

BLAINE TRUITT COVERT

Lana Muhlbach and Michael McGonegal of Pacific Artists Ballet Theatre mirror each other's moves in rehearsal for the ballet "Paquita," a showy dance that puts the performers' technique in high profile.

## Entering the dance

Veteran dancers teach new ones as they prepare for a challenging performance

By **BOB HICKS** | THE OREGONIAN

**B**aseball has statistics to help keep the vital link to its past. Theater has scripts. Music has scores.

Dance has notation of steps and, in recent decades, videos of live performances. But mostly it has the tradition of things being handed down, person to person, muscle memory to muscle memory, from the old to the young.

So it was on a recent afternoon that ballet's past and fu-

ture met in a sun-filled studio in the Hillsdale neighborhood, where the young dancers of Pacific Artists Ballet Theatre were rehearsing for the company's pair of spring concerts on Saturday.

The teenage dancers, members of the elite pre-professional performance arm of Pacific Artists Dance Center, looked like young dancers have always looked: long and lean and buoyant and eager.

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### Pacific Artists Ballet Theatre

**Program:** "Paquita" after Marius Petipa; Alexandros Ballard's "The Underlying Organization of Metaphor"; peasant pas de deux from "Giselle"; Dennis Spaight's "Gloria"; Moses Kaplan's "Departure"

**Evening gala bonus:** Julie Diana and Zachary Hench of Pennsylvania Ballet dance the second-act pas de deux from "Swan Lake"

**Where:** Performing Arts Center, Portland Community College Sylvania Campus, 12000 S.W. 49th Ave.

**When:** 2:30 p.m. Saturday; gala 7:30 p.m. Saturday

**Tickets:** \$10-\$18 matinee, \$18-\$30 evening gala; 503-452-8448, [www.pacificartistsdancecenter.com](http://www.pacificartistsdancecenter.com)

## Dancers: A 'ballet about heaven' contains 'step from hell'

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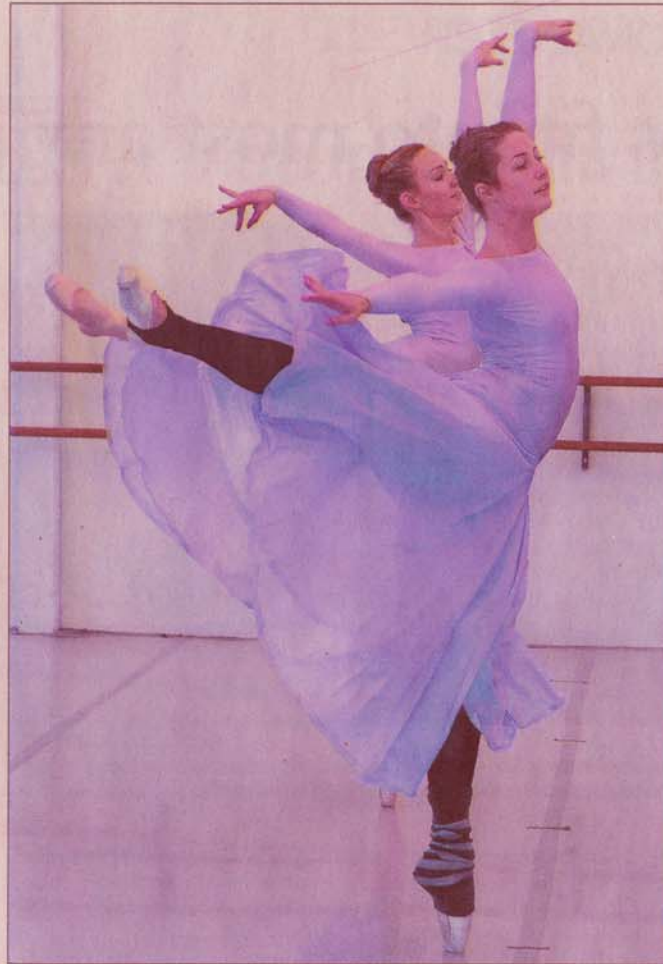
Their elders — former Balanchine dancers Jim Lane and Nancy Davis, who run the school and ballet company; Carol Shults, here to set excerpts from Dennis Spaight's 1983 ballet "Gloria" on the young dancers; Alexandrous Ballard, a longtime leading dancer at Oregon Ballet Theatre now building a career as a teacher and choreographer — looked on with a mix of pride, hopefulness and wonder that here, in these high-springing young bodies, something that began long ago is moving confidently forward.

"They weren't alive, any of them, when Dennis created this," Shults said softly. "Goes in a blink."

So it does. Spaight himself went in a blink, dying in 1993, at age 38, from the effects of AIDS. Shults is the conservator of his dances, and Lane and Davis, ardent admirers, have now produced four Spaight ballets for their student company.

"From the outset I loved Dennis' musicality, having danced a lot of Balanchine," Davis said. Shults, listening to the Vivaldi Mass on the stereo and watching the moves of "Gloria" play out once again, murmured agreement. She's a dance historian of some note, and Spaight's dance reminds her of the famous duet in Balanchine's 1957 dance, "Agon."

Four young female dancers in shades of purple and blue — Ellie Ewer, Lauren Lane, Gwendolyn Duffy, Lana Muhlbach — hold down the four corners of the studio and then flow through the space languidly yet swiftly and possessively, melting as they stretch their bodies' lines.



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Dancers Ellie Ewer and Lauren Lane help revive the musical spirit of choreographer Dennis Spaight in an excerpt from his ballet "Gloria."

"I feel like Dennis loved the female dancer. Again, just like Balanchine," said Davis, herself long and dancery and jangly in sharp-toed cowboy boots.

This was a rehearsal, after all, and not everything was perfect. Shults strode onto the floor to demonstrate one especially thorny passage of "Gloria."

"It's a ballet about heaven," she said wryly, "but we have a step from hell."

it in 2006.

Here, 17-year-old Michael McGonegal, this year's star student, shines. "Paquita" is a dance of almost rococo showiness, and McGonegal is quickly developing the chops to do it justice. He's got great extension, vivacity, speed and leaping prowess. He spins and jetés with easy quickness. He has the insouciance, the stage power, of a star in the making.

The 16 members of the performing company are the cream of the academy's 150-odd students, about 85 of whom are taking the rigorous pre-professional curriculum. They come from across the city, and from Salem and beyond, and the best eventually move on to some of the country's finest dance

schools and companies. McGonegal, for instance, leaves soon this summer for Houston Ballet, one of America's best regional dance troupes.

Lane smiled as he watched his young dancers and thought about the things beyond technique and body style that make them special. "It takes a lot of discipline and passion," he said. "It's not for everybody."

Then again, for the select few it's everything. Shults watched the future and saw it in good hands.

"It really is the way to raise kids," she said.

Bob Hicks: 503-221-8369;  
bobhicks@news.oregonian.com

Lane, spinning deftly in the wheelchair that has been his mode of transportation since a car crash in the mid-1990s left him paralyzed, moves to the sound system and switches it to the music of Ludwig Minkus. The sense of time drifts even farther back, to Marius Petipa's 1881 revision of his ballet "Paquita," which he'd first choreographed in 1847, when he was 25, not much older than the dancers who will take the stage to perform