AMY POTTER
HOW SPORTS AND FAMILY LED TO BECOMING A PRINCIPAL ARTIST
Ballet West was in the national spotlight recently with the revival of *Les Noces* (The Wedding) featured in the New York Times. “With a cast of almost 40 dancers and a complex musical score by Stravinsky, *Les Noces* is a heavy lift for many American ballet companies . . . In a recent rehearsal at Ballet West, the dancers looked alternately like jumping gazelles and figures in icons, their hands held out flat and heads tilted to the side.” - New York Times

The John F. Kennedy Center also announced their 2023 – 2024 programming, which includes two separate tours for Ballet West - *Ballet West’s The Nutcracker* Nov 22 and 24 – 26, 2023 and *10,000 Dreams: A Celebration of Asian Choreography* June 18-23, 2024.

“Continuing to bring world-class dance to the stages of the National Cultural Center, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts today announced its 2023-2024 dance season. Being at the forefront of responding to the moment, today’s artists and companies are challenging the frame of storytelling, shifting the boundaries of what movement can be, and showcasing the dynamic form in a multitude of ways, blurring the lines between classical and contemporary. Through this lens, audiences will experience a season filled with innovative works and collaborations among ballet and dance offerings, beloved classics, master voices, and newcomers to the stage.” - Broadway World

Continuing its efforts to highlight underrepresented voices working in the ballet aesthetic and develop more diverse representation in the field of ballet, the Kennedy Center will present a special engagement in summer 2024. Co-curated by Phil Chan, a Kennedy Center Next 50 leader, *10,000 Dreams: A Celebration of Asian Choreography* is a week-long festival-style engagement inspired by Chan’s Final Bow for Yellowface initiative to elevate Asian creatives on- and offstage, (June 18-23). This celebration will feature Houston Ballet, The Washington Ballet, Ballet West, and other artists to be announced at a later date in a gala and two mixed repertory programs of works all by Asian choreographers. Programs will include several new works alongside a focus on the contributions of Choo San Goh, the late Singaporean-born choreographer of Chinese descent who served as resident choreographer for The Washington Ballet for nearly a decade and was hailed artistically for making major contributions to the ballet field.” - John F. Kennedy Center
Ballet was just one of many sports Amy Potter enjoyed while growing up, until she fully immersed herself into the world of ballet during a summer intensive program. Realizing the sport satisfied her competitive side and desire to be challenged, she was hooked as a sophomore in high school and spent the next 17 years of her life working toward becoming a professional ballerina.

While ballet was her most consistent sport through the years, she had yet to pick a favorite as she approached high school. On a whim, she auditioned for a summer intensive program for the Nutmeg Conservatory for the Arts while they were visiting her ballet studio. She was accepted and found herself immersed into the world of ballet at age 14.

As the summer ended, Amy moved permanently to Torrington, Connecticut for their year-round professional training program. She started online high school and began what would then be the next 17 years of her life working her way to becoming a professional ballerina.

“I never thought I would be pursuing ballet as a career at that point in my life, or even just moving for a year-round program,” said Potter. “I just thought, ‘Summer away from home? Dancing? Sounds fun.’ I did that and fell in love with the world and my parents generously let me go year-round at age 15.”

“Growing up between two brothers, I was very competitive, so I really liked the hard work and discipline that was required for ballet,” she continued. “Seeing improvement slowly, but surely, kept me motivated. It’s never a stagnant art form. It’s always evolving and progressing, which makes it so interesting.”

Fast forward to last year when she was promoted to Ballet West Principal Artist at age 31 for the 2022-23 season. Potter credits the achievement to her participation in a variety of sports and support from family.

“Being in all those different sports, I was exposed to a lot of different aspects that helped me develop my work ethic,” said Potter. “You have to learn how to be disciplined and work with your teammates. In tennis, it’s all about you, so you work hard to hone in on and master a specific skill set. With the other sports I played, teamwork was key and you can’t win the game if everyone isn’t working together. Subconsciously, I was being exposed to all of those things, in addition to having the support of my family and learning to always stick to something and not give up.”

