

From Your Director...

It seems as though we have just begun to enjoy the fruits of our recent labors here at Amherst Ballet and now deserve the chance to rest comfortably for a time. With the completion of the first phase of our capital campaign (we successfully raised \$100,000), we purchased our building in January of 2006. Over this past summer and fall we have made numerous renovations to our space in the interest of the well-being of our school and students. We now need to look ahead and begin taking the steps that will ensure the viability of Amherst Ballet for the next 30 years and on into the future.

In deciding what our priorities are, we think it is important to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses. Amherst Ballet has many strengths: a solid 30+ year history coupled with a strong reputation in the Pioneer Valley; excellent faculty and staff; a strong and active board; the ability to attract and keep happy, talented students; great performances; great community feeling and so much more. As for weaknesses, the most evident is our lack of space. We own our building in an excellent location, but our



studios are on the small side, storage space for costumes is lacking, and our dressing rooms are bursting at the seams! Additional studio space for classes and rehearsals would also be very welcome. We now have waiting lists for many of our classes and we hate to turn people away. We are at a point in our history where a decision will have to be made as to how our future should look. Given the limitations of our current space, we must decide whether to renovate and expand allowing us to comfortably accommodate our current population and possible expansion of our programs and

enrollment. The other option would be to continue to operate with our current facilities unchanged and adopt a change in our mission and philosophy as a result. Do we want to be able to serve the many young people who want to train within our doors, or should we become



more exclusive and accept only a select group?

Without even hesitating I know what my answer is. While growth must be managed carefully, Amherst Ballet belongs to the community and thus must serve the community. This means opening our doors to those who want to be here, including continuing to offer scholarships to those who need them. Teaching dance is so much more than simply serving those who have the genetic capacity for professional ballet careers. Dancing is fundamental to human expression and is an integral part of every society and culture. Dancing is inherently beneficial to all people. While I am well aware that research shows the study of movement and music to have unique benefits for the developing brain (and the adult brain as well!), it doesn't take a team of researchers to show me what I have already observed during many years of teaching. I watch students grow up, typically beginning my work with them when they are quite young, and continuing it through their high school graduation. I have seen time and again children who seem "spacey," have trouble paying attention, are uncoordinated, or have less than perfect classroom behavior mature into absolutely fantastic young adults. Ballet training under the care and guidance of a teacher

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Performance at AIC



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Last April 44 AB dancers performed *Dances from the Earth* at the American International College in Springfield. AB had been invited to perform at AIC's Karen Sprague Cultural Arts Center by Alvin Paige, the recently retired Director of Visual and Performing Arts at the college. Two performances were given: an afternoon performance for local 4 - 8 grade students and an evening performance

for AIC college students and community members. In the afternoon, the auditorium was filled to overflowing with wriggling elementary and middle school students. But once the lights went down and the music began the students were transfixed and transformed to the distinctive arctic and rainforest ecosystems. Between *The Arctic* and *The Rainforest* performances, Fran Ryan of Horizon Productions made a Power Point presentation of images from the Alaskan Wildlife Refuge and tropical rainforests. Fran and Director Catherine Fair had been collaborators on the original *Dances from the Earth* which premiered in March 2006. Fran's photographs and Catherine, John Bancan-Wrzos, Sam Kenney and Jacqueline Kinsman's choreography of *The Arctic* and *The Rainforest* provided compelling images of the fragility and beauty of these two ecosystems. And the students were compelled – they were absolutely rapt during the performance and really seemed to appreciate the fact that many of the dancers were their identical ages. Those who came to the evening performance were also awed by the choreography and technique from AB and images from Horizon Productions.

These performances were a great outreach experience for AB and its dancers and we hope to continue such performances in the future.

4th grade boy from Homer Street School, Springfield

“Dear Amherst Ballet,
Thank you for inviting us to your perfect show. I mean, man you guys ROCK! Those animal costumes are awesome looking. My favorite were the polar bears, bunnies and caribou. Also the kids dancing are 7 – 18 years old. I really enjoyed the show at A.I.C and I hope I can come again!”

