

En l'Air

News from
MASSACHUSETTS
ACADEMY of
BALLET
Educational Training
Association

FALL 2013



Spring Dance, Holyoke High ©2013 Jeffrey Byrnes, JeffreyB Photography

Welcome to a New Year!

Massachusetts Academy of Ballet has kicked off another exciting academic year! We're looking forward to traditions like the Wistariahurst *Nutcracker & Sweets* 2013, scheduled for December 13-15. In response to popular demand and last year's sold out shows, we have added a seventh show, working with two casts.

We're kicking off new initiatives as well, with new pieces choreographed by Charles; a ballet version of the sequel to last year's *Gwendolyn the Graceful Pig*, in collaboration with author David Rottenberg, entitled *Gwendolyn Goes to Hollywood*; and tap classes for adults!

After spending their summers participating in the MAB Summer Intensive and visiting other programs like Pennsylvania Academy of Ballet and Pointe Park Summer Dance Intensive, our MABETA members are already working hard on *Nutcracker* and other pieces they will perform throughout the year.

Our parent/teacher MABETA board is planning ways to support MABETA's efforts to bring classical ballet to the greater Holyoke community. New members are always welcome: contact rflachs@massacademyofballet.com.



2009

Five Years of *Nutcracker & Sweets*

by Loran Saito

In 2008, Massachusetts Academy of Ballet launched its *Nutcracker & Sweets* tradition.

The previous year, most of the students at MAB participated in a holiday performance at the studio, which included a few excerpts from *Nutcracker*. Rose wanted to find a way to involve younger students from the pre-ballet division, who had not participated in the holiday performance. This led her to create *Nutcracker & Sweets* based on the history of the Skinners, a prominent Holyoke family, to be performed in the music room at Wistariahurst Museum, the Cabot Street mansion that was the Skinner family home. Resources for Rose's research included *Holyoke: The Skinner Family* and *Wistariahurst* by Kate Navarra Thibodeau and *Images of America: Holyoke, Massachusetts*, by Craig P. Della Penna.

Rose proposed the idea to Melissa Boisselle, the director of the Wistariahurst, who gave it her full support. As a next step, Charles and Rose began work on a script for the narration. Charles, who was a theatre major in college, spent hours at Dogwood Studios recording and creating the sound score.

Arlene Kowal, MAB's costume designer, was also an integral part in the development of this historic *Nutcracker*. From the onset, she consulted with Charles and Rose about period-appropriate costumes for the first act, and the fanciful costumes for the second. MAB dancers dazzled the audience as each character appeared on stage to dance in a professional quality costume designed and sewn by Arlene.

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The Massachusetts Academy of Ballet

4 Open Square Way, Studio 403 • Holyoke, MA 01040 • 413.536.6200 • massacademyofballet.com



In 2008, the first year of *Nutcracker & Sweets*, MAB offered just two performances to the public, with very few roles: just William Skinner, young Ruth and William, dolls, mice, soldiers, snowflakes and four divertissement dancers in the second act: Hot Cocoa, Mandarin Tea, Ribbon Candy, and Hot Coffee.

Each year since then, Rose and Charles have adapted the individual *Nutcracker* pieces to the individual strengths and characters of the dancers in the school. Charles has returned often to the Dogwood Studios and edited the audio as needed to include new scenes. Additions in 2012 included the "Waltz of the Flowers," and a state-of-the-art lighting design. The enthusiastic response from the local community was encouragement enough to continue *Nutcracker & Sweets* as an annual cultural family event. Now *Nutcracker & Sweets* is 50 minutes in length, with nearly 30 roles for dancers, and MAB will offer the community seven performances in one weekend!

MAB's relationship with the Wistariahurst Museum also grew as systems were developed to improve each year's production and challenges with the space were addressed. The staff and volunteers of both organizations de-

veloped systems that work well for all. Some students and parent volunteers still recall the first year at Wistariahurst, when dancers processed from the dressing rooms to the music room across the shiny, freshly waxed wood floors, only to discover they had picked up wax on their ballet slippers and pointe shoes and transferred it onto their dance floor, making for a slippery performance! Now everyone wears socks over their slippers until they're safely in the backstage area.

