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Down to Earth



JONATHAN REECE

Amelia Bielen takes a jewelry-box ballerina pose-en-pointe on Park Street.

Anytime, anywhere. In an arts town like Portland, look over your shoulder and we'll be there. A professional ballet dancer explains.

BY KELSEY HARRISON

They're always surprised they hadn't caught it before. Afterward, they're apt to say they recognized a certain grace in our movements or poise in our posture—or even the slightly turned-out feet that is a 'tell' for a ballerina, but initially we're viewed only through the context in which we're encountered. 'We' are the professional company dancers of Portland Ballet Company, and 'they' are our coworkers, clients, coeds, and the general public we meet—stardust optional—on a daily basis at our conventional jobs.

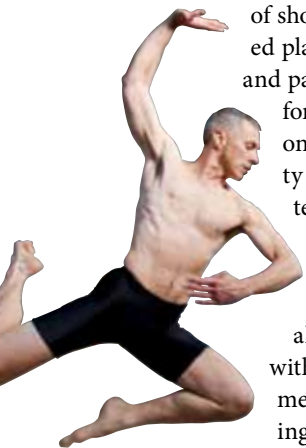
PERFORMANCE



Kaitlyn Hayes arches over Back Cove at sunrise before heading off to make smoothies at Maine Squeeze in the Public Market House in Monument Square. Colleen stops traffic on Exchange Street when she isn't mixing a mean mocktail (below) at Vena's Fizz House around the corner on Fore Street. Derek Clifford flies through the air, below left.

THE AREA UNDER THE CURVE

"Math is undeniably linked to dance," says Erica Diesl. A stretch? After eight years tutoring students in all levels of math, Erica logically defends her hypothesis: "Dancers are constantly using geometry. We make shapes—both with our bodies and in relation to the other dancers on stage. We merge with symmetry, lines, and angles. We memorize movement patterns and count music." Working at The Study Hall in Scarborough, Erica is often asked, "Why do I have to learn this?" While she admits that graphing sine curves rarely resurfaces in adulthood, "Math has a sneaky way of showing up in unexpected places, from the rhythm and patterns in music to the formations and lines on stage." It's this ability to relate subject matter on a personal level that resonates with the students she tutors; in turn, they align their excitement with their work. Few moments are more gratifying for Erica than leaping



toward this change of heart. "When one of my students got her first A of the year on a geometry exam, her mother cooked her a celebration dinner and brought me a helping. Watching my students gain confidence and succeed is the ultimate reward."

DAILY CONCOCTIONS

Whether she's painting, choreographing, or mixing drinks, the outcome is always intended a work of art for Colleen Edwards. "As a dancer, that's what we do every day—create something from nothing—and I try to bring that experience to other branches of my life." Here at ground level, Edwards works at Vena's Fizz House, the Old Port soda bar and shop, where she's developed a close relationship with the shop's owner, Johanna Corman. Corman's enthusiasm for Colleen's ballet training has led her to seek her unique input on beverages. To promote Vena's and Portland Ballet Company's annual production of *The Victorian Nutcracker* at the holidays, Colleen organized a successful fundraiser called Tonics and Tutus, creating drinks like Sugar Plum Fizz Fairy, Spanish Hot Chocolate, Arabian Coffee, and White Chocolate Peppermint Russian Fizz. Why not give their palates a twirl?



"Every shift became a performance, and Jen-the-Sassy-Cocktail-Waitress became a character I could slip into with increasing ease."





SHAKE IT UP

Kaitlyn Hayes loves to break the fourth wall and meet with audience members face-to-face. An assistant manager at Maine Squeeze Juice Café in the Public Market House, she can sometimes be seen sporting Portland Ballet attire on the job. When another Market House vendor realized he'd beheld her on stage at Merrill Auditorium in *The Victorian Nutcracker*, "he thought it was nice to see me out of my element." Or is she in her element? She's absolutely in performance mode at the smoothie café, too, recognizing regulars and memorizing their orders the way she remembers choreography months after it's rehearsed. "People are intrigued when they discover I dance. Customers who know always ask me how my 'dance life' is going."