7th Grade Girl from Glenbook Middle School, Springfield

“During the performance I was intrigued. To perform a show to hundreds of people I thought would be hard, but the performers actually looked very relaxed. I was also surprised at how the message of the dance was so clear. The beginning narrator told me a lot of information that I liked and the power point presentation was very captivating.”

Tuition Raffle

Andrea Leibson

At our Annual Meeting at the end of May 2007, winners of AB's third tuition raffle were selected. Raffle tickets were sent to Amherst Ballet supporters along with invitations to attend our March performance. The \$10 tickets could be designated for a specific AB dancer or be applied to AB's Young Dancer Scholarship fund. Once again the raffle was quite popular with dance lovers around the country and around the block and once again the Young Dancer Scholarship fund received some much appreciated dollars. This year all three of the designated student winners are Upper School dancers: Rachael Bean, Marissa Ho and Sara Klugman.

All three of these dancers are students at Amherst Regional High School; Rachael is 17 and Marissa and Sara are 15. They all started dancing early – by the time they were six. Rachael danced in *The Nutcracker* each of the four years Amherst Ballet participated with the Moscow Ballet production and has been cast in many other roles; her favorite role was in last year's *Hungarian Festival of Dance*. Sara has been cast in many pieces and says that her favorite role was being a part of *The Rainforest* “but being a bee [in *Magician's Nephew*] was pretty exhilarating at six [years of age].” Marissa especially liked the opportunity of going to the Joffrey

Ballet this past summer. All three of the dancers note the community feeling of being part of AB; Sara sums it up when she says, “I really like the atmosphere leading up to the show; there's this unique excitement and connection between all the dancers.” Rachael says “The quality and commitment of the instructors at AB is really special and really sets AB apart from other dance schools, and the amount of time and effort the teachers, employees, dancers and parents put into AB to make everything possible is really impressive and special.”

Other winners were also announced at our Annual Meeting. Our attendance winners were Robin Palmer, an Upper School dancer who took eight classes a week and only had two absences and Bryar Loftfield who took nine classes a week in both the Lower and Upper Schools and missed only two classes. We thank them (and the family members who drive them) for their commitment! The Maura Donohue Award, a peer award named in honor of founder Therese B. Donohue's daughter, was given to senior Evie Simkins. This award is voted on by all the dancers in the Upper School and is given to one of their own who strives to do the best, is respectful of the teachers and is well liked by her peers.

Congratulations to all our winners!

For University of Massachusetts Employees...

...Another way to help out Amherst Ballet

The UMass Amherst Community Campaign (UMACC) is a workplace giving program designed with University of Massachusetts, Amherst employees in mind. Employees receive a pledge card once a year, usually in October, and are asked to participate by donating to any of more than 500 charities and non-profit organizations on the UMACC Agency Listing. Employees may give through payroll deduction, direct payments (cash, check, credit card) or through the transfer of stock. To donate to Amherst Ballet, just indicate code #687533 on your pledge card. If you have already sent in your pledge form but would like to change your designations, you may do so through March 15 by calling the UMACC office at 577-1101.

Donating through the UMass Amherst Community Campaign gives Amherst Ballet a chance to share in the undesignated donations as well as receive funds directed specifically to AB. Many thanks to those of you who already donate to Amherst Ballet through this program and we hope other UMass employees will join them this year.

Thanks to **Jane Yolen**,
award-winning author
of more than 275 books,
including the *Barefoot Book*
of Ballet Stories, for her
sponsorship of this
newsletter.

Summer at Amherst Ballet

By Director Catherine Fair

Summer of 2007 was the busiest summer on record at Amherst Ballet with growing demand and interest in studying dance resulting in an increase in programs offered. We held two week-long, full day, children's workshops and each had a waiting list. This was our second summer offering our popular children's technique classes and we offered our usual technique classes for adults and teens all summer long. Our two-week Summer Teen Intensive served a record number of 30 dancers and offered a varied curriculum and distinguished faculty. The Intensives were directed by me and Amherst Ballet faculty members Joanna Duncan taught classical ballet, repertoire and ballet electives, while Jenny Bennett-Mansur taught Modern Dance. Guest teachers Celeste Sze taught Pilates classes and Francoise Voranger and Jessica Sibley (back for the third year in a row) taught classical ballet, repertoire, and ballet electives. The dancers truly were "happy campers" who grew in strength and knowledge by leaps and bounds as a result of intensive study.

