

NOUVELLES DU BALLET

Newsletter of Champaign Urbana Ballet

Fall 2009



ASPIRATIONS OF A CLASSICAL ATHLETE

Company dancer Mason Anders in studio. He dances over 20 hours each week in ballet classes and rehearsals with CU Ballet. Photo by Jason Lindsey.

These days in ballet, men are getting lots of attention. What Baryshnikov and Nureyev began in the 1970s has evolved to a level of athleticism and showmanship where men are expected to shine as brightly as their ballerina counterparts.

For increasing numbers of local male dancers, the art is feeling every bit like a competition sport with physical and mental demands that challenge and consume them, even from a very early age.

When Mason Anders was seven years old, he would walk past Deanna Doty's former studio in Urbana while running errands in town with his mother. He'd look through the window, fascinated by dancers taking class, so his mother enrolled him at Champaign Ballet Academy (CBA). By the time he was 10, Mason knew he wanted ballet as a profession; a decade later, he is well on his way.

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One glimpse at this classic pose and you know it's the season for:

- a) six geese a laying
- b) seven swans a swimming
- c) another Tchaikovsky masterpiece from CU Ballet



Photo by Dan Merlo.

SWAN LAKE

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CLASSICAL ATHLETE

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Six days a week at CBA, Mason works on lifting, turning, and jumping while increasing his upper and lower body strength. There are technical challenges that need constant attention; it's easy to let the finer points of good technique slip. He focuses on arm placement and manipulates his leg muscles to improve turnout. He studies choreography painstakingly, step by step, working to precisely fit each movement to music. The seeming effortless of the male dancer who strides and glides gracefully across a stage belies the many hours of exacting rehearsal, the sore muscles, and the moments of frustration. Perhaps more than athletes of any sport, the male ballet dancer must show grace under pressure.

Outside of the studio and the stage where ballet fans of all ages appreciate the dancers' skill and talent, young male dancers may face a less appreciative audience among schoolmates who equate ballet with tutus, not technique. For Mason, such perceptions were a low hurdle early on, quickly surmounted through the confidence he gained in ballet class and the support of his family, parents Phil and Patience Anders, and sister Autumn, a first-year company dancer.

30⁺%

The faces of CU Ballet are changing as an abundance of male dancers join the ranks of the company. Over 30% of company dancers, 31% of apprentice dancers, and 33% of *Nutcracker* cast members are men.

Turn out to see the men of CU Ballet's company in *T*

Mason Anders, 16

Cavalier, partnering Sugar Plums
Chloe Cooper and Alexis Hedge

Mark Deler, 19

Dancing Doll, Arabian pas de deux, Russian pas de deux

Johnathan Shepherd, 22

Arabian pas de deux, Russian

"I like what I'm doing.
I feel I'm good at it.
I like the athletic part
of being in dance."

"It really isn't a problem for me. I like what I'm doing, and I feel I'm good at it, so I don't pay attention to anyone who tries to give me a hard time." Mason describes the positives, "I like the athletic part of being in dance; it's a wonderful way to stay in shape, to exercise, to be a part of something, and all of it will help me become a professional."

Eventually he will leave the security of Doty's close attention and the comforts of his home studio. Aspiring professionals strive for acceptance in a ballet school that is connected to a professional company, usually in a metropolitan area, hoping to get noticed by artistic directors.

Mason has explored this next step by attending summer ballet intensives at both the Milwaukee and Boston Ballet programs. There, for four to six weeks, dancers are taught by ballet professionals who work with students of the highest potential. Working with other dancers during summer intensives has further motivated him to pursue ballet as a profession.

When Mason decides that the time is right to leave Champaign for a professional training school, he will audition in person or by video. Also required: a variation from a ballet classic that shows off his strongest attributes—Mason is leaning toward a selection from *Le Corsaire*. Boston Ballet school is at the top of his list; teachers there communicated an interest in him staying this school year, but he chose to return to his support base and training in Champaign. Financing this final stage in professional training is also expensive, and one hopes that whatever school he prefers will offer him scholarship assistance. Mason sees himself as increasingly independent and looks forward to the milestones ahead.

For now, his focus must remain on the daily challenge of growing as a dancer, and his teacher Deanna Doty is nurturing his talent and drive. Together they are working on his technique and rehearsing his upcoming performances as the Cavalier in *The Nutcracker* and Prince Siegfried in CU Ballet's *Swan Lake*. The latter is an especially challenging role, but an important one, as *Swan Lake* is one of the most frequently performed classical ballets and demands great depth from its male lead.

Like Misha and Rudi before him, Mason hopes to make his mark in the ballet world. Transitioning from Krannert Center to Lincoln Center is quite a leap, but then again, he's got a pretty good jump on it.

