

# FRONT ROW

SUMMER 2023

FREDERICK QUINNEY LAWSON  
BALLET WEST ACADEMY  
SPECIAL EDITION

Dreams  
Start  
Here



PHOTO BY BEAU PEARSON



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SUMMER 2023



Ballet West Academy's Director Evelyn Cisneros-Legate was selected as one of Utah Business' Women of the Year, recognizing women who are leading Utah's businesses and building Utah's communities. Ballet West Academy was also named as one of Inspire in Utah's 100 Companies Championing Women.

## IN THE NEWS

### STUDENT EXCHANGE VISAS APPROVED

The Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy received approval from the United States Student and Exchange Visitor Program to host international students beginning with the 2023 -2024 season. Students from across the world can now audition and obtain an educational visa for the Ballet West Academy Professional Training Division.

"Ballet is truly an international artform and language, and we are thrilled to welcome extraordinarily-talented students from all over the world," said Ballet West Academy Director Evelyn Cisneros-Legate. "We know this will enrich our community of dancers, and influence the broader Salt Lake City dance community. I am excited to support our mission of diversity and access to the arts with greater opportunities for international students."

### NEW HOUSING OPTIONS

Ballet West Academy has opened a new apartment complex for pre-professional and trainee students. The North Park Apartments, located at 577 South 500 East in Salt Lake City, is a 28-unit apartment complex dedicated to the Ballet West student community with leases running in conjunction with student sessions.

The new housing option will include onsite resident advisors, security features, furnishings, and utility fees. The double-occupancy apartments are located just 1.4 miles from the Ballet Centre with easy access to bus and light rail. The building is also walking distance to several large grocery stores. //

# Dreams Start Here

## THE DEMANDING PATH TO THE PROFESSIONAL STAGE

Written by Dana Rimington



CORPS ARTISTS STELLA BIRKINSHAW & JONAS MALINKAS-THOMPSON | PHOTO BY BEAU PEARSON



**“It’s hard to become a professional.** Not everyone makes it, but I still encourage them to give it their all. The joy and fulfillment can also come from the passion of striving. One of the things that I’ve always said in mentoring sessions is that there is a big difference between disappointment and regret, and we want to live our lives with no regret. So, we give our all to everything we try to do, then we cannot regret having tried it.”

– Ballet West Artistic Director Adam Sklute

**W**hat does it take to make it into the professional world of ballet? For Jonas Malinka-Thompson, it meant a lot of training, which started when he was on the soccer team in kindergarten and his parents noticed that while the other kids were chasing the ball, he was off to the side flailing his arms around.

They enrolled him in dance, starting at the Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy, and now several years later, he is joining the main Ballet West company as a Corps Artist. His journey to a professional ballet career included the Royal Ballet School in London as a teenager, the Ballet West Trainee program in 2020, and Ballet West II in 2021.

“I started as a little buttercup in yellow leotards here after my parents saw that I moved around a lot,” Malinka-Thompson said. “I love ballet and the feeling of working hard in class and rehearsals, pushing myself, the feeling of sweat and breathing hard, and seeing the outcome of that.”

A similar situation happened to Corps Artist Maren Florence, who still remembers dancing Ballet West’s *The Nutcracker* as a young girl. She started with the Ballet West Academy in 2012, moved into the Trainee Program in 2020, and has now been promoted to the main company after two years with Ballet West II.

“I’ve been watching this company for as long as I can remember, and I’m so excited to officially be a part of it,” said Florence. “I just love the feeling of working hard and

*“I’ve been watching this company for as long as I can remember, and I’m so excited to officially be a part of it.”*

–Maren Florence  
Ballet West Corps Artist

knowing I pushed my body as much as I could. I look forward to continuing that and dancing with the Company every day, which is inspiring and helpful for me as a dancer.”

Getting to the top doesn’t happen overnight, and for others, it’s not about starting ballet at a young age either. The biggest factor to a professional ballet career is all about the right training at a quality ballet school with a history of professional placements.

Currently, 90% of the main company at Ballet West comes from BWII, the company’s pre-preprofessional company, and now nearly 50% of the company members began at the Ballet West Academy and moved up through BWII.

