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The Bush School

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*Alumnae/i  
in the  
Arts*

EXPERIENCE

*Bush Alumna  
Julia Erickson '97  
Rises to the Top  
of Major Ballet  
Company*

by Ben Ryan '97

**A**t the end of the first act in the Pacific Northwest Ballet's (PNB's) *Nutcracker*, the young Clara, with her own starry-eyed whimsy as pixie dust, magically blossoms into a sinewy woman who sails away with the prince.

Julia Erickson '97 recalled observing this fairy-tale transformation during rehearsals for the ballet when she was a 9-year-old student at PNB:

"Something about it just seemed so magical. I said, 'Wow, I would love to be that. I would love to try to reach that.'"

Two decades later, she's living the fairy tale. In March, she was promoted to principal dancer at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre. A lifer at Bush, the 29-year-old studied at PNB from the age of 7, and eventually performed and toured with the company as a preprofessional student after finishing high school. She landed her first job at Dallas Fort Worth Ballet in 1999, where she danced for two years before moving on to PBT to join her long-term boyfriend, Aaron Ingley, who was already in the *corps de ballet*. She was promoted to soloist, the next highest rank, in 2004.

Julia maintains a cautious level of modesty about her success, using words like "a relief" and "gratifying" to describe the

promotion. "Everyone around me was really thrilled, which was almost more exciting to me," she said.

Amanda Brotman '97, who studied ballet alongside Julia for 12 years and who is now a fashion designer, said, "There's probably a little bit in all of us that feels like a proud mom. Becoming a principal is the pinnacle. That's what you are striving for from when you are 7 years old in class. Julia was always a really strong dancer, and had the body and the look..."

Julia wandered into the ground level of ballet's rigid, pyramid-shaped hierarchy on something of a whim. A crew of her Second Grade Bush classmates was taking Saturday classes and she wanted to join in. The others all dropped out by the end of that first year. Julia continued. Of the 75 girls in her beginning class, she is the only one now dancing for a major ballet company.

With the goal of a dance career coming into greater focus, Julia was at the *barre* six days a week by the Seventh Grade, obliged to leave school 45 minutes early each day. In high school, while many of her PNB peers had all but abandoned formal education in favor of nearly all-day ballet training, Julia made the painful decision to slow her ballet progress in order to juggle a double life as student and dancer. She left school each day at two o'clock and spent at least 12 hours a week dancing, a commitment which would extend to more than 20 hours if she were performing. "I was hustling constantly," she recalled. "Essentially, I missed one class a week of each subject, because of the staggered schedule. One day, Joe Bailey—the Tenth Grade Spanish teacher—said to me, 'You seem a little bit like you're swimming upstream.' That put it really well."

Peggy Skinner, who had Julia for two years of biology, remembered Julia as an intensely focused student, and presumed the singular concentration required for ballet helped prepare her to succeed in the classroom as well. Janice



*Julia Erickson '97 strikes an early ballet pose at home in Seattle, aged 5.*

Osaka, who taught Julia three years of advanced math said, "We all knew she was a gifted dancer. But she also wanted to be a high-school student. She never used her dance as an excuse. She used her time so well."

In Julia's mind, the two educational environments often fueled, rather than leeched from, one another.

"I think Bush helped me grow a sense of individuality and that's ultimately been my strong suit as a dancer. When it comes down to it, ballet is about conveying emotions to the audience, and having those tools, being able to draw from within yourself and trust yourself."

Offstage, Julia is still a committed student and still very much the juggler. She is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh with a double major in political science and business. Never to be outdone, she is perched within the top 2 percent of her class.

As for that day when she'll finally hang up her *pointe* shoes, Julia said she intends to bid *adieu* to ballet and explore the business field like her entrepreneurial father, Ron. (Her mother, Kathryn Hall, is a talented fine artist.) In the meantime, she never stops striving to improve as a dancer.

"Every day, I learn," she says. "I'm always working on my line. I'm always working on balance. And strength. Just trying to be as strong and clean as possible." Good advice for a juggler.

*The youngest of a trio of "lifer" brothers, Ben Ryan '97 received a BA in English from Columbia University and is a writer living in Manhattan. Lagging somewhat behind, he took up dancing a few years back. Ben can be contacted at benryan@nyc.rr.com.*

*Julia Erickson '97 is featured on the cover of this issue of Experience Magazine as Jordan in Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's The Great Gatsby.*