- Constance Hosier

For artistic director Deanna Doty, this accomplishment, rare among pre-professional companies, is the result of many years' effort to attract and retain male talent. "We've worked hard to create opportunities for male dancers—for them to realize a progression so that bigger roles and more challenging choreography awaits them in the seasons ahead. Male dancers need to be supported, nurtured, and celebrated locally for this to continue."

The Nutcracker at Krannert Center this December.

Gibby Kirby, 26

*Dancing Doll, Captain,
Arabian pas de deux,
Russian*

Ben Chapman, 12

*Captain, Herald, Ribbon
Candy pas de deux*

Ashler Uebele, 13

*Nutcracker Prince,
partnering Claras Lia
Jordan and Marie Tender*

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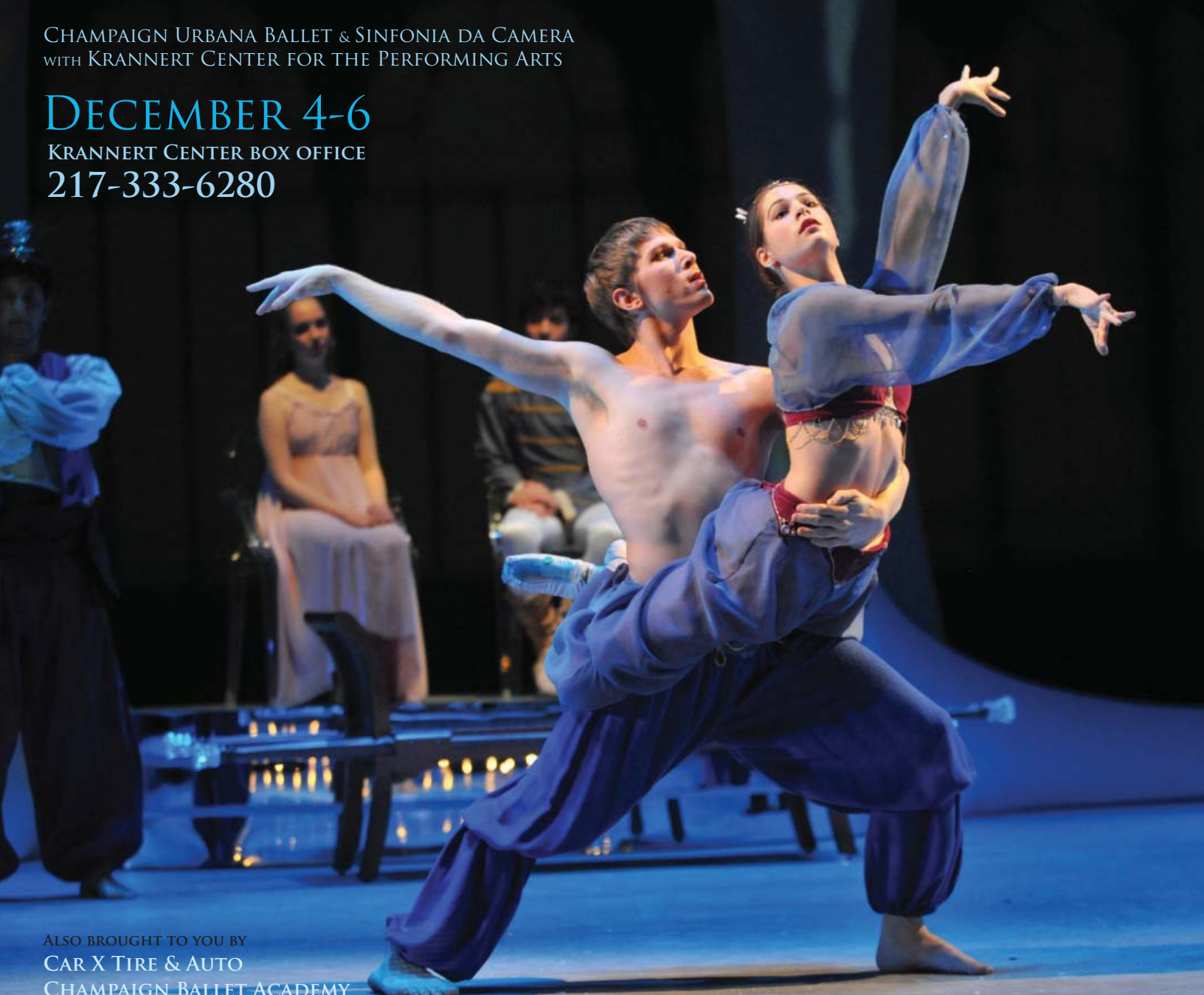
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Company dancers Erica Johnston and Gibby Kirby dance the Arabian pas de deux, Act II, *The Nutcracker*. Photo by Dan Merlo.