

NOUVELLES DU BALLET

Newsletter of Champaign Urbana Ballet

Spring 2019



STEPPING UP
AND OUT

Teaching in Eswatini: Community on a Tile Floor



Alexandra Warwick danced with Champaign-Urbana Ballet from childhood to young adulthood and is now an elementary school teacher and world-traveler. Currently, Alexandra lives in Milan, Italy working as a nanny for a family with three children. Prior to living in Italy, Alexandra lived in Manzini, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), a country in Southern Africa, where she taught children of local missionary families and had the pleasure of bringing the art of ballet to a Community Center for local children.

One Friday afternoon, Alexandra asked a group of children at the Community Center if they would like to start a ballet class. In Swaziland, there was little to no preconceived notion of what ballet was, but she asked the children if they liked to move and liked music. "This is a class, it's for boys and girls, whoever wants to come, come to class!" She immediately had a group of four, 13-year old boys interested in taking her class regularly, along with many other children ranging from ages 5-18. They danced on a tile floor covered in dust, of a former restaurant, where there was a literal bar (not ballet barre) from which adult volunteers would sometimes stand behind imitating the ballet movements of the children. The children eventually learned barre work after a woodworking class at the Community Center used scrap wood and ingenuity to create two beloved barres.

Alexandra's core group of dancers included those same four boys who attended weekly. "There was no concept of what ballet was supposed to look like or who ballet was supposed to be for—for the boys they liked to dance, they felt good about themselves, and they were having fun. It was work for them and they recognized that." She had to teach the children all the ballet basics like how to stand and face the barre and synchronize their movements. Though she never had to teach them how to feel or follow a beat. Music is such a part of Swazi culture and Swazi people have a strong basis in traditional dance.

Some of the children attending the Community Center came from difficult home-lives where there were no parents, or where older children were the primary caretakers for younger siblings. Some of the children had difficult circumstances including abuse. For them, dance became a place where negative experiences with their bodies transformed into making art. "It was like some of the children were living in a shell and ballet let them create something beautiful out of pain and darkness. You can see how music can change people."

Dancers in her class ranged in attendance from eight to twenty children, all dancing to her iPod of classical ballet music, the same music she used for her classes when teaching at Champaign Urbana Ballet. At CUB, Alexandra formed her commitment to become a teacher. "As a little kid, you think you want to be a teacher, but that's an abstract idea." While teaching children during Battle rehearsals for *The Nutcracker* and instructing in the ballet studio, Alexandra discovered she enjoyed the process of helping young dancers improve and her aspirations to teach became concrete. "By the end of my time at the studio, there was a never a doubt that I wanted to go into education; dance teaching experiences solidified that for me."

From time to time, Alexandra wishes she could have stayed in Swaziland longer and started something bigger. "On one hand I imagine what it could be and on the other hand I know ballet can really be anywhere. You can take it to a tile floor in the middle of Africa. You can make it work." Two of the Swazi boys from Alexandra's ballet class are now volunteering at the Community Center. They are helping to continue the good work brought to and from this place, teaching and encouraging others like Alexandra taught them. And right here at Champaign Urbana Ballet? There are future teachers in the making: some are trying on their first pointe shoes after years and months of training, others are downloading music on their phones preparing to teach their first apprentice class lesson, one choreographs a dance guided by his artistic director, and just like the children in Swaziland all share in the community of ballet.



A fair share of dancer development consists of a graduated program of technique acquisition and honing of artistry, leading to ever more demanding roles. Audience members can see the product of that process on stage, when our dancers perform. Less discernible to the eye, however, are the many opportunities CU Ballet provides to develop the whole dancer, with all the intangibles that entails. Our dancers commit a great deal of time to CU Ballet activities, and in return, we commit to ensuring that their time with us is as enriching as it can be. Through a staged program of responsibility and an interlinked chain of peer-to-peer mentoring, we aim to cultivate our dancers' independence, leadership, collaboration, cooperation and sense of community. Below is an overview of the stepping stones CU Ballet has put in place to prepare these wonderful young people to shine on any and all future stages, be they actual or metaphorical.