GRACEFUL COACH

"I grew up in a family of talented field hockey players," says Morgan Sanborn with a shrug. "My mother, her three sisters, and two of my cousins all played and coached." At Bonnie Eagle High in Standish—mystical field-hockey terrain—she balanced training in Portland School of Ballet's pre-professional CORPS program with playing on the varsity squad. After college, she joined Portland Ballet while keeping a leg in her sport by coaching for her alma mater. "In addition to helping players with flexibility and conditioning, my dancing has increased my ability to understand field positioning, angles, and strength in body positioning." More recently, her aunt, USM's head coach Bonny Brown-Denico, hired Morgan as an assistant coach for the women's team there, where she's been for two seasons. Last year, on a hiatus from Portland Ballet to dance with Teatrul Balet de Sibiu in Romania, Morgan was unfazed when a choreographer derisively remarked on her arm mus-

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culature. “I took it as a compliment,” she says. “My cross training in sports has always helped me with dance and vice versa.”

THE POLYMATH APPROACH

“In the creative process, you must be open to following the path that reveals itself,” says Derek Clifford. Having danced on stages at the Lincoln Center and Kennedy Center; having toured in Scotland, Germany, and Belgium; and having once held a job as a fishing guide in Alaska to support his artistic endeavors, Derek has embraced the road less traveled. Currently, the married father of four works in the operating room at Maine Medical Center as an orthopedic medical device manufacturer’s sales rep. This position frequently places him in front of audiences for training and sales presentations as well as directly into hospital operatories mid-procedure, and that’s when his performance experience kicks in. “Being in surgery is similar to performing. You need to be calm under pressure, and able to adapt instantly to the unexpected. You must have very keen awareness of your physical movements in the O.R. I find it akin to learning choreography.” He’s one of the few male dancers in the company: “People with any connection to the arts are often interested and understand it is a legitimate, if difficult, profession.”

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PERFORMANCE



Erica Diesl dances along the city's favorite graffito on Free Street. In her civilian life, she's a math whiz and tutor.

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Ethereal and soft-spoken are not going to cut it. In ballet, maybe, but not in the restaurant business. A self-proclaimed introvert, Jennifer Jones feels "performing on stage is a breeze. I can't explain it, it's just the way it is. In real life, crowds make me horribly uncomfortable, and the idea of initiating conversation with a stranger sends me into a cold sweat."

So how is it she ended up tending bar at Rosie's Restaurant & Pub in the Old Port on Friday nights? In short, because much of dance involves acting. In the title role in *Giselle*, for example, Jennifer segued from passionate love to maddening grief to gentle despair in a way that was both conceivable and compelling. Early in her career, she met a cook who taught her to parlay that skill in front of an audience into her work at the bar. From that moment on, "Every shift became a performance, and Jen-the-Sassy-Cocktail-Waitress became a character I could slip into with increasing ease. Years later, I still get sweaty palms [greeting strangers], but I slip into performance mode and off I go. Heck, sometimes I even enjoy it."

PRIVATE NARRATIVES

So what does each of these stories ultimately illustrate? Versatility. We're constantly reading reactions and adjusting. Adapting the

JONATHAN REECE

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PERFORMANCE

strength and creativity ballet has taught us to any workplace without losing our composure may be our greatest asset.

Recognizing this, other organizations have approached Portland Ballet to hire professional dancers. River Arts Center in Damariscotta has organized a gathering for artists to paint members of the company in a Degas-inspired modeling session. Maine State Music Theatre has run a series of commercials to advertise their past season featuring three PBC members. The environmental Bloom Association has produced an anti-deep-sea-trawling video that features our CORPS director.

One day, ballet fan Guila Fakhoury approached the company with a unusual request, which is how I found myself at the Sheraton Portsmouth Harborside Hotel one July, performing at her wedding reception. . .

Fellow PBC members Amelia Bielen, Colleen Edwards, and Deborah Grammatic, and I needed to reassure the bride-to-be as much as ourselves about the wedding at which we'd soon be entertaining. The bride had dreamed of a "white tutus, classical music" piece, as well as something "more upbeat and salsa-esque" for the reception. None of us had ballroom training, as we explained at the meeting, but being a ballet dancer is a process of becoming—and knowing your audience. We found red dresses in PBC's costume room, put on Michael Buble's "Save The Last Dance For Me," and emulated the Spanish flair that crackles in ballet classics such as *Paquita* and *Don Quixote*—to much laughter and applause.

Buoyed by our joyful reception at Guila's wedding reception—when PORTpera contacted Portland Ballet a few months later, looking for a high-stepping, chorus line dance piece to set the tone at their fundraiser gala—I signed on without hesitation.

Can-Can you guess the style they assigned us? ■

JONATHAN REECE



The author, Kelsey Harrison, dances her way to the bow of a lobsterboat tied up at Widgery Wharf.

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