

# Words of Welcome

Susan Lilley, Orlando poet laureate

Winter is not such a challenging time of year in Central Florida, says Susan Lilley.

“You are not going to get snow and ice — we even have beautiful plants that wait just for January to bloom. No complaints here.”

That’s the positive seasonal outlook from the City of Orlando’s first poet laureate. Last October, the Orlando City Council approved Lilley, after her selection by a committee of distinguished local poets, scholars and literary experts. The process was developed through a partnership with United Arts of Central Florida and Burrow Press.

Lilley, 64, brings a love and familiarity of her hometown.

“I think Orlando is part of a growing and inclusive community, and Mayor Dyer saw the need for the literary arts to be included in our celebrations,” says Lilley. “I’m so proud to be the first.”

She grew up here, where she raised her

own family, and earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Central Florida. Now she teaches at Trinity Preparatory School, where her days are given over to moving her students forward in advanced literature and composition, and is an adjunct professor at Rollins College.

At the time of this writing, Lilley was working with the City to further define the role in which she will promote poetry and an appreciation for the literary art throughout the community.

“We are still under construction, and I am working with wonderful people at the City on planning,” says Lilley.

Lilley, who has been devoting her personal reading time to poetry by people of color, is eager to nurture the next generation of readers and writers.



COURTESY SUSAN LILLEY

“Every community has to open its arms and heart to diverse voices within,” she says. “I might be an old white lady poet, but I’m going to be looking for poets with diverse backgrounds to shine a light on.”

Lilley is a winner of the Rita Dove Poetry Award and a recipient of a Florida Individual Arts Fellowship. As part of a personal commitment, she writes a poem every day.

— Lindy T. Shepherd

## True Love

Chiaki Yasukawa, ballerina

In a large rehearsal hall with a panoramic view of Lake Forsmosa’s sparking surface, Chiaki Yasukawa is preparing to practice her moves.

The prima ballerina of Orlando Ballet will retire after playing the female lead in her favorite ballet, Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Feb. 9-11 at Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. With girlish features that settle naturally into the sweetest smile you’ve ever seen, she hardly looks old enough to retire from high school. But in fact, she is married, in her mid-30s and the

mother of two small children.

*Dressed for her drill, Yasukawa inspects her 5-foot, 2-inch form in a mirror as she runs through a series of increasingly difficult exercises: pliés, forward and backward bends ... . Movements that seem precise from the start soon seem even more so.*

Born and raised in Osaka, Japan, the petite performer began ballet lessons at age 6. She hated them. But during her first public performance, something came over her. Following her career path — and embracing her competitive nature — she moved to Monaco and then to New York, eventually landing very steady work at Orlando Ballet in 2000.

*Fully warmed up, she switches from booties to ballet slippers and then to a*

*second, better-fitting pair of slippers.*

*“Even a millimeter,” she explains, can make a “huge” difference.*

Although she is leaving her high-profile post, Yasukawa intends to keep her hand — or, rather, foot — in. She is open to guesting with other troupes, as well as to continuing with choreography (“something that I love to do”) and teaching (“another part of my soul”).

*After locating the appropriate music on her phone, she dons a tutu and dances her part of the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet. It won’t be long now before she is ready to take the stage for her farewell performance.*

Visit [orlandoballet.org](http://orlandoballet.org) for more information and to purchase tickets.

— Jay Boyar **OAMI**