Most successful ballet companies have a professional training school in their organization. When George Balanchine was asked to found a ballet company in the early 1930s, he said no, stating a school was needed first. Consequently, he founded the School of American Ballet, now famously known as SAB, and from there he began training dancers for the New York City Ballet. To this day, almost all NYCB dancers are products of SAB.

Ballet West’s founder, Willam Christensen, envisioned the same principle, beginning at the University of Utah, where he trained students in the first fully-accredited ballet program in the United States. He created a performing group with many of the students, founding the Utah Civic Ballet in 1963, which changed its name to Ballet West in 1968.

Mr. C’s ballet school was reshaped over the years with each consecutive artistic director. As the fifth Artistic Director in Ballet West’s history, Adam Sklute has



brought his unique perspective to the school. When he started at Ballet West in 2007, there were only two dancers in the company who were products of the Ballet West Academy.

"I made a conscious decision that we needed to start building dancers from the Academy," said Sklute. "I worked closely with our Academy directors and faculty to codify our approach to classical ballet, to discern our unique style, and build a 'principals of technique' that could help all our students become ready, ideally for Ballet West, but if not, then for any professional ballet company in the world. Early on, we set our sights on specific young kids in the school who showed promise and strong potential, as well as making a very concerted effort to start recruiting older kids from ballet competitions around the world."

Competitions began noticing that Ballet West was providing not only a top-rate home for students to train, but was building and developing students for moving into the main company and into other companies globally. They in turn began recommending Ballet West Academy as a great place to train.

"We were making a systematic effort not only to build the Utah locals from the ground up, but to augment that with talented kids from around the world who would then join the school and move their way up and that whole process has been successful," said Sklute.

Sklute knowingly acknowledges that not all students make it to the top.

"It's hard to become a professional. Not everyone makes it, but I still encourage them to give it their all," said Sklute. "The joy and fulfillment can come from the passion of striving. One of the things that I've always said in mentoring sessions is that there is a big difference between disappointment and regret, and we want to live our lives with no regret. So, we give our all to everything we try to do, then we cannot regret having tried it."



CORPS ARTIST JONAS MALINKA-THOMPSON AS A MEMBER OF BALLET WEST II | PHOTO BY BEAU PEARSON

"I can't promise there won't be disappointments," he continued. "We have disappointments in everything, but it's all about giving 100% and committing yourself. Whether it works out for the company or not, we will make it the best and most fulfilling experience it can be for them and if they want a professional career, we will work hard to help students achieve that goal."

Newly-named Corps Artist Stella Birkinshaw, who began with the Ballet West Academy in 2011 and was later accepted into the Trainee program, is one of the success stories.

"I have been dancing here for so long, looking up to Company and hoping that I would get to dance with them," said Birkinshaw. "I didn't want to get my hopes up because you never know, but it's just so exciting for my parents to watch me grow up and finally get to dance where I've been wanting to dance my whole life." ❧

Follow Maren on Instagram at [@maren\\_en\\_pointe](#) and Stella on Instagram at [@estella.birkinshaw](#)

*"I didn't want to get my hopes up because you never know, but it's just so exciting for my parents to watch me grow up and finally get to dance where I've been wanting to dance my whole life."*

—Stella Birkinshaw  
Ballet West Corps Artist



CORPS ARTIST MAREN FLORENCE AS A STUDENT OF BALLET WEST ACADEMY | PHOTO BY BEAU PEARSON



# Ballet West Academy Legacy: Megan Fairchild

New York City Ballet Principal Dancer Megan Fairchild treasures her years at the Ballet West Academy that helped launch a professional career. Fairchild started dancing at what was then the Ballet West Conservatory at age 12, then at age 15, moved to New York City to train at the School of American Ballet, the official school of the New York City Ballet. In 2000, she was hired as an apprentice with NYCB, promoted to the rank of soloist in 2004, and then to principal in 2005.

Her experience with Ballet West began even earlier, as she performed in Ballet West's *The Nutcracker* from age nine until she was 15 years old. Most recently, she returned to Utah to teach at the Academy's Summer Intensive program.