Her path to the top wasn’t without challenges. After graduation from online high school, she was accepted into the Boston Ballet Academy, where she spent a year moving up the ranks to Trainee and performing with the company.

“It was my first experience with a professional company,” she said. “Looking around and seeing the dancers doing it as their job, not just a hobby, was the moment it clicked in my head and I could see myself doing that.”

She then auditioned and accepted a position with Houston Ballet’s second company for two years.

“I felt so young, but everyone was younger,” Potter said. “My time with the second company was probably my best training years. I performed lead roles and toured internationally. It was huge developmentally-wise as a dancer and a performer.”

It was hard when she was not selected to move into the main company, which meant going back to cattle-call auditions, where she met Ballet West Artistic Director Adam Sklute in New York. She was offered a position in with Ballet West II, but it meant a lateral move, rather than a promotion.

“Being given another second-company job, I just took the approach of seeing where the path would lead and then becoming the best I could be at it,” said Potter. “I always knew I would fall where I was meant to be, that this was just a hiccup in the road.”

After spending for a year in Ballet West II, she was promoted to the main company in 2012, joined Oklahoma City Ballet in 2014, was promoted to Soloist in 2015, and then...
to Principal in 2018. She returned to Ballet West in 2021 as a Soloist and was promoted to Principal in 2022.

“I love being here at Ballet West because there is a real sense of family here,” said Potter. “Everyone is always so encouraging and supportive of one another. In a world that can be so physically and mentally demanding and competitive, we all genuinely care for one another and want to see our coworkers succeed.”

Potter recently danced the role of Aurora in Sleeping Beauty, one of the most technically-demanding roles there is for a ballerina.

“Aurora is the epitome of classical ballet technique, so I knew going into it that this role would be very challenging,” said Potter. “To help better prepare myself, I studied videos online of other ballerinas dancing Aurora and recorded myself in rehearsals. Additionally, Potter says what she learned during her early years of ballet comes with a lot of stress, so when handling whatever comes my way, whether mentally or technically, I just go back to family and what I learned from different sports and activities outside of ballet. I remind myself if I am getting stressed or if I have a bad day in rehearsal, I say to myself, ‘It’s just ballet.’” Potter says. “Sure, it’s my job and I want to excel and succeed, but at the end of the day, I try to keep things in perspective and remind myself of the elements I learned growing up. Easier said than done, but I try to not take myself too seriously. Before performances, I use essential oils and good music to keep my nerves at bay to allow myself to perform at my highest level.”

“I love being here at Ballet West because there is a real sense of family here.”

—Amy Potter
Ballet West Principal Artist

Ballet West recently held its third annual Spring Soirée, where a record-breaking $307,000 was raised to support training of the next generation of dancers at the Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy.

Over 150 community leaders and supporters attended the third annual Spring Soirée, where all of the proceeds generated were in support of the Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy, including financial aid and scholarship funds. More than 100 students at the Ballet West Academy benefit from the donations as they pursue their dream of dance.

Thanks for our Spring Soirée Committee for creating such a successful event: Chairs Samantha Topping Gellett and Bronwyn Newport Bradley, Vice-Chairs Kimberly Heglar and Tatiana Lingos-Webb Prince, and Ballet West Board Chair Shari H. Quinney, with support from Cole Adams and Fat Fish Media, and Every Blooming Thing.

“So much work went into the soirée because while the event is important to Ballet West from a fundraising perspective, it’s truly so much more than that,” said Newport-Bradley. “What Ballet West is able to do in terms of providing scholarships and training for beginning dancers all the way to company artists is such an important mission. We are inspiring children, equipping them to be better members of society and future artists and patrons of the arts.”

