

En l'Air

News from
MASSACHUSETTS
ACADEMY of
BALLET
Educational Training
Association

SPRING
2014



Charles shows the foxes how to properly break through a line of chickens during a costumed run-through at Mt. Holyoke College, a few days before the Youth America Grand Prix competition in Providence.

The Making of a Chicken Dance

by Charles Flachs, Co-Artistic Director of Massachusetts Academy of Ballet

How does one choreograph? People often imagine that you need to go to school and attend rigorous dance sessions with complicated movements and ideas, painstakingly piecing together a dance with your intellectual powers. I have never been able to do that! In fact I think my process is often quite the opposite. I find music I like or an interesting idea, and then see how I can present the dance to the best effect for the dancers and the idea. I am not suggesting that it is an easy process, as nothing worth doing is really easy, but while challenging, it is also very satisfying to have a creation that is enjoyable for the dancers and the audience.

The most effective choreographers are those who do it regularly. My dance history teacher said that for every successful ballet that Balanchine created, he made four or five others that were just average at best. He choreographed whenever he could. He even made dances for elephants in the circus. Just like most jobs, the more you do it the more accomplished you can become.

Another aspect of choreography is the ability to bring your own life experiences into the work. I am not ashamed to say that I have taken movements that I like from other choreographers and used them in my own work. Having a long dance career has certainly informed my choreography.

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Another Successful Nutcracker & Sweets

Nutcracker & Sweets 2013 was a huge success. MAB and MABETA students performed seven shows to sold out audiences at Wistariahurst Museum. Nearly 750 tickets were sold. The performance featured a brand new, 12-foot tall Christmas tree and new lighting by CJC Event Lighting. We have already set dates for this year's Nutcracker and Sweets: Mark your calendar for December 12-14. Tickets will go on sale October 14th; mark that date on your calendar as well—as the reputation of our wonderful show grows, more and more families make it an annual tradition, and we sell out fast! See a few of this year's photos on the back page of the newsletter.

And Gwendolyn Dances On...

After a successful 2013 tour of *Gwendolyn the Graceful Pig*, an original ballet choreographed by Charles Flachs to accompany a children's picture book by author David Rothenberg, MABETA collaborates again with the author to present a sequel, *Gwendolyn Goes to Hollywood*, at local libraries and schools this summer and fall. This program is supported in part by a grant from the Chicopee and Holyoke Local Cultural Councils.



Massachusetts Cultural Council

The Massachusetts Academy of Ballet

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Generally there is nothing new under that sun, only different variations of the same thing and if I am going to steal, I will do it from the best! A choreographer's own experiences are what bring the individual flavor to their work. That is why it is fun to watch certain artists who can craft dance



Warm-up class in Providence

in many different ways but still leave their own stamp on the work. A favorite choreographer of mine is Paul Taylor—his choreography has an extremely eclectic range, from the whimsical to the very serious. He is also a writer and painter as well as a dance maker. I think he is a genius and his life has certainly informed his artistry.

There is also always a little experimentation in making dances, as it is important to use the skills of the dancers you have and not get lost in the technical aspect of the art form. After all, there are no codified steps in ballet that are related to chickens so we have to make them up. The "Chicken Dance" began with an interest in Glenn Miller's big band piece "In the Mood." The piece is very well known to those of us at a certain age, but I found a rendition in which chickens' voices filled in the instrumental lines. I began to think that it could be a fun piece for the younger kids, but I needed to try and work some meaning into a short two minute and thirty seconds' worth of music. Having raised chickens where I grew up, I knew first hand of the relationship between chickens and foxes, and wondered what it would be like if this time the chickens won the battle of nature. In my imagination that is what happens in our piece. No chickens or foxes were harmed in this piece, making it another fairy tale ballet!

Oh yes, I forgot the most important part of this process...*having fun!*

Off to College: A MABETA Veteran Prepares to Graduate

by *Louisa Rader*



I have really enjoyed my time at Massachusetts Academy of Ballet and I know that though I will miss everyone, I will be leaving with a strong background and foundation for whatever I want to do. I have been in level 5 for three years now and have done several years of Nutcracker, playing a variety of roles as well as the many different variations that we have learned in the summer and for the end-of-the-year spring performance. I know that I will use what I have learned from my time here out in the world and later in my life.