"I feel very close to Ballet West and feel like it's my dancing home," said Fairchild. "I love that I get to come back when the opportunity presents itself and be part of the legacy."

She credits her training with Bené Arnold, the School Director of Ballet West Academy at the time, giving her the building blocks for a future career as a professional ballet dancer.

"Bené Arnold was a task master, but she also gave all the tools you needed, so I was prepared for all of the full-length ballets in New York," said Fairchild. "The first time I had to portray a character was Clara in Ballet West's *The Nutcracker*. Bené had me write out a sentence for every move I made and turn in a homework essay of what we were thinking in this moment or that moment to make sure we weren't phony acting. She

FREDERICK QUINNEY LAWSON BALLET WEST SUMMER INTENSIVE INSTRUCTOR MEGAN FAIRCHILD  
PHOTOS BY BEAU PEARSON

would stop class and ask someone, 'What were you thinking in that moment?' and we'd be put on the spot. She would then say, 'If you're not aiming for something, what are you moving your body for?'"

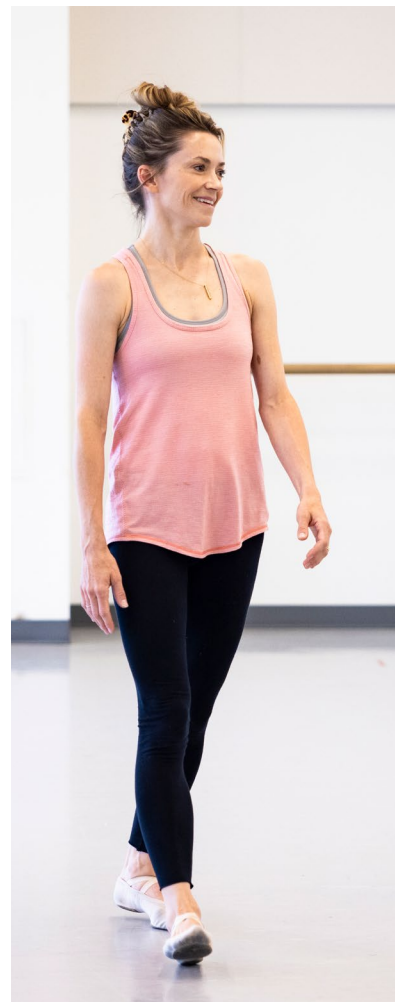
For students currently attending the Academy, she recommends soaking up every class possible.

"Ballet West Academy is a beautiful place to be learning and an incredible opportunity with wonderful teachers that used to dance professionally," said Fairchild.

"Don't leave until you've maximized your time and maybe you don't need to leave because this is your home. The Academy is a really lucky place to end up and a place that is a great starting off point for ending up where you are meant to be." ❧

*"The Academy is a really lucky place to end up and a place that is a great starting off point for ending up where you are meant to be."*

—Megan Fairchild





MOVEMENT MENTOR PARTICIPANTS PAIRED WITH BALLET WEST ACADEMY ADVANCED STUDENTS | PHOTO BY HEATHER FRYXELL

# Inspiring Abilities

## Movement Mentor Program

**Movement Mentor is a unique program that pairs advanced students of the Ballet West Academy with students who have disabilities for weekly dance classes at Ballet West campuses.**

For one mother whose daughter has cerebral palsy, the vision of ballet classes and performing onstage was merely a dream until she discovered Ballet West's Movement Mentor Program. Her young girl spent eight months attending a weekly ballet class with individualized mentoring from advanced students at the Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy.

"Watching their final performance, this mother cried because she never thought her daughter would have this opportunity," said Heather Fryxell, who created the program over 20 years ago when she wanted to provide an opportunity for children with disabilities to dance.

"As a former dancer myself, it can get overwhelming, so I wanted to reach out and do something outside of myself," said Fryxell. "I wanted to provide these students with a chance to dance and have peer interaction. My goal has been to offer the classes free of charge for participants, because these families already have a lot of financial obligations for their children."

Movement Mentor is a unique program that pairs advanced students of the Ballet West Academy with students who have disabilities for weekly dance classes at Ballet West

campuses. The mentors and students pair up for the entire year and perform together in the year-end performances. The class is taught by Ballet West adaptive dance instructors with professional ballet experience, and the students receive one-on-one as-needed guidance from their peer mentors that create bonds of friendship, trust, and learning.

