

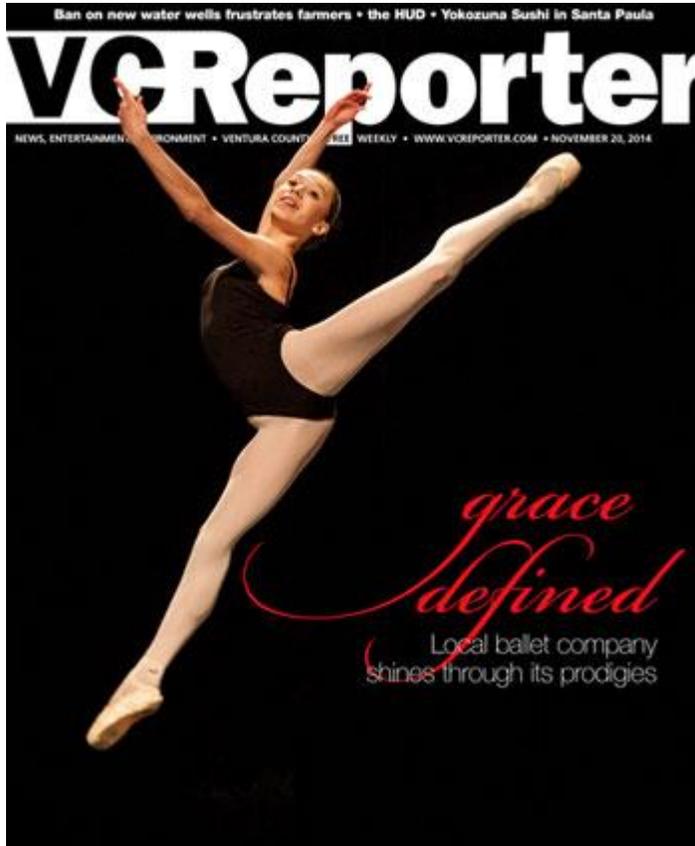
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Grace defined

Local ballet company shines through its prodigies

By Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer 11/20/2014



It's hard to match the beauty, elegance and pageantry that ballet brings to the stage. Dancers leap, pirouette, kick and caper across the floorboards with impossible grace and clockwork timing, seemingly defying gravity while making it look effortless. Of course, ballet is anything but. Those elegant poses and expressive movements can only be mastered after years of dedication and single-minded focus. For most professional-level dancers, including some performing in the Ventura County Ballet Company's 2014 production

of *The Nutcracker*, that means immersing themselves in ballet's all-consuming world around 11 years old ... or younger. It's not for the faint of heart. "It's a very competitive world," noted Kathleen Noblin, the ballet company's founder and executive director. "I think a child has to be emotionally strong."

The family of Jazmine Quezada, of Oxnard, a promising student at Ballet Academy Ventura (operated by Ventura County Ballet Company) has made every effort to accommodate their daughter's talent and dreams. "She's a 24-7 mom," Mario Quezada, Jazmine's father, said of his wife, Rebecca. And

she has to be: 14-year-old Jazmine started classes when she was 2, and currently trains up to three hours a day during the offseason, twice that while preparing for a performance. This year, she'll be starring as Clara in *The Nutcracker*. "Coming to the studio from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. most nights is pretty standard for us right now," Rebecca said. And yes, Jazmine is homeschooled. "She didn't want to miss a single ballet class," Rebecca explained. To fit in academics, Rebecca carries a basket of school supplies and curricula with her everywhere, providing instruction between classes, rehearsals and other commitments. When Jazmine earned a scholarship to a summer program at the American Ballet Theater in San Francisco, her parents rented an RV — cheaper than a Bay Area apartment — and parked it a few hours outside of town where they could live during the course.



Photos by: T Christian Gapen

Jazmine does her part as well. Her commitment to her classes is extraordinary — "She'd stay here all the time if we let her," Noblin laughed — and she offsets tuition costs by working with younger students at the ballet academy and assisting with the Creative Movement classes. "When other girls are running around having fun, she's working," Noblin said. "Children working like this are giving back, and they are helping in the opportunity to train." Jazmine doesn't enjoy a lot of free time, but when she has it, she spends it stretching or practicing on her own. She lives and breathes dance, and wouldn't have it any other way. "I want more," Jazmine said. "When I dance, I feel like myself."

Jazmine shares her passion with many aspiring ballerinas, including Kate Kadow, who will be starring with Jazmine in this year's *The Nutcracker*.

"I've been preparing to be a professional for as long as I can remember," said Kadow, who came to the Central Coast in 2012 after stints with Miami's Cuban Classical Ballet and Morphoses in New York City. Now 23, she started her training at 8, enrolling in the prestigious ballet school at the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet. Even then, her talent and ambition stood out. "When [schools] see that passion and drive at 8, it's unique," Kadow admitted. She practiced five hours a day, seven days a week, studying technique, pointe, performance essentials, etc. — rigorous but typical for dancers in a pre-professional program.