As part of a new program of study, 16 Amherst Ballet students traveled to New York City to study at the Joffrey Ballet School. (See their pictures, by Heidi Stemple, throughout this newsletter.) The trip was the result of an idea

formulated by me and Joanna Duncan to allow young students to study dance outside of their home school while enjoying the protection and nurturing of their teachers and friends. The dancers, Joanna and I were accompanied by parent chaperones Karen Schweitzer and Heidi Stemple. Our students had the opportunity to take classes with like-minded ballet peers from all over the country and world! Divided into several different class levels, the dancers were able to experience many different teachers and took classes in ballet, pointe, variations, Modern Dance, Jazz and Dance Conditioning. Our students brought their good training, polite classroom behavior, and work ethic to the school and were well received by all. Two of AB's young male dancers, Ethan Schweitzer-Gaslin and Henry Weis, stayed late each afternoon to take the special Men's Variations classes. The youngest dancers in that class, our boys worked hard and danced well gaining attention and praise from the teachers and officials at the school. Joffrey Ballet School Director John Magnus officially invited Amherst Ballet to return to the summer school at any time in the future! In addition to classes at the Joffrey, five dancers aged 16 and older accompanied Mrs. Duncan for a special treat: classes

on the split silks with circus trainer Ivo Georgiev. The dancers reported that this was a wonderful new experience and we thank Mrs. Duncan for arranging it!

We all stayed at Hostelling International on Amsterdam Avenue sharing dorm style accommodations with travelers from all over the world. Travel through the city was by subway and bus, and meals were taken both at the hostel and in a variety of restaurants. The heroic efforts of the chaperones resulted in a relatively smooth week (in spite of the subways breaking down and halting all travel in the city on the fourth morning of the trip...). Special thanks go to Karen and Heidi who stayed up late each night purchasing groceries and rising early each morning to prepare breakfast for all of us and to New Yorkers Eric, Joani, Jackie and Manny Schweitzer for their help in keeping us fed. In addition to daily visits to Joffrey, the group toured the city seeing Times Square, Battery Park, Lincoln Center, Little Italy, Chinatown and more. An experience never to be forgotten, the dancers report that they would love to do it again. While they enjoyed the dance experience, they also loved the chance to be in one of the most exciting cities in the world surrounded by dear friends!

From the Director, continued from page 1

who truly has a student's best interests at heart is undoubtedly therapeutic for the developing child. My anecdotal, but compelling, evidence deserves a closer look; I believe ballet training to have a unique advantage in training a child to focus, improve memory, and organize the thinking processes. (I could write an entire book about this, and some day plan to!) Other benefits include being members of a caring and tightly knit community, making dear friends, developing confidence, and getting enough exercise, to name just a few. Just because most children don't grow up to be professional dancers does not mean that the study of dance should be viewed as less valuable or that it should be dispensable; that sort of thinking would lead us to believe that children should not

study music, theater or any other subject taught in school if they will not be pursuing a professional career in that discipline.

I know that the study of dance is clearly beneficial to the growing young person; this knowledge persuades me to strive to make such study available to as many children as possible. This leads me to the answer to my earlier question of whether a facilities expansion is an appropriate decision for Amherst Ballet. While it may not be easily achievable in the short-term, exploration of this possibility is certainly called for. Amherst Ballet is a com-



munity-based cultural and educational institution that plays an important role in the lives of many children and their families; just as the local schools must meet the needs of an increase in student population, so should we.

From Our March 2007 Performances



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Where are They Now??

News about former AB students and staff

Andrea Leibson

Recent grad Galya Ponomareva writes from Cincinnati to say she is dancing with the Kentucky Ballet Theater Company in addition to her work at the Conservatory at the University of Cincinnati. Also at the Conservatory is Melanie Lahti working on her Ph.D. in music. Melanie spent her summer interning at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and put her dance, music and organizational knowledge to work there all summer long...Jamie Schoen has been traveling a bunch, first to Cyprus with her dad in October and to Buenos Aires in November to take a course in teaching English as a foreign language...Lucy Segar is now a senior at Oberlin College and still dancing; her senior dance show

will be in the spring...Ana Caban has moved back to California and appeared on the Fine Living Network's Dinner Date cooking show in October.

