

# From Your Director...

by Catherine Fair

For many years Amherst Ballet has been fortunate to collaborate with esteemed arts and cultural organizations, and this year is no exception. Following on the heels of our exciting collaboration with the Emily Dickinson Museum, we have hardly had a chance to catch our breath before proceeding on to the next project. By invitation of the Pioneer Valley Symphony Music Director and Conductor Paul Phillips, we will be performing on December 12, 2009 at the Greenfield High School as a part of *Holiday Magic*, a seasonal concert filled with music



▲ Marissa Ho as Emily, and Robin Palmer as Lavinia in AB's "Emily of Amherst" last May at the Kirby Theater. photo by Chris Eliot

and dance. The first half of the concert will feature the orchestra on stage playing traditional holiday music including *A Christmas Festival* by Leroy Anderson and *Hanukkah Festival Overture* by Lucas Richman. For the second half, the orchestra will move to the "pit" to allow Amherst Ballet to take the stage in performance of excerpts from Act Two of *The Nutcracker*. Not having had the opportunity to choreograph scenes from *The Nutcracker* since 1996 I am pleasantly surprised to find that I am truly enjoying the opportunity to be creating choreography for this ballet yet again. When Paul asked me about including sections from the ballet, my initial reaction was negative for a variety of reasons including time and budget. After giving it further thought, I realized that not only was I eager to

delve into *Nutcracker* again, but the students were also excited about the chance to perform variations from the time honored classic. Performing this ballet live with an orchestra is something that many professional companies no longer have the luxury of doing. For a dance company to hire an orchestra is a huge expense, and requires a significant chunk of an already strained budget. Many companies have no choice but to turn to "canned" music. While a performance of the ballet is in itself a wonderful thing, the power, beauty and excitement of seeing it performed with a live orchestra is unparalleled. I hope that this collaboration may lead to greater things in the future, perhaps even a full performance of *The Nutcracker* with the orchestra, which would be a "first" for Amherst Ballet!

Closing the concert will be Amherst Ballet's own version of *Chopiniana*, a ballet to the suite *Les Sylphides* by Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849). Faculty member Sueann Townsend is directing, staging and choreographing the majority of this 28 minute ballet with some assistance from myself and AB teacher Jana Fugate. This "white ballet," traditionally danced by a corps of beautiful white-clad sylphs and the "poet," who appears in a white shirt and black vest, is a test of skill

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## from Your Director, continued from page 1

for any ballet company or school; the choreography emphasizes the expressiveness of the body and the groups (corps) and utilizes the soft lines and lilting *ballon* of the Romantic style. The ballet includes a male soloist with three female soloists, and features The Waltz Pas de Deux performed by the poet and a female soloist, dancing amidst the corps which remains on stage throughout the ballet. It is a joy to watch this

ballet take shape in the studio and I am proud to have both the staff and the dancers capable of achieving it.

The Pioneer Valley Symphony, under the Direction of Paul Phillips, is one of the oldest community orchestras in the United States and provides professional musical direction for over 200 volunteer musicians. Approximately 95 instrumentalists and over 120 singers participate annually, producing six symphonic concerts, as well as family, educational, and choral programs. The geographically di-



▲ "Emily at the West Cemetery" Kenna Tyrrell as the ghost of Jennie Grout May 2009 in AB's "Emily of Amherst"

▶ "Poetry in Motion" May 2009 from AB's "Emily of Amherst". photos by Chris Eliot



## Visitor's Week and Presentation Night

Twice a year parents of Lower School dancers (Pre-Primary, Primary, Levels 1-5, Jazz 2 and Hip Hop 1) are invited into the studio to watch a class in action. This year's Visitor's Week for the Lower School is December 14-19. We set up chairs in the studio and encourage parents to attend and to bring your cameras to film your child in action. You'll be amazed to see how much your child has learned!

Rather than have parents visit the classes of our Upper School dancers, we observe and celebrate their progress at Presentation Night which is held on the stage of the Amherst Regional Middle School auditorium. This year's Presentation Night is December 5 at 7:00pm. All families in our community are invited to attend. We sell modestly priced tickets to offset the cost of renting the auditorium and have a reception after. We encourage young dancers to come to get an idea of where their dance training can take them.

### *from Your Director, continued*

verse membership of the orchestra — musicians from 36 communities in western Massachusetts, and six communities in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Vermont — is testimony to the orchestra's reputation and quality.

The PVS has gained national recognition for its programming of contemporary music. In June 1997, the PVS won the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers annual award for adventurous programming. In celebration of its 60th anniversary season, the PVS presented two world premieres. Each of the past eight seasons has featured performances of works by living composers.