Major ballet companies have schools attached, not unlike boarding schools, where dancers live and study ballet as well as academics. But that's not true of every ballet school, and not every community can boast a pre-professional program like Ventura County Ballet Company. Hopeful ballet dancers come from all over the world to study at these prestigious institutions, and that can mean significant sacrifice for the dancers and their families. Tuition can cost hundreds of dollars every month, homeschooling is very common (and almost a necessity, due to the time commitment of a pre-professional program) and some families end up relocating to support their children's ambitions. Kadow's mother moved with her daughter so she could attend Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, while her father stayed home in Florida to support the family. "I was just a really lucky person in that my parents were willing to do it," said Kadow, who takes on the role of Dream Clara in this year's production of *The Nutcracker*. "I am so appreciative."

The pretty ballerina poised perfectly en pointe is the stuff of dreams for girls like Jazmine and Kadow, but little boys have heard — and answered — this clarion call as well. John Piel, who will play Drosselmeyer, finds that more men are getting interested in ballet. When he first started at age 4, he was frequently the only boy in his ballet classes. "There was a time when guys would get scholarships and free classes, just to get them interested," said the 30-year-old dancer. "Now I see two or three guys in my classes."

Training for boys isn't vastly different from that for girls early on but, as they get older, strength — for lifting, long jumps, tricks and turns — becomes increasingly important, as does their "ligne," or the way the outline of the body complements the ballerinas. "The fitness and strength of a male

dancer beats most football players," Piel said. "And they have to adapt," Noblin added, "Adaptability is the most important thing for a male dancer." This becomes crucial when mistakes or changes to choreography happen at the last minute — the male dancer needs to adjust on the fly while maintaining form. "You have to think on your feet to save the moment," Piel said. And, as 23-year-old Jackson Stewart (Snow King) explained, the man's most important role in a performance is to enhance the technique of the female dancers. "Basically, it's all about making the girl look good."

Like Piel, Stewart has seen an increase in the number of men entering classical ballet at the professional level, and thinks this has to do with ballet's growing visibility. "I feel like ballet is more in the public eye today," he said, but acknowledges that it's a double-edged sword. "It's a hard time right now. There's a lot of competition out there. There's a ton of dancers — really *good* dancers — looking for work." Noblin agreed, adding that the economy has exacerbated that problem. Art programs across the board struggle with fewer funds and smaller grants, and ballet companies simply can't afford as many dancers or as many performances as they used to. Sergei Domrachev (this year's *Nutcracker*), a Russian émigré who trained at the world-renowned Perm Ballet Academy, has been performing in the United States since 1994, and has seen dramatic changes in the world of classical ballet. "Now everyone works a lot less. Where once you'd have two or three performances, now you do one." Ballet careers tend to be shorter for men as well. "We have a lot of lifting, jumps, deep plies — high impact activities," Stewart said. "Your knees give out."

Male or female, how a dancer's body changes through the years is always a factor. Dancers have to audition for a pre-professional program and, as Noblin explained, it's always "body first. Lung capacity, height, flexibility, how you move. And they look at the physicality of parents, too, to get an idea of what the child is going to look like later." Most dancers aiming for a professional career start around 11 or 12, right at the beginning of puberty: an unpredictable time, physically. "You're growing and your body is constantly changing," Stewart explained, and dancers are constantly training to compensate for that. But sometimes even perfect technique can't overcome an awkward height or *lignè*. "Bodies sometimes fail you," Noblin says. "Some dancers who are unbelievable as youngsters mature into something really different." Criticism is unrelenting, too. "That's one thing that ballet teaches you," Stewart said, "you have to be willing to take criticism. It's not personal; it's really about improving your form and technique. But you need to be receptive to it."

Still, ballet has also changed through the years. Contemporary ballet is coming more into vogue, and choreographers are blending modern forms of dance with classical styles. "Contemporary and modern dance are much more accommodating," Noblin says. "Years ago, everybody was Twiggy. Now you do see more womanly bodies dancing ballet." Kadow came of age when the classical ballet was everything and had to adjust in later years to make herself more marketable. "When I was growing up, classical ballet was *it*. If you explored other dance forms, it meant you weren't serious," she recalled. "Today, more modern forms are becoming necessary. There are techniques that I had to learn to continue dancing professionally." Nevertheless, there's no substitute for classical ballet techniques. As Domrachev said, "Classical ballet dancers can dance modern, but modern dancers can't necessarily dance classical ballet."

Years of training, a childhood exchanged for technique, continuous criticism, steep financial output, the risk of injury or a promise unmet: It takes tremendous grit to go the distance in ballet. Even the most stalwart dancers can succumb to the pressure. "I took some time away," Kadow said. "Sometimes you get what you want, and it's not always what you want. So the dream changes." Stewart admits to having doubts about his career path at times. "I danced for a year, and wasn't really sure if that was what I wanted. So I took a year off." But ultimately, neither could resist ballet's pull. "You always come back to it when you love something that deeply," says Kadow.

That love comes through when these consummate professionals take the stage, bringing the world's best-known ballets to glorious, vibrant, mesmerizing life. The achy muscles, split toes, and nagging doubts fall away as these dancers live the dreams they've spent a lifetime making real through blood, sweat and tears. □

The Ventura County Ballet Company's 2014 production of The Nutcracker starts Nov. 22 at the Oxnard Performing Arts Center, and Dec. 13 at the Ventura College Performing Arts Center. For more information go to www.venturacountyballet.com or call (805) 648-2080.

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