MAB dancers and volunteers are thrilled to have access to the beautiful rooms and performance space at Wistariahurst. MAB students treat the space respectfully and lovingly; the Skinner family would be proud of the magic the dancers bring to their music room.

Nutcracker & Sweets is the hottest holiday ticket in town—audiences seem to agree that a Historic Holyoke *Nutcracker* in the Skinner mansion is an event not to be missed. This year even the mayor of Holyoke plans to attend! What will the next five years bring?



2009



2010



2011



2012

Vintage Nutcracker & Sweets photos by Linda Keith, Kerry Homstead, Kyle Homstead, Loran Saito, and Theodore Paradise

MAB Summer Dance Camp 2013!



MAB's youngest summer students enjoyed dance and learning with MAB Children's Division teacher Cathy Johnson, assisted by Level 3 student Christine Becher. Photos: Jodi Bobrowski

MABETA Member Profile: Isabelle Luu-Li Haas

by MAB Student Molly Czitrom

Sixteen-year-old Isabelle Luu-Li Haas, who attends Pioneer Valley Performing Arts High School in South Hadley, has been a serious and dedicated ballet student at the Massachusetts Academy of Ballet since 5th grade.

Training five days a week at the studio and also at school, she loves that in ballet there is a "right and wrong" way to perform it. "It's almost like a formula," Haas says, "There's a certain way to do it, yet you can still add your own artistry to it. That's what I love about it." Haas' favorite variation that she has performed was "Diana and Acteon" from the ballet *Esmeralda*, which she performed last spring with Roger Creel in the



Spring Ballet for the Massachusetts Academy of Ballet.

Haas' love for ballet is strong, but she also says that the hardest thing about ballet is to keep

up the motivation, "It's really hard not to get discouraged on some days. The only thing you can do is keep working really hard and push through it," Haas says. Her favorite part of ballet class is grand allegro, and when she dances she hopes that people see all of the dedication she puts in. She also hopes that people see her as being taller when she dances!

When she's not dancing, Haas likes to hang out with her friends and sleep. She also claims that her guilty pleasure is pumpkin pie. Some of Haas' role models in the ballet world are Maria Kotchekova, who is a dancer in the San Francisco Ballet Com-

pany, and also Yuka Oba, who is a dancer in the Grand Rapids Ballet Company with Rose's and Charles' daughter, Connie Flachs. Haas also claims that she would like to marry her dream man, Sergei Polunin, who danced with the Royal Ballet Company.

In the future, Haas would like to join a ballet company, and if not possible then she would love to do more commercial and contemporary dance. Haas also looks forward to dancing in *The Nutcracker* with the Massachusetts Academy of Ballet in December. She is double-cast with Anastasia Lusnia as the Sugar Plum Fairy and the Mouse Queen, and will also be dancing as the Russian.

Alumni Updates



Photo: Joshua Sugiyama Photography

RACHEL AYLWARD graduated with a dual degree in Dance (BA) and Marketing (BBA) in May 2013 from UMass Amherst. After graduation, she relocated to New York City to pursue a performance career. She has been actively auditioning for theater, TV, and film and has received a number of callbacks for both regional theaters and national touring productions. Slowly but surely she is building her relationships in and knowledge of this industry. Broadway has always been a dream of hers and she will continue to work toward living that dream! On training with Rose and Charles Flachs, she said "MAB provided me with an indispensable technical foundation for which I am grateful each time I dance." Her advice to aspiring performers is to "feel gratitude each time your hand rests at the barre. The studio is where you can get to know yourself as a dancer and as a person...Find ways to cherish these moments--even the hard ones!"

KELSEY CHAMBERLAIN Last summer, Rose and Charles invited Kelsey to sign her name on the studio wall after she signed with her first professional company, ME Dance in Orlando, FL.