Amherst Ballet and the Pioneer Valley Symphony seem particularly well suited to work together — both being community based organizations with similar missions for providing excellence in programming together with educational outreach. I am very proud to be collaborating with the symphony and am confident that *Holiday Magic* will truly live up to its name. Be sure to mark your calendars now for this very special event, I hope to see you there!

*Tickets for the concert can be purchased by contacting the PVS office at 773-3664 or (800) 681-7870 or by visiting their website at [www.pvso.org](http://www.pvso.org).*

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## **AB Young Dancer Scholarships**

Remember how pretty you felt when you tried on your first leotard and tights? Remember when you first learned how to point your feet when jumping? Remember how your palms sweated and heart beat a little faster when it was time for your dance at a performance? Remember how fun it was to wear a costume, dance on a stage and hear applause for your efforts? Remember how thrilling it felt to be a part of the All School Bow? This is something that should be available to every child.

Amherst Ballet knows that paying for dance lessons can be difficult for some. Amherst Ballet provides need based financial aid to several of its families; over the last four years AB has awarded an average of \$7176 in financial assistance. One of the ways financial aid is awarded is through our Young Dancer Scholarship Fund. Each fall between 2 and 7 scholarships from the Young Dancer Fund are given to Lower School students (aged 5 to 11) whose families may not be able to afford full tuition. The intent of this scholarship fund is to help *everyone have the chance to dance!*

The Young Dancer Scholarship Fund was established in 2001 by an Amherst Ballet Upper School dancer on the occasion of her Bat Mitzvah. In appreciation for the many years of joy she had attained from classes and performances, this dancer decided to donate a portion of her Bat Mitzvah gift money to enable other aspiring young dancers in our community to have the same opportunity. Since that time, Amherst Ballet has received additional donations allocated for the Young Dancer Scholarship Fund, including a generous donation by another Upper School student upon celebrating her Bat Mitzvah!

Amherst Ballet welcomes donations to the Young Dancer Scholarship Fund in any amount; please write "Young Dancer Scholarship" on the memo line of your check. Please help spread the joy of dance to elementary-aged children in our area by contributing to this scholarship fund.

## **UMassFive College Credit Union**

Amherst Ballet has been accepted for membership in the UMassFive College Federal Credit Union. As members of the Amherst Ballet community, our parents, dancers and staff are encouraged to join this local credit union too. One of the benefits of membership is the accruing of CU points which can be used to reduce service fees, increase interest rates on savings and can be transferred to other CU members.

One of our former board members transferred CU points to Amherst Ballet to enable us to receive a higher interest rate on a certificate of deposit. That was literally "money in the bank" for us and is a way of increasing our return for very little fundraising effort on the part of our board, parent volunteers or staff. If you have CU points you'd be willing to transfer to Amherst Ballet we would be delighted to accept them! Please call Andrea at the front desk if you have points to donate.

## **Funneling Funds**

Amherst Ballet has received a gift of a Coriolis Well which demonstrates a principle of physics – and is a fun way to watch your pennies pirouette! See your spare change chngement into creative choreography and help your dollars developpé into fabulous performances! Many thanks to the Stanforth family for this fun fundraiser!

## **Behind the Scenes via Email**

We are planning to send our newsletters to some of our families via email. If you'd like to receive it electronically, please let us know by sending your email address to [info@amherstballet.org](mailto:info@amherstballet.org).

# Summer at Amherst Ballet

by Catherine Fair

The summer of 2009 presented fresh opportunities for Amherst Ballet students to grow, learn and develop their craft. As early as the previous December, students busied themselves researching summer programs around the country and deciding where to audition. A number of students chose to audition for the experience but did not commit to studying beyond the Amherst Ballet studios. The frenzied process began in January and lasted until March while students traveled as far away as Connecticut and New York City all while keeping their hectic rehearsal schedules for *Emily of Amherst* as their top commitment. Our students truly distinguished themselves and gave confirmation of the excellent training and preparation they receive here at Amherst Ballet. The following list is a sampling of the well known programs they were accepted to:

The Ailey School Summer Intensive Program, The American Academy of Ballet, American Ballet Theatre's Summer Intensive (NYC), The Boston Ballet Summer Dance Program, The Joffrey Ballet School Summer Intensive,

The Kirov Academy of Ballet Summer Session, The Walnut Hill School, The Richmond Ballet Summer Intensive Program, The Nutmeg Conservatory for the Arts Summer Program, and more... We are so proud of what they accomplished both during the audition process, and in the hard work put in during their intensives!

