dance, music and carnival costume design. With an original carnival music score, stunning costumes and set design, the unique production will be performed by 16 dancers from Phoenix, the UK and other international dance companies.

Carnival Chairman Arthur France said; *"The Leeds West Indian Carnival partnership with Phoenix Dance Theatre is a perfect match, reflected in our shared heritage and beginnings in inner city Leeds. Carnival Ballet will be an incredible centrepiece of our milestone 50th anniversary celebrations and will share the stories behind the phenomenal spectacle which brings people together every year"*.

Author and BBC producer Colin Grant will work closely with carnival organisers and contributors to capture the stories behind one of the North's biggest annual events. The resulting narrative will shape the dance piece which will be created by award winning Phoenix Artistic Director Sharon Watson.

Ms. Watson commented, *"Phoenix Dance Theatre is delighted to be standing side by side with Leeds West Indian Carnival to celebrate the 50th anniversary and to create such an exciting, unique production. Steeped in Caribbean culture and flying the flag for a wonderfully diverse Leeds, Carnival Ballet is an amazing opportunity to be at the heart of brand new inspirational art which will appeal to lovers of dance, carnival spectacle, music and theatre"*.

The production will receive funding from the Arts Council England Exceptional Award programme for projects of potential national and international impact. Alison Clark, National Director, Combined Arts said, *“We are delighted to support Carnival Ballet through our Exceptional awards programme. Carnival Arts are an important part of the UK cultural scene, and I'm sure that this innovative partnership between Leeds West Indian Carnival and Phoenix Dance Theatre will result in work of exceptional quality and scale, which will both develop the practice of carnival arts in this country, and bring the work to new audiences.”*

The cast of Carnival Ballet will be joined by amateur performers taking part in an education programme which will share carnival arts, dance and music with communities in tour locations.

The high profile world premiere will kick-start a national tour to six venues in major UK cities including London as well as Hull, Bristol and Liverpool whose histories resonate with Carnival and its origins as a celebration of the emancipation of slavery. The UK tour will be followed by touring to Europe and the Caribbean in 2018.

Carnival organisers are working with partners including Leeds City Council to develop a range of special events and projects in 2017 to mark the 50th anniversary.

Image 1 Caption: (L) Phoenix Dance Theatre Artistic Director Sharon Watson and Leeds West Indian Carnival Founder Arthur France (R), share costume style which could inspire the 2017 Carnival Ballet production with dancer Marie Astrid Mence. **Image credit:** Richard Moran Photography

Image 2 Caption: Phoenix Dance Theatre's Marie Astrid Mence in the carnival style which could inspire 2017's Carnival Ballet production. Costume by Leeds designers AnonyMas. Image: Richard Moran Photography

ENDS

EDITOR'S NOTES

- Founded in 1967 by Arthur France as a remedy for the homesickness for his native St Kitts & Nevis, **Leeds West Indian Carnival** is Europe's longest running authentic Caribbean carnival parade and the biggest outside London. Regularly attracting crowds of over 100,000 to Leeds it is one of the North's biggest annual events bringing phenomenal costumes, rhythmic steel pan and soca music together with the arts, crafts and cuisine of the Caribbean. **Arthur France** was awarded an M.B.E. in 1997 and the Leeds Award in 2014 for services to Carnival arts and to communities. Carnival 2015 kicks off on August 23rd, with the annual Prince & Princess Show, the spectacular King & Queen Costume Contest Show at West Yorkshire Playhouse on August 28th, a Soca Monarch show on August 29th and culminates with the eye popping colour of the Carnival Parade on Bank Holiday Monday 31st August. www.leedscarnival.co.uk

- Formed in 1981 in inner-city Leeds, **Phoenix Dance Theatre** has grown to be one of Britain's leading international dance companies. As a repertory company, Phoenix brings the best choreographers from the international contemporary dance world to work with its diverse company of dancers and Artistic Director to create innovative work, which is communicative, highly accessible and represents the cultural diversity and experience of life in multi-cultural society. Phoenix has a commitment to widening access to dance and its highly acclaimed programme of education work promotes participation in the arts as a stimulating and creative pursuit within schools and community settings. **Sharon Watson** was appointed as Artistic Director in 2009. A more detailed history of Phoenix is available at www.phoenixdancetheatre.co.uk
- **Sharon Watson** was appointed as the 7th Artistic Director of Phoenix Dance Theatre in 2009 having danced with the company from 1989 to 1997 before returning as Rehearsal and Tour Director in 2000. Works choreographed for Phoenix include *Shaded Limits*, *Never Still*, *Fast Lane*, *Melt*, *Repetition of Change* and *TearFall*. A Fellow of the Clore Leadership Programme, she was one of 26 aspiring leaders from around the globe invited to attend *Dance East's Rural Retreat* in 2008. In collaboration with the BBC she choreographed *Frankenstein's Wedding Live in Leeds* (2011) and scenes featured in the seven-part adaptation of Susanna Clarke's novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2014). In 2014 Sharon choreographed three major commissions - *Ghost Peloton*, for Yorkshire Festival; *Honour* for Quays Culture event marking the centenary of WW1; and a large scale performance for the RFL Challenge Cup Final at Wembley. Sharon was named as one of the Cultural Leadership Programme's list of 50 *Women to Watch*, is a trustee of Matthew Bourne's New Adventures, The Place, West Yorkshire Playhouse, regional judge for the inaugural BBC Young Dancer and artistic advisor to Central School of Ballet and Leeds Inspired.
- **Arts Council England** champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2010 and 2015, we will invest £1.9 billion of public money from government and an estimated £1.1 billion from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. Arts Council England announced the Exceptional awards programme in July 2013. www.artscouncil.org.uk
- **Colin Grant** is an author, historian, and Associate Fellow in the Centre for Caribbean Studies. His books include: *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey*; and a group biography of the Wailers, *I&I, The Natural Mystics*. His memoir of growing up in a Caribbean family in 1970s Luton, *Bageye at the Wheel*, was shortlisted for the Pen/Ackerly Prize. As a producer for the BBC, Grant has written and directed a number of radio drama documentaries including *African Man of Letters: The Life of Ignatius Sancho*, and *A Fountain of Tears: The Murder of Federico Garcia Lorca*. He has been a regular tutor of creative writing for Arvon, Sierra Nevada College and City University, London. Grant has also written for a number of newspapers and journals including the Guardian, GQ and Granta. With his wife, Jo Alderson, he hosts *Speaky Spokey*, a literary cabaret in Brighton. Grant's next book, a cultural history of epilepsy, *A Smell of Burning*, will be published by Jonathan Cape in 2016. www.colingrant.info

FOR PRESS INFORMATION, IMAGES, QUOTES AND INTERVIEWS, PLEASE CONTACT

Susan Pitter on pittercommunications@gmail.com Mobile: 07935 957385