Photo: Charles Flachs

CONNIE FLACHS While Grand Rapids Ballet technically just completed the first program of the 2013-2014 season (*Dracula*), we've done work on many more ballets. We began the season working with Olivier Wevers on a brand new production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which I'm dancing the role of Hermia, and learning a piece by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa that we will be performing in 2014. I danced in an excerpt of Balanchine's *Four Temperaments* for the season's opening gala and we've done numerous photo/video shoots for the new website and promotions. Now that *Dracula* has come to a close (I was one of Dracula's brides or Lucy, the innocent girl who ends up eating babies after Dracula bites her), we've moved on to *Nutcracker* rehearsals, although I'm performing the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony pas in a few days and we'll also begin to work on Jose Limon's *The Moor's Pavane*. Apparently, I've been busy!



Photos courtesy Connie Flachs



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ROGER CREEL Having joined the Louisville Ballet this fall as a Company Artist, I am once again a novice at the bottom of the ladder and it is humbling. The dancers who dance leads either attended no college or majored in dance at conservatory college programs like Indiana University or Oklahoma University. They have spent their lives syncing their bodies to their minds and match impressive technique with that capacity we dancers all crave: the ability to speak through motion. Having performed *Swan Lake* and a studio series already this fall, we head into a full December of *Nutcracker*, with *La Sylphide*, three contemporary ballets, and more in the spring.

I have a lot of catching up to do, and have discovered that light calmness often succeeds where brute effort cannot. So I learn and watch, grateful every day for the training that Rose and Charles gave me at MAB, grateful that they insisted on *relève* during *frappé* combinations and on doing *petite allegro* in reverse. As with most dreams, this dream has more clay feet than I imagined, and new dreams grow on top of the old, but even so there is much joy to be had in the life of a professional dancer.



Photo: Sandy Thiessen

LIAM SAITO is in his 2nd year of study in the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School Professional Division. He is having a busy fall as he prepares to tour with the school's annual Concert Hour, to participate in the annual First Steps student choreography competition, and to dance the role of Julian in the company's *Nutcracker*.

MAB in Europe!

Rose & Charles hit the international scene with CORPS de Ballet International

MABETA Board Member Amy Crowley talked with Rose & Charles about their experience in Europe this summer.

When did you go to Europe and for how long?

In June we traveled to Paris, France to attend the CORPS de Ballet International's 15th annual teacher conference. We stayed in Paris for a week and then visited our friend, and choreographer, Kinsun Chan, in Switzerland. Our children, Connie and Nathaniel, came with us.

What is the CORPS de Ballet International?

The CORPS de Ballet International is a professional organization dedicated to the development, exploration, and advancement of ballet in higher education. Many college dance departments are primarily focused on modern dance, so it is extremely important to have this network to support and mentor teachers of ballet. The CORPS was formed 15 years ago, and we are both founding members. More than 60 institutions from the US, Canada, and England belong to the CORPS. At each conference, the CORPS gives a Lifetime Achievement Award to someone who has furthered the growth of ballet in higher education and has made valuable contributions to ballet departments, through administration, teaching, choreography, mentoring or research. This year we honored Professor Emeritus Richard Sias from Florida State University. He is the original founder of the CORPS and its first president.

Did you gain any insights on the current state or future of ballet?

Yes, we learn so much every year talking to colleagues and taking classes. The conference is set up with presentations of academic papers, classes, movement workshops, and activities with guest teachers and choreographers. We also had a private tour of the Palais Garnier and the Palace of Versailles.

This year, choreographer Alexandre Münz presented a new method of ballet instruction called Spine Advanced Functional Empowerment (S.A.F.E.). During his time as a professional ballet dancer, he suffered an injury which inspired him to create a new instructional technique that can develop more resilient dancers. Traditional ballet involves using a set of muscles in a specific way (dancing with legs turned out). The S.A.F.E.



Rose & Charles in front of the Paris Opera, June 2013

method also exercises the reciprocal, or opposite, muscles (dancing with legs turned in) to strengthen the muscle structure as a whole and thus prevent injury. This is particularly necessary today because ballet choreography now includes new types of movement that do not always require dancers to be turned out. It is difficult for a dancer trained only in the traditional method to do both and not face injury.