“I also love getting to be part of something that also so benefits everything around us,” she continues. “Providing encouraging and knowledgeable spaces for people to learn and become expert dancers and humans is such a beautiful combination. As scholarships provide a place for ballet mastery, they also provide many other ways to leverage these children into success.”

The event included a world premiere by resident choreographer Nicolo Fonte, in addition to performances from Ballet West Company Artists and students from the Ballet West Academy. Attendees of the event bid on items that were auctioned off, which included walk-on roles for The Nutcracker and Swan Lake, a personal fitting with designer Carolina Herrera in New York, and a Dracula or Bride costume custom-designed and created by the Ballet West costume shop.

Spring Soirée Helps Students
Announcing the 60th Season Company Dancers

For the 2023-24 season, Ballet West has announced five company dancer promotions, six new company members moving up from Ballet West II, and nine new Ballet West II members, including six promoted from the Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy.

“I am excited to announce that next season, of the five merit promotions I have made, all came up out of Ballet West II with three of them beginning as trainees in the Ballet West Academy,” says Adam Sklute, Artistic Director of Ballet West. “Additionally, of the six new main company members moving up from Ballet West II, four of them began in our academy. It’s amazing to see the growth of these artists from young students to now professionals and it speaks to the wealth of talent coming through the Ballet West Academy.”

For next season, Tyler Gum has been promoted to Principal Artist. Gum began as a member of Ballet West II and was promoted to the main company in 2010 as a Corps Artist. He moved through the ranks to Demi-Soloist, Soloist, and then First Soloist in 2018 prior to this year’s promotion to Principal Artist. Gum joins current Principal Artists Emily Adams, Katelyn Addison, Hadriel Diniz, Adrian Fry, Jenna Rae Herrera, Amy Potter, and Jordan Veit.

Demi-Soloist Kristina Weimer and Corps Artist Victoria Vassos have been promoted to Soloist. Weimer is from Princeton, New Jersey and joined Ballet West II in 2015 before being promoted to the main company in 2017. Vassos started with Ballet West Academy as a Trainee in 2016 and was later promoted to Ballet West in 2020.

For the 2023-24 season, Ballet West has announced five company dancer promotions, six new company members moving up from Ballet West II, and nine new Ballet West II members, including six promoted from the Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy.

Ballet West II dancers Stella Birkinshaw, Kye Cooley, Anderson Duhan, Maren Florence, William Lynch, and Jonas Malinka-Thompson have all been promoted to the main company. Birkinshaw, Duhan, Florence, and Malinka-Thompson are all products of the Ballet West Academy.

New Additions to Ballet West II

Joining Ballet West II, Ballet West’s pre-professional company, are Frederick Quinney Lawson Ballet West Academy alumni Olivia Book, Kai Casperson, Lund Fuller, Nikkaya Gyfteas, and Anna Murray, as well as Alexis Bull, Jaya Bhand, Andre McGregor II, and Philipp Mergener, who are new to the organization.

Departing Dancers

At the conclusion of the 2022-23 season, Ballet West bids a fond farewell from the stage to longtime Demi-Soloist Joshua Whitehead, who will be retiring from dancing. Whitehead has been commissioned by Sklute to set and re-choreograph his ballet Fever Dream, which he originally presented as a work in progress and composed the score for the Ballet West Academy/artEmotion 2022 summer workshop. The world premiere of Fever Dream will appear as part of the Firebird program in the fall of 2023. Also moving on will be company Corps Artists Connor Hammond, Noel Jensen, and Amber Miller, as well as Ballet West II Artists Michael Bushman, Elijah Hartley, Julia Otmistesque, Kennedy Sheriff, and Rebecca Trockel.

“Tyler has proven himself to be an exceptional artist, with a superb technique and a dynamic stage presence.”

— Adam Sklute
Ballet West Artistic Director
Nicolo Fonte:
10 years creating choreography for Ballet West

Ballet West’s Resident Choreographer, Nicolo Fonte, is known for his unique approach to choreography, having created over 60 new works for dance companies spanning the globe.

