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Los Gatos ballet studio a study in fun, hard work for young dancers

By **Marianne Lucchesi Hamilton**
Special to the Los Gatos Weekly-Times
Article Launched: 10/02/2007 01:00:00 AM PDT

Budding ballerinas typically dream of floating across the stage in tutus and tiaras, accompanied by the elegant strains of Swan Lake. But when Julia Smith realized her dance dreams, the soundtrack came from her brother's video game and the performers sported geometric face-paint.

At Los Gatos Ballet and Pilates, performers young and old are encouraged to stretch themselves - in more ways than one.

Owner Marcie Ryken, an alumna of the American Ballet Theater as well as the Houston and San Francisco ballet companies, opened her studio in 2001 with one goal in mind: to nurture the bodies and spirits of those aiming for a career in dance. And for those who don't actually end up on the stage, Ryken's comprehensive program - which

combines classical ballet disciplines with the toning and core strengthening of Pilates - still offers multiple, lifelong benefits.

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It was fitting that Ryken settle into the

Lyndon Avenue structure that houses her studio: It was once owned by the founders of the San Jose Dance Theater and has long been home to an active dance community. Through the years the building has hosted several other arts-related enterprises, including photographers and printers.

Ryken's ballet studio now shares the high-ceilinged, airy space with an adjoining room that boasts a gleaming assortment of Pilates equipment. Ballet students of all ages are encouraged to incorporate both disciplines into their routine. "We take a holistic approach to teaching

and conditioning our students' entire bodies," Ryken notes. "We make sure we equip everyone with the tools they need to stay healthy. Pilates is actually a big part of the training given to dancers in almost every other major dance company, because it's excellent for strength and conditioning."

Though the addition of Pilates to the ballet curriculum may be commonplace in other schools, Ryken's students enjoy an opportunity that is unique:

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Marcie Ryken, director of Los Gatos Ballet works with... (George Sakkestad/Los Gatos Weekly-Times)

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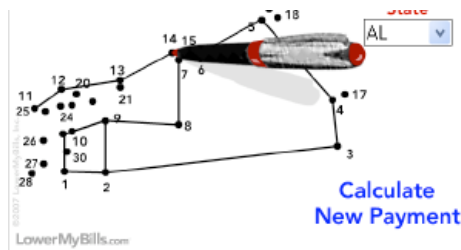
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Each year, intermediate and advanced students are invited to submit proposals to choreograph, costume and produce dance segments for presentation to the community. The young choreographers must first select a suitable piece of music, then explain the concept that the music creates for them. Also, the students must devise every step, select the wardrobe and even design the makeup for as many as 12 dancers who will bring the concepts to life. Once Ryken and partner Crystal Petzel approve a proposal and assign the necessary dancers, the student troupes put in many long hours in the studio to ensure the perfection of their movements.

"Normally we practice about two hours every weekday, and another two or three hours on the weekends," says Rachel Care, a 17-year-old senior at Palo Alto's Castilleja High School, who's been dancing at LGBP for the past four years. "But in the spring before our showcase, and in the fall before we put on The Nutcracker, we rehearse three hours every day, and four or five hours on the weekends. It's a lot of work!"

Earlier this year, Rachel collaborated with Julia on the choreography of "It's Not the Same," the dance that used the video game music. "It was really fun working with Julia on this piece, because she has a very unique style," Rachel says. "She's very long and angular, and likes to create movements that emphasize that. I put in softer, more fluid movements and rhythms in the solo parts. I thought the juxtaposition of our two styles was very interesting in emphasizing the theme."

That theme, according to Julia, was all about conformity; specifically, the need to avoid it. Julia says the inspiration for her dance was a combination of "Halo," her brother's favorite video game, and a history class at Fisher Middle School, where she's a student.

"My brother kept telling me I should listen to the music from Halo, and when I did I thought it was really cool," recalls Julia. "Then my history teacher had us do a project where we formed groups - with two people in the middle representing a master and slave - to learn about slavery. That gave me the idea for the dance, to show how people need to break away from conformity."

Julia's and Rachel's dancers - clad in black tights pulled over red leotards, with black triangles etched below their cheekbones - begin with identical movements. But soon a fluttering of arms and shoulders indicates their wish to break free. They tumble to the floor in seeming anguish, then one leaps up to perform a solo, and another. Soon the powerful, industrial-sounding beat underscores all in joyous flight, each dancing to her own rhythm. Finally the group regains its uniform movements for a few brief moments, but perishes under the rigid constraints. "I wanted to show how you have to be yourself, otherwise what's the point?" says Julia.

Point taken.

In direct contrast to the modern moves of Julia's and Rachel's sequence, 16-year-old Leigh High School sophomore Brittany Steacy created a more traditional, classical piece for her dancers. After listening to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," Brittany, who's been dancing since the age of 4, envisioned "Moonlight Dreams." She brought together six dancers clad in white and mint green gowns, creating a lyrical ebb and flow of limbs. "My dance is all about the final achievement of one's dream," Brittany explains. "Throughout the piece the dancers go around a circle, which represents the goal they're always working toward. Sometimes they're together, sometimes alone, to show the need for support between people."

From where do such insights spring in young teens? Ryken firmly believes that allowing her students to participate in the production process - which also includes the delivery to their audience of a brief oral presentation on each dance - fosters an atmosphere of empowerment and self-confidence.

"It's an enormous learning process for everyone, and they have to be very responsible," Ryken says. "When the students see their dances being done, they have such a sense of pride in their achievement. It's great to be able to nurture that in a dancer."

Rachel says she's learned skills that will serve her well as she makes the move to UCLA in the fall, and beyond. "Making the presentations has really helped me, because it makes sense to really think each piece through and be deliberate. Plus, we learn how to interact with each other and exercise some authority. We especially try to cultivate that in our younger students, and help them to assert themselves and nurture their ideas."

Many of Ryken's students (and those from other Bay Area dance schools) recently completed LGBP's Summer Intensive Program, which included courses in acting as well as flamenco, modern and jazz dance to the curriculum. During this "dance boot camp," students attended weekday classes from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., honing and perfecting their skills and technique. Following a couple of weeks off to rest mind and muscles, the dancers auditioned for the annual production of Nutcracker, which will run Dec. 9 through 23 at San Jose's Center for the Performing Arts. This will be the fifth year that LGBP has collaborated with San Jose Dance Theater in the production of the classic holiday ballet; Ryken herself has directed the ballet a number of times.

In addition to coaching her prima ballerinas-to-be, Ryken's on the lookout for space to accommodate her steadily increasing class sizes. Ideally Los Gatos Ballet and Pilates will expand in its current location, keeping Ryken in the town she loves. No matter where her operation may take her, though, Ryken is committed to providing her students and clients with the tools they need to lead better lives - on stage and off.

"If someone wants to become a dancer, we will certainly help them with that," she says. "But we also help every student learn important life lessons: To be organized, to be disciplined and to have a sense of their body in space. In return, everyone can become much more confident in themselves."

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