Trainees

In 2015, Tobey Martinez, the former Ballet Mistress of CU Ballet and the current principal of the Champaign Ballet Academy, created the Trainee program for the Company. For the older dancers in the Junior and Senior Company, there is only a short break between the final curtain of *The Nutcracker* and new rehearsals for the spring production. Unlike *The Nutcracker*, the spring production usually does not have roles for the younger children. The Trainee program was specially designed to keep these young dancers engaged in the world of ballet and to help them continue to develop as dancers in an environment that is both fun and supportive.

Students, ages 8-10, are invited, at the discretion of the Artistic Director, to participate in the Trainee program. The Trainees meet on Saturdays for ten weeks during the spring for their own special seminars taught by CU Ballet staff. They also have the opportunity to work with the Senior Company dancers when they serve as guest instructors; you can imagine the excitement of learning how to mime from the Lilac Fairy from *The Sleeping Beauty*! The seminars provide a well-rounded introduction to ballet. The Trainees learn ballet terminology, which are almost all in French, and about ballet history and significant choreographers. They also learn more in depth about the spring CU Ballet production. This year, the Trainees are immersed in *Swan Lake*, the enchanting love story of a prince and a bewitched swan maiden. The dancers are also taught essential practical skills. The girls, for example, learn how to correctly do a ballet bun in a session called Bun 101. They are then expected to do their buns on their own. This is a small but important step toward becoming a mature, independent dancer.

Apprentices

When auditioning for *The Nutcracker*, dancers who are 10-12 years old can simultaneously audition to be an Apprentice, the next level in the CU Ballet Company. If accepted, the dancers begin taking Company classes with the Junior Company every Saturday from 12:30-2:00. The weekly one-and-a-half-hour class is led by experienced Senior Company members. The main purpose of the class is to help the dancers prepare and warm up for the afternoon rehearsal for the upcoming production, *The Nutcracker* in the fall and another well-known classical ballet in the spring. As an Apprentice, it is a heady honor to become an active member of the Company by participating in these classes.

The Apprentices are also given more opportunities to contribute to the Company and to develop their independence. They are required to take turns cleaning the costume shop under the guidance of Junior Company members. For those on pointe, they learn how to take care of their pointe shoes and their feet. As well, they are now solely responsible for

Développé Devant

Placing Dancer Development in the Forefront

In ballet, the term "développé" describes a movement in which one leg—the "free" or "working" leg—is unfolded into the air until fully extended, then held (high!). The step represents one of the distinctive feats of combined strength and flexibility that accomplished dancers perform, seemingly effortlessly. A form of the French verb développer, "to develop," its very name invokes the sense of process the beautiful effect entails. Ballet parlance further specifies the direction the dancer's leg is to be extended/developed: "devant," to the front, "à la seconde," to the side (in second position), or "derrière," to the back (behind the dancer). At CU Ballet, we take inspiration from this classic step to place our dancers' development squarely at the forefront of what we do.



doing their own stage makeup for the performances. Along with the responsibilities, there are privileges. An exciting one for the Apprentices is that, during *The Nutcracker*, they are given their own designated dressing area. Although they are still a part of the vast Krannert Center Opera Room that serves as the dressing room for all the younger cast members (the Mice, the Soldiers, the Dutch Dairy, etc.), the Apprentices have a more private space to call their own, a meaningful acknowledgment of their growth and maturity.

Junior Company

Once dancers master the apprenticeship stage, they are admitted to the Junior Company. At this most transitional stage of all in the developmental progression of CU Ballet dancers, Junior Company members assume, in measured fashion, the responsibilities of Company dancers, while also taking on some leadership roles in mentoring Apprentices.

Company members, of whatever seniority, as well as Apprentices, have volunteer responsibilities designed to promote a community ethos and contribute to the smooth-functioning of CU Ballet. Junior Company members and Apprentices are together responsible for weekly Saturday-morning cleaning of the costume shop, prior to the classes that prepare the dancers for the afternoon rehearsals for CU Ballet productions. Junior Company dancers take

turns guiding rotating Apprentice teams to ensure that, week in and week out, the costume shop is in order and ready for the incoming volunteer costumers' invaluable work. Members of Junior Company also assist at the under-10's auditions for *The Nutcracker*, aid in audition-flyer preparation, and help to staff activity booths at NutFest celebrations.