Looking back on when I first came to MAB, I cannot believe how far I have come. I have grown so much, both as a dancer and as a person. I remember how much I looked up to the older kids and now I am one of the oldest in the studio, and an example for the younger ones. I was a shy, reserved child when I first started dancing with Rose and Charles, and now I have become a more confident person and dancer. I have grown a lot since I first started and I look forward to continuing to grow and change with new experiences.

When I first started dancing at MAB, I was unsure about what I wanted to do with dance. I didn't think the professional dance world was for me; it is highly competitive and demanding, which wasn't where I wanted to be. Yet, I still was passionate about dance and wanted to keep dancing

seriously. I then entered my junior year of high school and began looking at colleges. I had almost no idea what I wanted, causing me to have a list of over 4,000 schools, just in the northeast. Then, I decided that despite not wanting to dance professionally, I could still be serious about dance in college and see where that takes me. Once I added a serious and comprehensive dance program to my specifications, the list of colleges dropped to under twenty. I have always been juggling a challenging academic course load in high school with the many hours of classes and rehearsals that Level 5 requires, so I could finally merge both into my college experience. I also like the idea that there will be many other people doing exactly what I will be doing and who could end up both being in my ballet class one semester and my calculus class next semester. Despite not wanting to enter a conservatory or skip college and attempt to make it in the dance world, I have allowed for myself to keep dancing after I graduate high school.

I am looking forward to the next few years of my life. I will be more independent while living in a dorm at college and I will be able to pursue all of my interests in one place. I appreciate the training I have received in my years at MAB, and I head off to college with confidence that I'll be able to continue to pursue my passion for dance.

Laurel Raffetto Works with MABETA Dancers on New Contemporary Piece

by Amy Crowley



Laurel Raffetto has been performing, teaching, and creating work with artists and students in various private schools, local dance studios, and colleges such as Mount Holyoke College, Keene State College, Northfield Mount Hermon School, Deerfield Academy, Amherst Ballet, and Karen's Dance Studio in Greenfield. She has been the Director of Dance at Williston Northampton since 2007. MAB board member Amy Crowley sat down with Laurel to learn more about her background and her current collaborations with our studio.

Where and what type of dance did you study?

I grew up taking mostly jazz classes at a local studio in Needham, Mass. I later realized that the jazz I studied was heavily infused

with modern style and that I was fortunate enough to have been taught very strong technique. In college I wanted to take every type of dance I could find and was driven to reach advanced levels in all forms.

I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in dance at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. My dance teacher growing up—who was a huge inspiration to me—had gone there and told me about the Five College program, which allows students to take dance classes at all of the five major colleges in the Valley. This is how I met Rose and Charles, taking their classes at Mt. Holyoke through this program. I then went on to get a Master's degree at Smith College in Choreography and Performance.

Tell us about your evolution as a choreographer.

My first real job out of graduate school was teaching dance at Northfield Mount Hermon, which had a growing dance program. They put on three dance concerts each year, so I very quickly became prolific at choreography. The biggest challenge for me in the beginning was trying to find just the right material to fit the body of students I had at any moment. At Northfield and other schools where I've worked, the students came from different backgrounds all over the world and had varied dance experience. I ended up loving to work with students of varying levels of knowledge, technique, and artistry, and as a result, my work aims to emphasize the individual dancers' strengths and doesn't have a cookie-cutter aesthetic.

My time at Northfield was a real training ground for who I am today as a teacher and choreographer. I came to understand that the learning environment must be safe so students are comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. My top priority since that time has been to ensure a safe and supportive teaching environment and to inspire students. The by-product of dance is the performance, but the real teaching takes place in the process. I love helping students work through challenging material. The ability to maintain discipline and work through obstacles in dance is parallel to life. And you are more likely to succeed if you feel safe and have good guides and mentors. I've taken this approach everywhere I've worked since.

How did you connect with MAB?

I first started teaching at MAB during the summer program in 2013. I put together a few small

pieces for the little kids and more ambitious pieces for the older students. What I appreciate about Rose and Charles is that they hold the students to a high level of expectation. The work the MAB students do takes such precision, and the students learn early to pay attention to the smaller subtle aspects of movement. The art is in the details.

Through my instruction, I get the students to pay attention to how the movement feels and not worry too much what it looks like right away. I show them how the body is a natural vehicle to show emotion and tell a story—how the body can communicate meaning and feelings through subtle weight shifts, contraction, and releasing. There's a beautifully human element to modern movement. It doesn't have the same aesthetic as ballet, but it has authenticity. There's a story even in those raw, "ugly" moments.