Prior to Ballet West Artistic Director Adam Sklute’s arrival in 2007, it had been almost nine years since new choreography was created on the company, so Sklute commissioned Fonte in 2009 to create a brand new work for the company. The Immeasurable Cadences Within, and then a reproduction of Fonte’s version of Ravel’s Bolero.

The blend of classical and contemporary movement with Fonte’s sculptural stage architecture proved to be a perfect fit for Ballet West. In 2013, Sklute named Fonte Resident Choreographer, and over the past 10 years has created seven new works: The Rite of Spring (2014), Presto (2018), Piece of My Heart (for BWII 2016), Fox on the Doorstep (2017), Cammino Burana (2018), reproduction of Almost Tango for Ballet West (2016), and Forword/Close (2020). Most recently, Fonte created and presented a new ballet as a work-in-progress for Ballet West’s annual Spring Soiree, with its formal premiere planned during Ballet West’s tour to Aspen in late August of 2023.

Fonte started dancing at the age of 14 and studied at the Joffrey Ballet School in New York, San Francisco Ballet, and School of American Ballet, then completing a Bachelor’s Degree of Fine Arts at SUNY Purchase. After graduation, he danced with Peridance in New York and later, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in Montreal and Nacho Duato’s Compania Nacional de Danza in Madrid.

In 2000, Fonte retired from performing to devote time to his burgeoning choreographic career, creating and staging his ballets for The Dutch National Ballet, Houston Ballet, Royal Danish Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, The Australian Ballet, and The Göteborg Ballet, amongst many others.

He didn’t set out to become a choreographer; rather, he stumbled across it during a required choreography class for his Bachelor of Fine Arts. Fonte later had various opportunities to choreograph pieces for professional dancers at festivals and workshops and discovered his passion.

“I did miserably at first because I had no clue what I was doing, but eventually I got through it and had a seed planted in me,” Fonte said. “Through those classes I had to take, even though I was focused for many years as a dancer, I knew somewhere in the back of my mind that I was going to try my hand at choreography. I thought maybe I had something to say and wanted classically-trained dancers to move in a particular way.”

Fonte started his choreographic career in 2002 with a solo role, along with water elements on the stage. The ballet also included a student in a solo role, along with water elements on the stage. It was the first time Fonte incorporated a shoe change into his choreography, with the women starting out in flat shoes, then changing into pointe shoes. The ballet also included a student in a solo role, along with water elements on the stage.

“It was really monumental on many levels,” said Fonte. “It’s a complex way of creating architecture in space. Dance is a combination of poetism, lines, and gesture, all done – most of the time – to music.”

With the myriads of musical selections available, picking just the right music is an art itself. Fonte finds musical inspiration from a number of places—finding music on Spotify, banking selections in his iTunes library, talking to conductors and getting composer recommendations, or receiving new music from music publishers.

“I just have to listen and have my ears open for new music of all types and different venues,” said Fonte.

Fonte is known for taking iconic scores and reinventing them for a contemporary world, bringing magic to the stage on many levels. Such was the case when Sklute asked Fonte to choreograph a new version of The Rite of Spring using the famous music by Igor Stravinsky.

It was the first time Fonte incorporated a shoe change into his choreography, with the women starting out in flat shoes, then changing into pointe shoes. The ballet also included a student in a solo role, along with water elements on the stage.

“It was really monumental on many levels,” said Fonte. “What stood out to me was incorporating many elements into a ballet evening – not just the thrill of the choreography, but all these other theatrical components that worked seamlessly, making it an important landmark for me.”

Fonte will be closing the chapter as Ballet West’s resident choreographer at the end of the 2022-23 season. His works and legacy will live on at Ballet West.