Several more alumnae have contacted us from California. Valentina Valentini is living in Carlsbad and attending Cal State...Jan Passion, formerly Daniel Burgess, works in San Francisco as a programme officer for the Nonviolent Peaceforce. Jan credits his six years with Therese at AB with helping him survive a particularly difficult childhood. His sister Meg Starkweather is back in Amherst and is a graduate student at UMass. Meg's daughter Imani James has just started to dance at AB this year.

Jessica Berins Berke contacted us by email to remind us that not only had Eliza Grannis Lussier danced at AB but also Eliza's sister Jennifer Grannis. We apologize for this omission and urge alums to contact us via email or regular mail to let us know what they're doing. Jessica suggested that we have a space in the AB newsletter to hear what alums ("those of us from 'way back when' and those most recent graduates") are doing now. As Jessica said "I'm sure there are many fascinating stories whether dance-related or not." We're sure too. Please contact us and stop by 29 Strong Street when you're in Amherst!

Lia Karras

Heidi Stemple

Lia Karras was born smiling. Soon after, at age three, she started dancing. She and her favorite doll would wear their matching leotards and dance around the house together. When Director Catherine Fair first came to Amherst Ballet, Lia was already there. "My first impression of Lia was of a sweet child with great jumps and a beautiful turn-out." Those talents have matured, according to Mrs. Fair, and Lia has grown into a "diversely talented dancer whose elegance and beautiful pointe work together with her natural sense of movement and rhythm distinguish her."

In her freshman year of high school, Lia took a break from dancing. Though this saddened both her family and AB, she wanted to experience some of the things outside ballet that a rigorous dance schedule makes easy to miss. She played lacrosse and ultimate. She sang in the musical and hung out with her friends. But, two years later, missing ballet, she, tentatively at first, returned to the studio. "I was really nervous about coming back," Lia admits. She worried that it would be impossible to catch up. But, as it turned out, everyone was truly supportive as Lia, in Mrs. Fair words, "recommitted herself to dancing." Lia thinks she may have been a better dancer had she not taken a break, but she does not regret the new experiences she gained.

Jumping right back in with two feet, Lia took a full dance load in her junior year. She traveled with AB to New York City on the Joffery Ballet trip where she was



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not only a superb dancer, but a real role model and friend for the younger dancers. This year, she is taking three ballet classes plus variations and conditioning. She will be dancing in Desiree's Court in *Sleeping Beauty* and was chosen to be one of the ten AB dancers in the Latin Fusion piece being choreographed by Anastasia Christie for the spring performance. It seems likely that these will become some of her favorite roles, though she has danced in many AB ballets over the years including *The Arctic* (Caribou), *The Hungarian Festival of Dance* (corps), *Sleeping Beauty* (2004) and *The Magician's Nephew* (bunny).

Her younger sister, Jessamy (Level A), who learned to walk in the AB lobby while big sister danced, is not the only younger dancer who looks up to Lia. Many of the younger dancers know that they can go to Lia for some big-sisterly leadership. It is, in fact, this community that begins with the smallest of dancers that Lia says she will miss most about AB after she graduates. She loves "all the cute little pink girls running around." Jeanne Esposito, Lia's mother, also credits Lia for inspiring her two brothers to come cheer her on. They have "been to more dance performances than most young men."

Lia plans to attend college next year and continue dancing as a hobby. That sweet little girl that Mrs. Fair saw in her early days at AB is "still clearly there inside the kind hearted and good natured young woman." The smiling girl will be missed by everyone she has touched through both her dancing and her consistently sunny personality. AB shares the sentiments of her parents--that watching Lia dance, whether through the studio window, on stage, or, as her mom often does, from the backstage wings, we are all "awed by Lia's grace and poise."

Elizabeth Duda

Andrea Leibson

Liz Duda is quite the renaissance woman. Sportswoman, musician, ceramicist, political activist, costumer, role model. And dancer. Liz Duda has been a stalwart around Amherst Ballet for many years and will be much missed when she graduates this June.