How has your experience been with the MAB students?

Awesome. I love working with the students here. Rose and Charles do such a great job teaching these kids to become great dancers and hard workers. A lot of people don't understand the value of work, but here the students learn that everything is achieved through effort, persistence, desire, and motivation. This is an essential life lesson.

How do the MAB-trained students adapt to modern dance?

There can be some hesitation for ballet dancers to step out of their comfort zone. Improvisation can be a tough transition. Instead of executing exact form, I'm asking them to listen to their own body, to follow their own in-

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MAB's Dancing Mothers Welcome Their Bouncing Baby Boys!

A conversation with Debra Vega and Matisse Madden about dancing, teaching, performing and motherhood

By MAB Faculty Member Cathy Johnson

There is nothing more special than welcoming a baby into this world! All of us at MAB are so happy to welcome TWO new baby boys into our dancing family: Odin Michael Vega and Aurelius Clyde Madden. I recently had the pleasure of discussing what it means to be a dancing mother with faculty members Debra Vega and Matisse Madden.

Cathy: We are all anxious to hear about these beautiful baby boys! Could you give us some details about Odin and Aurelius?

Debra: My husband Aaron and I welcomed Odin Michael Vega on November 15, 2013 at 2:05am. He was 5lbs 3oz and 19 inches long. He is a good eater and has grown a lot! He coos and makes lots of sounds as if he's holding conversations with us...a very vocal young man with a lot to say! We try to "read" a book every day. Right now his favorite is a tactile book about dinosaurs.



Debra and Odin Vega

Matisse: Aurelius Clyde Madden was born on February 2, 2014. He weighed in at 6 lbs 2 oz and was 19 inches long. He was happily welcomed into this world by his dad Jared, his big brother Rockwell (age 3½), and me.

Cathy: Could you give us some brief background information about your training, teaching and performing experiences as well as your current dancing schedule?

Debra: I was born and raised in Fort Wayne, IN and took dance classes starting at age

four. As I grew up, I was taking classes in tap, jazz, ballet and Hawaiian. I attended Ball State University, Muncie, IN, majoring in Dance Performance and minoring in Theatre. I also added extensive modern classes, clogging, and many ethnic dance styles to my practices while taking part in many musicals. It was my junior year in college when our school put on the musical *A Chorus Line*. This is when the light bulb went off for me, and I thought "THIS is what I want to do the rest of my life!" As a performer, I earned a living in New York City for ten years doing musical theatre. I am also a proud member of Actor's Equity Association (AEA) and American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA). I have taught dance over twenty-five years, locally at the Massachusetts Academy of Ballet (MAB), Williston Northampton Academy, Elms College and as a Visiting Professor at Mount Holyoke College.

I have always loved choreography and have choreographed numerous professional AEA productions around the country, as well as area productions of *Pippin*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The Music Man*. Currently, I'm choreographing Williston Academy's production of *Urinetown*, as well as Mount Holyoke College's production of *Rent*.

Yoga is also a big part of my life, both as a student and a teacher. My husband and I opened Vega Yoga & Movement Arts, www.vegayoga.com, in Holyoke, MA in 2008. Aside from our weekly classes, we also try to offer yoga outreach in our community, especially to teens and children. In addition to owning a business in Holyoke, my husband is Aaron Vega, State Representative for Holyoke. So, the two of us are extremely invested in our Holyoke community!

Matisse: I am from a small island called Kauai. I was very lucky to have a wonderful ballet teacher named Jennifer Bell-Grey who danced with the Royal Ballet and graduated from the prestigious teacher training program. My sophomore year of college, I had been dancing for a small professional



Matisse and Aurelius Madden

company while I pursued a zoology major. I decided to add another major (dance). I auditioned for companies, applied to graduate schools, and ultimately decided to pursue my MFA at the University of Utah. In Salt Lake City, I had the chance to dance with Ballet West. After graduation, I did a visiting professorship at Mount Holyoke College for one year and then received a contract with Connecticut Ballet, where I danced for 6 years. I also teach ballet at Yale University. At this time I am on maternity leave, but I will start teaching again in the next few weeks at the colleges and hopefully dance again in the fall.

Cathy: You both danced/worked right up to your due dates. Did you feel prepared for your baby's delivery being in such good shape as a dancer? Has it been or will it be difficult to return to work after the birth of your sons?