“As I end my tenure as Resident Choreographer and we enter into a new phase of our professional relationship, I will look forward to every opportunity to reconnect with this wonderful ensemble, knowing that the path that we have shared was an important part of our individual journeys,” said Fonte. “As I have said from the start of my choreographic career, ‘dance is in the moment,’ and I will forever cherish the moments we danced together.”

Sklute adds, “Nicolo’s work helped set Ballet West on a trajectory of exploration and fearlessness when it comes to new choreography. Because of him, our dancers can approach being choreographed as collaborators and partners in the creative process. His work will always play a strong part on our repertoire, including an important revival slated for 2025.”

Nicolo Fonte - Ballet West Resident Choreographer

“I am really fascinated by the human body and the process of making something out of nothing.”

Nicolo Fonte - Ballet West Resident Choreographer
The gym pulsates with energy as over 1,000 audience members watch 500 students dance together during a recent performance at West High School. Students exchange excited smiles as they move to the beat, a group of students help a girl with Down Syndrome find her spot, and other students gleam with pride as they show off their group dance. In the audience, parents, families, and teachers cheer their dancers on.

For 25 years, the I CAN DO program has been providing dance instruction for elementary students across several school districts in the Salt Lake area. Thanks to funding from the Utah State Board of Education’s Professional Outreach Program in Schools (POPS), as well as generous funding from corporations, foundations, and individuals, the free program gives fifth-grade students the chance to participate in a class taught by professional dance instructors every week during the school year, culminating in a final performance for the community.

“The goal of the program is to get them to try something new,” said Director of Education and Community Outreach Peter Christie. “Ninety percent of these students probably wouldn’t jump into a dance class. We help them achieve success by doing something completely foreign and help them think about what other things they can do too.”

I CAN DO, an acronym for Inspiring Children About Not Dropping Out, teaches basic styles of dance, jazz, and creative dance set to a variety of music selections. Students learn choreography for three full dances. I CAN DO Associate Director Dana Rossi says the focus is not on ballet, but rather the joy of movement and life skills learned in the process.

“Kids learn that it’s safe to try something new, it’s okay to make a mistake and learn from it, and if they do something a little bit different – it’s not bad,” said Rossi. “We help them realize that everybody’s best doesn’t look exactly the same. Even the performance, they know it’s okay if it’s not a perfect, polished piece. They’re showing us where they are at, what they’ve created, and it’s beautiful where it is.”

Students with the drive to learn more are chosen to participate in a Dream Team, practicing every Saturday during the school year. Those students also participate on the Celebration Team, which is made up of sixth-, seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders, who also rehearse weekly. Both teams are free to the participating students.

“One of the greatest tools for prevention of harmful behaviors and promoters of success is a sense of belonging,” said Rossi. “I have talked to students who said the I CAN DO program, or being on the Dream or Celebration Team, gave them that sense of belonging. I have heard that this was a place they could really be themselves. They felt like they were different, had hair with different colors, wore clothes different ways, but could still express their true selves and feel like they belonged.”

Ballet West II Artist Victor Galeana participated in the I CAN DO program while attending Midvalley Elementary 10 years ago. He and his fellow fifth-graders looked forward to the classes because it felt like another recess, doing something new. Looking back on the experience, he realizes the program was much more than that.

During his time in the I CAN DO program, Galeana received the Shar Quinney Scholarship and began attending classes at the Ballet West Academy in 2013. He continued training in the Academy and was promoted to Ballet West II in 2022.

“I CAN DO was an immersive experience that aligned with my values of health and exercise and was a pivotal moment in helping me determine what kind of person I wanted to be in my teen years.”

Victor Galeana
Ballet West II Dancer

To learn more about the program: https://balletwest.org/outreach/i-can-do
For a full listing of all our generous donors, please visit balletwest.org/donor-acknowledgments.

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Ballet West's Executive Director, Victor Pova, with dancer Kelly Vallico, with photo by Beau Pearson

Ballet West's Executive Director, Victor Pova, and dancer Kelly Vallico, with photo by Beau Pearson

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