Liz began her time at Amherst Ballet as a 5 year old in Creative Movement. She danced at AB for the next 4 years before taking time off from dance while she was in fourth and fifth grades when “any number of things” competed for her attention. During this hiatus Liz was busy figure skating, practicing piano, and playing basketball and soccer among other things. But the lure of dance beckoned and she has been a part of AB ever since returning to dance when she was in sixth grade.

Liz’s favorite dance medium is Modern. “I just love the music and fluid motion of Modern,” she says. “I am always happy when I can really move.” Her second favorite is Jazz, which she wishes she could fit into her busy schedule better. While she continues to take ballet classes, she finds that her athletic body is better suited to Modern and Jazz. Her favorite Amherst Ballet role was as Seaweed in *Shim Chung*, part of the Barefoot Books *Ballet Stories* performances in 2005. “*Shim Chung* was so amazing...I just loved Sam Kenney’s choreography.” She also danced the role of a swan in *Swan Lake* in 2005 and was in *The Rainforest*,



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Too Darn Hot, Out of Darkness, Honeybee and the Robber and in 2004’s excerpts from *The Sleeping Beauty*. “I’m really looking forward to the new latin piece this year as well,” Liz said. “I’ve always wanted to learn ballroom dancing.”

Now the oldest student in the Upper School, Liz remembers what it was like to be among the youngest. Along with Sarah Cycon and the other juniors and seniors in the school, Liz helped create the Upper School Student’s Board, a semi-formal organization that works to assure that all the Upper School students know each other (there are now 45 of them) so that younger dancers will feel comfortable talking to the oldest of our dancers. “It was so scary to talk to the Level Cs when I was a new Level A,” Liz remembers, “and we don’t want that feeling anymore.” So far the

AB Student Board has hosted a get-to-know-each-other dinner at Liz’s family barn (the site of AB’s fun Harvest Fetes and Silent Auctions) and they are planning a get together for the students after this December’s Presentation Night. What a wonderful mentor and thoughtful big sister Liz is!

Liz’s interest in the arts is evident at her high school too. Her “artsy thing” is ceramics and she is also the costume designer/creator for the high school’s theater productions. She worked on costumes for *Cats* last winter, and will be involved in costuming *The Tempest* this winter and next spring’s musical *Aida*. In addition to her work with the theater she plays violin in the school orchestra (“I’m no longer taking private lessons”), is a member of STAND (a Darfur awareness club) and the Women’s Rights club. She still loves sports and since the tenth grade has been a member of the high school’s ultimate frisbee teams. In fact she plays ultimate all year long, in school and out and has competed against teams from throughout the United States and Canada.

Now in her senior year at Amherst Regional High School, Liz’s life is busy with advance placement classes and the typical senior task of visiting colleges and filling out college applications. When asked what she wants to study at college, this renaissance woman says, “I have absolutely no idea.” With strengths in so many areas, Liz has a wealth of choices before her. We look forward to keeping in touch with her over the years and watching her blossom!



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Calendar of Upcoming Events at AB

FRI, NOVEMBER 30	CLASSES DO MEET in spite of Amherst Schools' Curriculum Day
SAT, DECEMBER 8	No Level C classes. UPPER SCHOOL PRESENTATION 7:00pm, Amherst Regional Middle School Auditorium. LOWER SCHOOL AND PUBLIC INVITED
DECEMBER 13 - 19	Visitors' week for Lower School, Thursday-Wednesday
THURS, DECEMBER 20	No classes. Vacation begins
DECEMBER 20-21	First Night rehearsals
DECEMBER 29-30	First Night rehearsals
MON, DECEMBER 31	Performance at Northampton's First Night
WED, JANUARY 2	Classes resume
MON, JANUARY 21	No classes. Martin Luther King Day observance
MON, JANUARY 28	CLASSES DO MEET in spite of Amherst Schools' Teacher Workday
SAT, FEBRUARY 16	Vacation begins at 12:30pm after morning Lower School classes meet. No Level C classes
FEBRUARY 18- 24	School Vacation. Classes resume Monday February 25
MARCH 8 & 9	SPRING REPERTOIRE PERFORMANCES