How would the S.A.F.E. method fit with the Vaganova method you teach here at MAB?

Agrippina Vaganova believed that ballet should continuously evolve to support new choreographic methods, so the two would be compatible. We are already incorporating some concepts into classes at MAB.

Is there a difference in attitude toward ballet between Europeans and Americans?

Alexandre Münz explained that ballet training in France is historically oriented and can, at times, be somewhat restrictive. France is where ballet originated, so this viewpoint is somewhat understandable. American training on the other hand often incorporates new ideas to reflect the current trends of choreography. Europeans have a great respect for ballet as do Americans; however, some of the European companies are funded in such a way that becoming a ballet dancer can be a lifelong profession that is supported by the government, the society, and the culture.

Did you attend any dance performances?

Yes, we saw the Paris Opera Ballet's opening night of *La Sylphide*. It was stunning and inspiring. In Zurich, we attended an evening-length dance work entitled *Listen*, choreographed by our friend, Kinsun Chan. The work was created on hearing-impaired actors and dancers, and five professional dancers from Zurich. A famous improvisational percussionist in Switzerland performed the music, creating the sound score by drumming on blocks that were incorporated into the choreography. The deaf dancers were able to feel the reverberations and use that rhythm with their movement. The dancers told their personal stories through the movement using dance and sign language. It was an amazing creation and touched us deeply. Seeing original, creative works like this is truly inspiring.

All in all, was it a successful trip?

We always come back from these conferences very enthused and ready to dive back into teaching. However, this was our first conference overseas, so it was extra special. We had a great trip, spending time with our children in Europe visiting gardens and museums, and taking in the wealth of history, architecture, and culture embedded in the beautiful old cities of Paris, Zurich, and Basel.

Spring Dance Performance 2013

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Massachusetts Academy of Ballet Educational Training Association, MABETA, is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to educating the residents of Holyoke, MA and the surrounding communities about the art of classical ballet through performances and lecture demonstrations at schools, senior centers, and other community venues.

MABETA Board Members: Amy Crowley, Meryl Fingrudt, Charles Flachs, Rose Marie Flachs, Deborah Haas, Cathy Johnson, Navae Fenwick Rodriguez, Loran Saito, Margaret Tonelli, and MJ Wraga

Thank you MABETA Donors!

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The REAL “Dance Moms” of MAB

by Amy Crowley

My daughter, Ava, is in her third year at MAB, in level 3A. As a parent, I’m relieved her class is finally long enough that I’m able to drop her off and go do other things! But sometimes I stick around anyway and spend time with the moms of the children in her group. Over the years we’ve gotten to know each other sitting in the waiting room, and have come to really enjoy each others’ company. None of us is a stereotypical “dance mom” (like TV would have you believe). I’ve never experienced any competition or comparing of dancers. Each of us is satisfied that our children are happy, enriched, and developing beautifully. Watching the progress of the more advanced students, we can see that we have our children in a good place, focused on high-quality training.



Amy Crowley (right) with fellow dance mom Rosanny Amaro (mother of Skyrlee and Kauriel Amaro). Photo: Ava Crowley.

We come from different communities: Chicopee, Easthampton, South Hadley, and Springfield. One family commutes all the way from Sturbridge. However, we leave our home and school connections behind and come together as our own community. We talk about our lives

and daily experiences. We care about each others’ children. In turn, the children observe and learn from this. And they have the freedom to focus on their studies without any unnecessary pressure or drama.

I also appreciate that MAB is not recital-based but rather the students have the opportunity to participate in performances that help spread cultural awareness of ballet within Holyoke and surrounding communities. These are the values I want Ava to take away from her experience. Ballet here is not about competition among the children or parents but about personal growth and accomplishment, fitness, art, culture, community service—and making friends.

This issue of En L’Air was compiled, edited and designed by Loran Diehl Saito with contributions and editing support from Amy Crowley, Molly Czitrom, Rose Flachs, and Navae Fenwick Rodriguez.

Dance with the professionals

