From the top

BY GWENDOLYN RICE  SEPTEMBER 7, 2017

“Okay, let’s try it again.”

The choreographer’s instructions ring through Mills Hall and immediately a group of 17, slightly sweaty undergrads find their positions onstage and hold them, waiting for the music to start. Smiling and still, they look up into mirrored panels that lean against the first row of the theater’s seats, checking that their arms, hands and feet are in synch with everyone else’s.

The band is still rehearsing across the hall, so the dancers go over a complicated bit of choreography, dancing to a recording and singing along in four- or eight-part harmony. They move seamlessly onto risers, then back to the floor, paired off for a quick twirl, then back into a larger formation. Spin. Step. Touch. Arms up. Jazz hands. Dressed in black leggings or shorts, running shoes, and red T-shirts and tank tops with the words “Wisconsin Singers” emblazoned across the front, they keep smiling and spinning, listening as they are counted into the next combination (five, six, seven, eight!).

Looking at their faces, it’s hard to tell that they’ve been practicing for hours. And they will continue to refine the dance routines for their 90-minute show until late into the
night. This is the middle of “production camp” for UW-Madison’s swing choir — 12- and 14-hour days of grueling rehearsal for 18 days straight, working to make every move look effortless.

Weeks before classes begin, this elite group of performers is preparing this year’s show — Can’t Stop Dancing — which celebrates the Wisconsin Singers’ 50th anniversary. Helping out are professional choreographers Jarad Voss and Victoria Burns. Voss, a former Wisconsin Singer, now works with Burns choreographing and coaching competitive swing choirs around the country.

Arlie Mucks Jr. founded the choir in 1967 when he was president of the Wisconsin Alumni Association. Mucks hoped the Singers would serve as “official ambassadors of goodwill” during a tumultuous time for the college. Embodying the Wisconsin Idea over the last five decades, the Singers has evolved into a professional quality performance troupe. Throughout the spring semester the performers will bring the high-energy music and dance revue to audiences in auditoriums, gymnasiums, and community festivals all over the state.

“Our audiences are made up of all ages” says Georgiana Edgington, executive producer. “We like to have a lot of modern pop music in the program that younger kids can get excited about, but we also like to pull songs from other eras so there’s something for everyone.” This year the troupe is performing numbers from Pentatonix to Moana; The Captain & Tennille to the Doobie Brothers; Fred Astaire to Michael Jackson.

Before hitting the road, the group will have a gala premiere at Overture Center on Nov. 10 and 11, where hundreds of former Wisconsin Singers are expected to attend. Special guests, opera singer Kitt Reuter-Foss and television personality Siri Daly, both alums of the program, will join the current cast onstage during the show, so the pressure is on.

“Singing on the Overture stage, where so many famous people have appeared … it’s going to be an unreal experience,” says Carter Biskup, a senior majoring in neurobiology. One of two dance captains for the group, he is beginning his fourth year as a cast member.

Math education major and trombone player Zach Schickert agrees. “Performing for Singers alumni is great. They are the best crowd. They’ve been where we are. They know when to applaud and when to get excited,” he grins.

Edgington says the students this year are “amazing” and come from all different majors — accounting, mechanical and chemical engineering, life sciences communication and journalism. But they hold one thing in common: “They have a deep love of music and performing that they want to share.”

Number of performances per year: 35-40
Arts aplenty
Madison is a creative city. Want proof? Here’s our guide to upcoming highlights in theater, dance, visual arts and classical music.
Sep 21, 2017

Virtual disciple
Shruti Parthasarathy’s parents introduced her to classical Indian dance when she was 5 as a way to connect her to the culture of the country they left behind. Nearly a decade later, she’s one of the top dancers in the nation.
Jun 1, 2017

Back on its feet
After being rocked by financial woes, Madison Ballet has regrouped and is enjoying experimentation and intimacy at the Bartell Theatre. The season closer, “Primavera,” opens March 31.
Mar 30, 2017

Estimated annual audience: **80,000 people**
Number of high school and junior high students who attend Wisconsin Singers’ free music workshops each year: **more than 1,000**
Number of Wisconsin Singers alums who are expected to attend the 50th anniversary performance at Overture Center: **800**
Money raised by Wisconsin Singers for scholarships over the years: **$1 million**
Tickets: wisconsinsingers.com/oncampus2017