As they began to practice as Apprentices, once in Junior Company, dancers must assume the mantle of sole and full responsibility for knowing their cues, having their props, and ensuring they arrive on stage at the appropriate time, ready to go. One big rite of passage for Junior Company dancers is that on performance days, they now report for "Company Call" times, earlier than the rest of the cast. This permits them to participate in the Company class that takes place on stage, just prior to the show. This is recognition that their increasingly challenging roles require them to intentionally ready their bodies and minds for the feats ahead. And, if numbers and venue space align in their favor, Junior Company members might even gain entrance to the inner sanctum of company status—**The COMPANY DRESSING ROOM!**





Senior Company

Senior Company represents the highest rung of responsibility among CU Ballet dancers. These dancers tackle the most challenging roles and are given opportunities to exercise leadership in a variety of arenas. For instance, those with greatest seniority take turns leading Saturday-morning Senior Company class for their peers, prior to rehearsals. Those who have been in the Senior Company for a more intermediate period (two or so years) take “teacher training” classes. Led by CU Ballet alumna and rehearsal assistant Ginny Martinez, these sessions prepare company members to devise a ballet class and lead it. As the “graduation” assignment for their teacher training, the dancers work on a class of their own conception, which, once approved, they lead for the Saturday Junior Company/Apprentice class. Senior Company dancers are also often charged with imparting the choreography for roles they have previously danced to dancers who are performing the roles for the first time. Further, at the discretion of the Artistic Director, Senior Company members may be tasked with helping to choreograph select scenes in CU Ballet productions.

Senior Company members are often called upon to act as ambassadors for CU Ballet in a variety of settings, and they carry themselves with the knowledge that they represent the Company to Champaign-Urbana and the surrounding community. Not surprisingly, then, Senior Company dancers play key roles helping to lead and manage *Nutcracker* audition classes for younger dancers, participate in school and community-organization visits, and perform pantomime demonstrations and other audience-engagement activities before public performances to young audiences. Senior Company members spend countless hours in the pursuit of their artistic craft, and CU Ballet is proud to showcase their talents in our productions. Last but not least, Senior Company dancers are the leaders of Student Production, which affords them the opportunity to flex new and different responsibility muscles.

Student Production

Inaugurated in 2014, the annual summer Student Production brings together all levels of CU Ballet’s dancer development program—Trainee, Apprentice, and Junior and Senior Company members—in a spirited example of CU Ballet’s commitment to peer mentoring. The primary goals of the program are twofold: to broaden Senior dancers’ knowledge in other areas of performing arts production and to provide Junior Company, Apprentice, and Trainee dancers the opportunity to perform in featured roles, so they may further develop their confidence and artistry.



Thanks in part to a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, CU Ballet provides paid internships, awarded on a competitive basis, to Senior Company Members who propose plans for a student-run production. Senior Company dancers step into the leadership roles of director, choreographer, costume and set designers, and also serve in related “crews”—stage, lighting, costume, and marketing/print materials. The production leads are responsible for a budget, and together the Senior Company members cast and choreograph the ballet. Production leads also perform a post-production analysis to better understand areas of both success and challenge and record their insights for the following year’s participants. Trainee, Apprentice, and Junior Company dancers learn and perform their roles, as well as assist in set and costume production.

Since 2016, CU Ballet has been fortunate to partner with Parkland College to present the Student Production ballet in Parkland Theatre’s Second Stage “black box” venue, further enhancing the real-life, hands-on production experience for dancers and production crew alike. If you’ve not yet had an opportunity to enjoy one of these delightful productions, we invite you to come see the fruition of our dancers’ collective work this summer.



alumni update



Blake Laneskog, Trainee with the Boston Ballet recently reached out with an update. "I wanted to thank you so much for starting me off in my career and providing me with the excitement to continue my ballet training. My days at CU Ballet continue to stand out as the most memorable times of my involvement in the dance world. I will cherish you and the CU Ballet community for the rest of my career and life. Thanks again and I will keep in touch!"



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Photo by Darrell Hoemann