"I believe in the philosophy that everyone can dance," said Director of Education and Community Outreach Peter Christie, who brought the program to Ballet West in 2015. "Ballet as an art form has traditionally had a reputation of elitism for a certain class of people, with a certain look and style, but there is so much happening in the world to break down those stereotypes of who belongs where and allowing people to explore other possibilities, which is something we're also trying to expand upon."

*"I believe in the philosophy that everyone can dance."*

—Peter Christie  
Director of Education and  
Community Outreach



PHOTOS BY HEATHER FRYXELL

Fryxell said the program is not found often in professional ballet schools, where students commit to volunteering in the program for the entire school year. "It's a win-win, because students get peer interaction but also learn valuable teaching skills by learning how to think outside the box," said Fryxell.

Audrey Dodd, who now runs the program, adds that "mentors also gain a greater understanding of how different bodies move and different ways to be creative that are not strictly ballet which will open their understanding of dance."

The class opens with exercise to promote socialization and connection, then moves to warm-ups and stretches that focus on sensory awareness and the mind/body connection. The rest of class explores basic ballet steps at the barre, promoting strengthening and building on exercises to help with balance and coordination during floor exercises.

"We prioritize establishing a safe environment for all the dancers to explore their own creativity," said Dodd. At the end of the school year, the program culminates in a final performance onstage.

"It's one of my favorite moments every single time, like putting a beating heart onstage, because it's the essence of what humanity gets from movement to music and goes beyond the barrier of physicality of the human being," said Ballet West Academy Director Evelyn Cisneros-Legate. "We see our Academy students, who are technically proficient, give their commitment, tenderness, and care to a child who will never be able to do what they do. It makes me cry every time. Humans were made to move and to dance to music. This program is so special and unique, taking Ballet West to a whole other level."

One new student this year had a medical condition that makes it difficult and painful to stand unsupported. With his walker and mentor beside him, he concentrated on the teacher's movements and intently replicated the movements.

"He is the most beautiful dancer with a natural ability that is just breathtaking," said Dodd. "We don't know how his health situation is going to play out, but he needs to have this opportunity, to express what is inside of him. That's what this program is all about."



FREDERICK QUINNEY LAWSON BALLET CENTRE DURING CONSTRUCTION | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BALLET WEST

# A Vision Realized 15 Years Ago

## Jessie Eccles Quinney Ballet Centre

Fifteen years ago, the vision for the Jessie Eccles Quinney Ballet Centre was born, built directly west of the Capitol Theatre on what used to be a vacant lot after an old restaurant was torn down. Greeting the students and staff were three new studios, offices for Academy administration, and two additional studios for Ballet West company dancers and Ballet West's costume department in the basement.

Prior to that, Academy students had limited access to two studios in the Capitol Theatre when they weren't being used by Ballet West's company rehearsals, proving to be a logistical nightmare. With the new building in place, the possibilities were endless.

"Having an Academy area, dedicated to students, greatly expanded the opportunity to have those classes and pulled everyone into a central location, solidifying our potential for growth, which we have seen happen with the development of the Trainee and Professional Training Divisions," said Peter Christie, Ballet West Director of Education and Outreach.

Ballet West Board Chair Shari H. Quinney said the concept for a new building began several years before the project started. "We realized that we were growing so quickly and all we had was the blue studio and now that I look at it, how did we ever do that?" said Quinney.

While the land sat vacant, Salt Lake County partnered with Ballet West, donating the land for the additional building, which also benefitted the county by expanding the county-owned theatre with extra lobby and restroom space, the lack of which had been the number one complaint by patrons.

"Suddenly we had something concrete and we all went to work raising money," said Quinney. "Literally everybody worked on this 24/7 and what an accomplishment it became to have everybody involved. We just realized we needed something bigger since we were growing and the support from Salt Lake County was unparalleled, with them realizing that Ballet West is an institution, having been around for more than 60 years."



Completed in **2013**  
thanks to countless donations.

Now home to **700**  
Ballet West Academy students.