Ethan Schweitzer-Gaslin attended the Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington D. C. as well as the American Academy of Ballet. He was very inspired by his time at the Kirov: "It was nice to live and breathe dance even though it was only for three weeks. Never in such a short time have I become such a different dancer as in my summer at the Kirov; I only wish I had stayed for the full six week program."

Marianne Wald attended the Richmond Ballet Summer Intensive. "It was nice to be able to go to a place where I could concentrate on dancing all the time and be around people whose experiences were different from mine, who had different training and goals. Being grouped in the apprentice group (the

highest level in the program), it was inspiring to see such an advanced level of training and to work with dancers who anticipate entering the world of professional ballet in the near future."

Heather Eliot attended Walnut Hill's summer program: "Walnut Hill was a wonderful first time experience for a sleep away ballet intensive. All the teachers were very supportive, and I got a whole lot out of their classes. All of the modern and ballet pieces performed at the end were very well choreographed and accommodated all students' levels. There were also electives at the end of each day such as skirt making, stage lighting and sound



▲ Participants in the Summer Children's Workshop. photo by Catherine Fair

▼ Ethan Schweitzer-Gaslin at the Kirov Academy (far right..) photo by Karen Schweitzer

Mercedes Fissore-O'Leary, Julia Fissore-O'Leary, Sophie Brown and Anna Plummer. photo by Catherine Fair

The cast of Perseus and Andromeda Summer Children's Workshop. photo by Catherine Fair





◀ Anna Lally with Boston Ballet corps member and instructor at the Boston Ballet Summer Intensive. photo by Gloria McPherson



▲ Heather Eliot at Walnut Hill (third from left). photo by Chris Eliot



◀ Anna Lally in class at the Boston Ballet. photo by Gloria McPherson

classes, improv, Russian style ballet class, a pirouette class, pointe technique. The campus is beautiful and the dorm conditions were wonderful, as was the dining hall.”

We are also quite proud of the work that happened right here in our own studios. Amherst Ballet’s summer intensives are not for lightweights! The faculty and programs are comparable and in some cases more rigorous than other more expensive programs. It certainly helps to bring in top quality faculty such as Richmond Ballet’s Malcolm Burn and Jasmine Grace along with our own excellent Sueann Townsend and Jana Fugate. While we understand how valuable it is to gain a broad range of experiences, we find that the students who study at AB receive more personal attention due to the smaller groups and more consistent time spent studying with faculty than in other programs. Some of our students decided to have the best of both worlds. Heather Eliot, Marissa Ho, Sara Moss-Horwitz, Ethan Schweitzer-Gaslin, and Marianne Wald all came home to attend the programs at AB after studying most of the summer elsewhere!

This year, during our second intensive week, we were able to offer something we never have before, a tutu making workshop! Under the direction of Sueann Townsend, and with help from skilled volunteers Carlton and Linda Ho and Heidi Stemple, 16 students set up shop in the lower studio and made the romantic style tutus used in ballets such as *Les Sylphides*. The week culminated in a lovely performance of choreography in the style of the famous ballet after Michel Fokine as preparation for Amherst Ballet’s upcoming performance with the Pioneer Valley Symphony. It was truly spectacular to see what the students accomplished in one week; not only did they begin to understand the technique required to execute the ballet, they did it wearing tutus they constructed during the workshop!

As newsworthy as the teen intensives weeks are, they aren’t the full story concerning the summer happenings at AB. Weekly classes throughout the summer including intermediate and advanced ballet, beginning adult ballet and modern dance kept us busy. Summer Children’s Workshops presented campers between the ages of 5 and 11 with the prospect of creating their own

costumes and sets and presenting a performance at the end of each week. *The Trouble with Boasting*, *A Greek Myth* found campers performing the story of Andromeda and Perseus in hand-made “chitons” (Greek tunics). In *Under the Big Top*, *A Ballet Circus*, dancers performed in hand-made masks and decorated overlays as a variety of circus characters. The camps were great fun and allowed for creativity all around!

The summer experiences offered by Amherst Ballet are rich and unique. Our summer camps are expensive to run, but when well attended provide an important source of income crucial to the operation of our non-profit entity. We had hoped for our usual enrollment this summer but anticipated that it might be diminished due to the economy and to so many of our students studying at intensive programs around the country. Unfortunately, our predictions were accurate and for the first time in many years our enrollment numbers were down. We hope to continue to bring excellent programming and guest teachers to the area, but these are dependent on the numbers working. We encourage our ballet community to seriously consider supporting Amherst Ballet through summer camp attendance and word of mouth advertising. Without our summer camps and classes we just won’t be the same place!