Debra: I taught either dance or yoga right up until I was due. Being a first time mother, I did take it easy the last two weeks before my due date. I am so thankful to have such an understanding of my body as I went through labor. I chose not to use any medication, so luckily dancers have a high pain tolerance. I could have not made it through without a yoga breathing technique that I used during contractions. And at the point

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instincts, be completely in the moment, and to tap into the flow of their own individual creativity.

Ultimately, their work ethic helps them overcome insecurities. The students want to learn and grow. I've never had a rehearsal that hasn't been revealing or rewarding in some way. That's part of the joy of being a choreographer. I get to enter a room of wonderfully talented people and have this blank canvas. Watching them move, I get to know them individually and get them to come out of their ballet mind. I tell them to put on their "modern minds." This allows them to approach movement differently, and infuse their individuality a little more into the work. So much of dance training is structured; I give the students a chance to explore and find their own way.

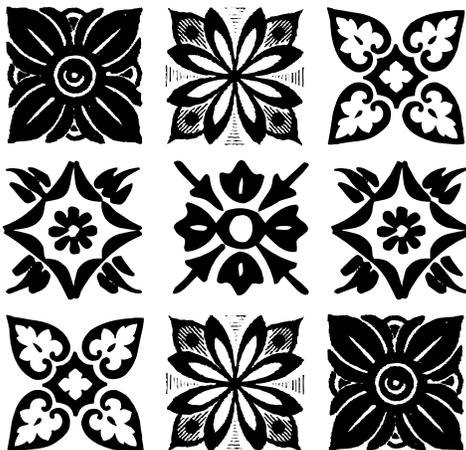
What are you working on now at MAB?

I'm working with a group of advanced students on a piece for the Spring Performance. For my own growth, I'm trying to move into some contemporary movement and figuring out how that works with instrumental music by Ólafur Arnalds. I'm using two pieces of music that move into each other organically. I wanted to see if I could choreograph a dance where the movement has its own story and becomes the lyrics to the music. I wanted to develop a piece that challenges the dancers with movement that would be meaningful to them to perform and also inspire imagery or memory for the audience.

Laurel will be teaching modern dance again during MAB's 2014 summer intensive sessions.

Kate's Kitchen Annual Benefit Performance

This was our seventh year presenting Dance to Stop Hunger, a benefit performance for Kate's Kitchen in Holyoke. This annual event has raised nearly \$2,000 for Providence Ministries and the Massachusetts Academy of Ballet Educational Training Association. More than sixty people attended the 2014 performance, including family, members of the local community and Brittany Noble, a representative from Kate's Soup Kitchen. The photos below show some of the pieces (a few as "works in progress") performed by our students and faculty.



that just breathing wasn't enough, I was able to vocalize through the contractions with something that resembled "Om" (but not as pretty). Once it was time to push, my dancer's mind and body totally got it. My body post-partum took some time to heal. I did not pressure myself to do too much too fast. I was very tired in the beginning. Little by little I felt more ready to exercise again. I started with a little bit of yoga. By January (about the month and a half mark), I started teaching dance and yoga again. I only did what felt right. Now I feel more like myself again...my energy level is back and my body is ready for more dynamic movement. At age 42, I think I'm doing pretty well with bouncing back thus far!

Matisse: Dancing through pregnancy was the ultimate pas de deux! While pregnant and still dancing, I would imagine myself dancing with a partner. It was a tender and intimate experience. I enjoyed it so much and will always remember it fondly.

The second time around I was much smarter about taking care of my body. My hips really hurt during my first pregnancy, but this time I was able to see a doctor and monitor the problem. I always warmed up and cooled down properly (which is a good habit even if one is not pregnant). I also did some physical therapy. It paid off in the end! I was taking ballet class (including jumps and a little pointe work) up until the day I gave birth. I have much more compassion for my male ballet partners now that I have lugged around the extra weight in ballet class!

Cathy: Has being a new mother changed the way you approach teaching/dancing/performing?

Debra: I think having less time to plan my classes has been challenging, but it also has made me able to work more efficiently. I know I only have a certain amount of time to come up with choreography (mainly while Odin is sleeping), so now I must focus and just get it done. Odin loves to bounce and be held, so sometimes I practice movement with him in my arms. He especially loves it when I tap dance...I think it must be the sound and all that bouncing!