# Located west of CAPITOL THEATRE.

"When I walk out and look at the addition and realize there are children in there that are working very hard to become world class dancers, that is the thrill for me and I say, 'yup, it happened,'" said Quinney.

"There was never a point when we didn't think we were going to raise the money," she continued. "It just came down to the enormous need and the great support that we had. We've become one of the finest Academies in the U.S. and the Academy keeps growing, bringing in the best of the best."

Constructing the new building had its challenges though. Merging two buildings, 100 years apart, makes for an interesting architectural dilemma.

"The buildings complement each other, but don't mirror one another," said Salt Lake County Arts and Culture Communications Manager Cami Munk. "You don't want to duplicate a historic building architecturally, which is why the fronts of the buildings look different."

Ballet West Director of Production Michael Andrew Currey worked with architects and construction during the process to provide instruction on the proper type of sprung floor needed to be installed, where to put the ballet barres, and how to install Marley floor on top of the sprung floor.

Looking back, the challenges and effort to raise money far surpassed expectations. Now with 700 Academy students, the extra space still requires creative problem-solving to fit Academy classes and rehearsals because of such demand, but that may very well be a good problem to have.



OPENING CEREMONY | PHOTO PROVIDED BY BALLET WEST

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—Shari H. Quinney  
Ballet West Board Chair



FORMER BALLET WEST PRINCIPAL ARTISTS AROLYN WILLIAMS & CHRISTOPHER RUUD | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BALLET WEST



PHOTO BY BEAU PEARSON

# Unveiling Costume Creation

Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy productions have earned a reputation for unique, eye-catching costumes. With over 26 performances every year and several hundred dancers requiring costumes each time, it's a good thing the Academy has a treasure trove of options, many of them actually hand-sewn by Connie Smith.

As a Ballet West Academy instructor who has a history with Ballet West dating back to her time dancing in *The Nutcracker* in 1965 when she was eight years old, Smith is the mastermind behind every primary level Academy performance costume.

Ballet and costumes became part of her life when her mom enrolled her in dance lessons and taught her how to sew at a young age. Smith fell in love with both the art form and costume production. Unfortunately, her mom was killed in a car accident during Smith's teen years, motivating her to continue dancing and later own a ballet studio for 20 years, knowing her mom saw that potential in her.

As a dancer and teacher, Smith gleaned the knowledge she needed for costuming, especially when sewing for productions at her own studio.

"I've spent years studying the way costumes move on people and what kinds of fabrics to use," said Smith. "Dancers live in a costume and whether they are old or young, it is a memorable experience. The steps are important, but costuming is also important for what they want projected to their audience."

Performance planning begins months in advance when Smith's ideas start flowing as she determines which costumes are already in stock from her collection, which can be altered, and which headpieces match costumes from both her own collection and those that have passed down from Ballet West.

Her favorite costumes are chickens and roosters full of hand-painted feathers, usually stealing the show when worn by the youngest dancers. Another cherished outfit has hand-made butterflies sewn in the costume with matching headpieces.




PHOTOS BY BEAU PEARSON

"It was like magic," Smith said. "These kids who had kind of robotic arms in class put on these costumes and they transformed into butterflies. Costumes are the beginning of a dancer's experience. The dancers become a different character and what it does is draw in these ballet families and creates a dream in children."

Assigning costumes starts with lining up dancers by height and sorting through to find the right fit for each dancer. Then the personalization process of sewing and stitching begins and each dancer gets their name placed on the tag inside. What's fun is seeing the names of all the other dancers who have previously worn that costume - many of whom are now principal dancers.

Performances do come with costume crises on occasion. One time a little boy put on his pants shortly before a performance, only to realize he had grown a few inches since the initial try-on. Smith grabbed a seam ripper, asked a parent volunteer to pick out the stitches, sprayed the pants with water and laid them flat shortly before he went on stage.

"Everything is a work in progress and has to be perfect before it goes on the stage, so I've taught parents how to put costumes on and how to check everything. Costuming is a team effort," said Smith. 



COSTUMING COORDINATOR CONNIE SMITH | PHOTO BY SARAH TAYLOR

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PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITEHEAD



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