# 1980'S Amherst Ballet Alumnae Reunion

By founder *Therese Brady Donohue*

Parents usually don't pay attention to the "big picture" when they register their little ones for ballet classes at Amherst Ballet. It takes years for that big picture to be completed. I had the pleasure on August 15<sup>th</sup> to admire the finished product when **Jessica Berins Berke '83** organized a reunion of her fellow dancers from the 1980's. Jessica started by establishing a FACEBOOK site for the 80's Amherst Ballet alums and then took it upon herself to look up and find out where her missed ballet classmates were. Currently there are 36 alumnae who have signed on. With her husband, two daughters and her parents, Jessica hosted a potluck at her parents' home in Amherst which eight alums attended.

**Ana Caban '87** a fitness, Pilates and life style expert currently living in Los Angeles, planned her summer vacation to visit home for the reunion. Her father Juan came with her to photograph the event; Juan did many videos of AB performances while Ana (then Anne) grew up at Amherst Ballet. **Eliza Grannis Lussier '85**, a physical therapist, drove down from Portland, Maine, leaving her three young children with her husband. **Deborah Lardner '87** drove up from Long Island where she is a professor and doctor of global health teaching medical students at the Glen Cove New York Institute of Technology College of Osteopathic Medicine. **Kimberly Heffley McCosker '84** and **Cynthia Kent Brindisi '83** came from the suburbs of Boston. By the end of the reunion day I overheard their plans to get together to take a ballet class; both still look like ballerinas. Kim is the mother of four while Cindy has five children. Cindy is actually dancing with a local group called the "Hip Hop Mamas" and is

looking forward to getting back to her ballet roots this fall when her youngest goes to school full time! **Natania Mitchell-Smith Hume '85** had just relocated to Amherst after moving from Easthampton where she works at the Williston-Northampton School. She brought her father and her beautiful little daughter Adeline with her.



photo by *Juan Caban*

The surprise attendee for me was **Laurie Filios Blanchard '85** who was the first deaf child I ever taught in ballet classes. At age six, her mother insisted that the Clarke School for the Deaf allow her to take ballet with me which meant always taking her out of school early. She was well loved by her fellow dancers. In fact, Jessica Berke became a sign language interpreter for BCCC & Sorenson in Pennsylvania as a result of her friendship with Laurie. She helped Laurie at the reunion with her signing ability although Laurie has always been very good at lip reading. Laurie is expecting her second child in December, a sister for the beautiful two year old daughter that we admired in photos.

The poise, beauty, leadership and confidence of these eight women filled the air, reminding me of their beginnings and the growth of their self esteem throughout their years at Amherst Ballet. Most of them studied at AB for 10-12

years, starting in the 70's, and were among my first students which makes them the backbone of Amherst Ballet. They reminisced about the hours they lived at their ballet school, their favorite memories of ballets wearing my masks and costumes as ducks, squirrels, and characters in *Uncle Wiggily* and *Punch & Judy* ballets. They remembered RAD (Royal Academy of Dance) exams and dances, and could still hum the music and do some of the steps. Cindy even showed us her steps as Mrs. Wibble Wobble in Mabel Garis' story *Uncle Wiggily and the Duck Pond*, written for Amherst Ballet back in the 70's. They all had great fun recalling which part they had danced in which ballet.

"I remember the moments just before RAD exams when we were nervous and confident and the reassuring final touches Mrs. D. gave as she put on our ribbons and pins. I felt very proud to be part of our school." *Eliza Grannis Lussier*

"I remember being a duck in *Uncle Wiggily!* I can still do the duck wiggle! We went on tours to perform for nearby schools which were so much fun." *Natania Mitchell-Smith Hume*

"I remember lots of things from ABTCO. But, I have to say that I loved when we traveled to perform at museums. I felt so important being invited to perform at the Guggenheim and National Gallery of Art." *Ana Caban*

"My favorite memories with Amherst Ballet are the ones I have from the production weeks before performances at the Fine Arts Center. I had such fun with all my friends in the Company: warming up on stage to cool music, running through the balconies, eating dinner back stage, doing each other's hair in French braids, and staying up late. I never could get all my stage make-up off before school the next day either!" *Cynthia Kent Brindisi*

# Chopiniana

by Sueann Townsend



◀ Anna Plummer,  
Maddison Stemple-Piatt,  
Sophie Brown,  
Sara Moss-Horwitz,  
Julia Fissore-O'Leary,  
Pilar Solomon-Jefferson.  
photo by Catherine Fair

Mikhail Fokine's ballet *Chopiniana* (or *Les Sylphides*) captured my interest early in my studies as a pre-professional student at the Interlochen Arts Academy. I had played some of the Chopin piano pieces that comprise the score, had poured over still photos of the work in ballet books, and had read descriptions of the ballet. When finally I saw the ballet in full, I was not disappointed. In fact I thought it too much to hope for that I would ever be allowed to dance in this particular ballet. It was my extreme good fortune that this ballet was part of the first production of the season during my first year as a member of Louisville Ballet. Being a bit of an overachiever (or just overly diligent), I made it my duty to write down all the steps, geometric shapes, and floor patterns of the corps de ballet. Later I went back and completed my notes to include the solos and pas de deux. It is with these notes

in hand that I have been able to help stage *Chopiniana* for Amherst Ballet.