Matisse: Becoming a mother has given me a reverence for the process of creation. I had a friend say to me "Pregnancy is the most creative time of your life." It is true! I was creating a new person. I feel I have become more open to possibilities to better my own dancing, create movement for class and formal choreography. I am not as cautious or reluctant as I once was. I am also more aware of the privilege it is to dance and to make a living doing it. Every moment I rehearse is a moment away from my babies, so I make every moment count.

Cathy: It is hard to juggle, for sure! What do you find is the biggest challenge as you negotiate a balance between motherhood and dancing/teaching?

Debra: Well, of course now my biggest concern is child care and making sure the baby will be able to eat while I'm gone...I am exclusively breast feeding at this point. Each day I have a different teaching schedule, so I must stay on top of the daily childcare arrangements. Although going back to work has been hectic at times, it is still a part-time schedule and I have plenty of quality time with Odin, which is important to me.

Matisse: I love to travel and getting to places is quite a challenge with two little boys! During the first months of nursing, baby must go where Mom goes...and also my three year old has strong "opinions" about where he wants to be. Getting to class can be a challenge sometimes. It is daunting unless I use my imagination. I pretend every outing is an epic voyage where memories can be made and adventures always happen! Sometimes I sweat more getting to ballet than when I am actually at ballet!

Cathy: Do you have any unique insights or any new perspectives as you now have two roles—as both dancers and mothers?

Debra: I have found that in my new role as a mother, it is extremely valuable for me to make sure that I remember that I had a life before motherhood. I was an expressive and creative creature. I need to come back to that part of myself to make sure I still have my own identity in addition to being a mother. I think this will help make me a better person and a better mother in the end.

Spring Dance Performance June 7

MABETA and MAB students return to Holyoke High School for the Spring Performance, June 7th at 1:00 pm. Back by popular demand, our regular division students perform *Etudes* and our pre-ballet division presents *Light Vignettes*. MABETA members and MAB advanced level students debut a new ballet by Charles Flachs and choreography by Debra Vega; *In the Mood*, recently performed at YAGP; and a premier contemporary work by Laurel Raffeto. Special guest artists Connie Flachs and David Naquin, from Grand Rapids Ballet Company, complete the program with a classical pas de deux. A reception will follow the performance.

Tickets go on sale at MAB May 1st.

Matisse: My most important role is as a wife and mother, and my husband Jared and I work as a team to create a happy home environment. Luckily my husband has been supportive and encourages me in my dance career, even though it does require some sacrifices. I love the time we have together as a family, especially when it involves dance. My husband is a trooper! We have brought Rockwell to many of my performances and it is wonderful to hear them cheering me on. Rockwell also loves to be a part of the community at MAB. It is amazing to expose him to the incredible environment there. He is so star-struck by the students and faculty. I love performing and plan to continue to perform professionally while teaching at both Yale and Mount Holyoke College. Achieving my goals requires careful time management and a lot of support and cooperation from family, friends and colleagues.

Cathy: It is clear that both Debra and Matisse are amazing dancing mothers! We look forward to spending time with both mothers and sons at MAB in the years to come. Who knows...might we have a young Prince Albrecht or a future Snow King in our midst? Only time will tell...

Top Honors for MAB Students at Connecticut Classic and Beyond

by Charles Flachs

This was MAB's first year at the Connecticut Classic Competition (in its fourth year) sponsored by the Connecticut Dance Alliance.

Students are awarded medals, scholarships and top ten recognition in three categories: Junior, Senior and Pas de Deux. We spent the weekend in Middlebury CT. More than 150 students competed, and our students, Athina Alimonos, Isabelle Luu Li Haas, Emlyn Fenwick-Homstead, Anastasia Lusnia, and Erica Maillet participated in master classes on Saturday and/or competed on Sunday. They all danced beautifully, competing against students from larger schools like Nutmeg Conservatory, the Hartt School, The New Haven Ballet and Connecticut Concert Ballet.

Athina, in the junior division, placed in the top ten and received a scholarship to the Hartt School and Joffrey summer programs. Izzy placed in the top ten in the senior division, receiving the bronze medal, and was offered scholarships to Nutmeg Conservatory and Hartt School summer programs.

Before the competition, through an audition process, Anastasia and Athina received scholarships to the Hartt School summer program, and Izzy received a large scholarship to attend the Alvin Ailey School's summer program in New York.

Several other teachers congratulated us on the quality and professionalism of our students. We were very proud to have them represent MAB.



(Above) Izzy Luu-Li Haas and Athina Alimonos
(Right) The participants and competitors





Nutcracker & Sweets 2013

Dance with the professionals



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