We began testing the Amherst Ballet students' ability to handle this work by staging the opening section of the ballet as part of the summer workshop. Encouraged by their in-studio performance and with the Pioneer Valley Symphony invitation on the table, we decided to "go for broke" and stage the whole ballet. We have had to make some accommodations because Amherst Ballet is a student company. For instance, the corps de ballet is traditionally comprised of eight girls of roughly uniform size. Amherst Ballet simply does not have those personnel available at this time. So the interesting problem became how to make the geometry of the piece balance while using a wide range of heights. Only in the pas de deux have we found it necessary to make accommodations in the actual steps. This is not due to ability (or lack thereof), but to physical maturity. One cannot expect teenage dancers to accomplish some of the lifts in the original choreography. Jana Fugate has been responsible for adapting the pas de deux, and has found a way to preserve the shape of the original choreography without overtaxing the dancers.

As a young dancer it was always special to me to dance historically important ballets — to think I was dancing the same steps that great dancers throughout the years had danced. It was a meager way to interact with history. While staging a ballet I always try to provide a bit of a history lesson along with the actual choreography. I only hope that the Amherst Ballet dancers feel as honored as I felt to be a participant in this great work.

## Amherst Ballet Dancers in *A House for Hermit Crab*

This fall's *A House for Hermit Crab* is the sixth production for The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art by Amherst Ballet founder Therese Brady Donohue. As long-time audience members of Amherst Ballet productions know, Therese is a master mask and costume maker and has turned her talents to creating them for Picture Book Theatre especially since retiring from Amherst Ballet.

Therese has been interpreting picture books by Eric Carle and one by Leo Lionni since the museum opened in 2003. Her productions include *The Very Lonely Firefly* (2003 & 2008), *Honeybee and the Robber* (2004), *A House for Hermit Crab* (2006 & 2009), *Tico and the Golden Wings* by Lionni (2007), *A Rooster is off to See the World* (2008) and *Mister Seahorse* (2009). In all of these productions (except *Mister Seahorse* performed with stick puppets), Therese uses Amherst Ballet dancers, some quite young, to bring the picture books to life. Her productions are incredible



photo by Bing Liang

collaborations with original scores composed for the stories and local (often well-known) narrators recording the texts. We hope you will enjoy Therese's latest production and Amherst Ballet dancers in *A House for Hermit Crab* on Saturdays throughout November and Friday November 27.



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## Upcoming Events

MON, NOVEMBER 16	DEAN'S BEANS COFFEE FUNDRAISER begins; ends Dec. 7
FRI, NOVEMBER 20	CLASSES MEET in spite of Amherst Schools Curriculum Day
NOVEMBER 24 – 28	No classes, <b>Thanksgiving Holiday</b> . Classes meet Monday November 23. Note rehearsals November 24. Classes resume Monday November 30.
TUES, NOVEMBER 24	PIONEER VALLEY SYMPHONY rehearsals at AB
WED, DECEMBER 2	PIONEER VALLEY SYMPHONY rehearsals in Deerfield.
SAT, DECEMBER 5	UPPER SCHOOL PRESENTATION 7:00pm, Amherst Regional Middle School Auditorium. Lower School and public invited.
THURS, DECEMBER 10	No Upper School classes. PIONEER VALLEY SYMPHONY rehearsals at Greenfield High School
SAT, DECEMBER 12	PIONEER VALLEY SYMPHONY <i>Holiday Magic</i> performance at Greenfield High School 7:00pm. <i>Chopiniana</i> and excerpts from <i>The Nutcracker</i> . Tickets available at <a href="http://www.pvso.org/tickets.html">www.pvso.org/tickets.html</a>
DECEMBER 14 – 19	Visitors' week for Lower School
DEC 21 – JAN 3	School Vacation. No regular classes.
MON, DECEMBER 21	Advanced ballet & senior YAGP classes meet
MON, JANUARY 4	Classes resume
FEBRUARY 19 – 21	Youth America Grand Prix semi-finals. Providence, RI