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Portland's Ben Slayen leaps
toward a dance career at the
School of American Ballet.
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ARTS & LETTERS

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LEAPING INTO A DREAM

Portland's Ben Slayen heads for the School of American Ballet

BY DEBORAH MOON SELDNER
Jewish Review

Dreams of a career as a professional dancer came one giant step closer to reality for Portlander Ben Slayen when he was accepted to the Advanced Men's I level of the School of American Ballet, the official school of the New York City Ballet.

Slayen, 17, a graduate of Portland Jewish Academy, will spend his senior year at SAB, which trains more students who go on to become professional dancers than any other school in the country. The school's Web site states that about 20 advanced students a year receive contracts with major professional dance companies each year and SAB alumni make up 90 percent of the NYCB.

Patricia Brewer-Jones, who has been one of Slayen's teachers during his time at the years he has danced at the Pacific Artists Ballet Theatre said she wasn't at all surprised that Slayen was accepted immediately after his audition.

"To watch this young man's body move is to see classical ballet at its most exquisite," said Brewer-Jones. "He is an amazing talent. Ben has an uncanny facility for ballet. The way that God put him together ... he has the perfect instrument to train as a classical ballet dancer."

Slayen said that he was a bit surprised to be accepted on the spot, because that is not typical. They didn't tell him why they accepted him so quickly, said Slayen. "All they said was they wanted me in the program."

"It's a really great opportunity," said Slayen of attending the school. "It's the next step in my training and my career."

Slayen had to be pushed to try ballet, he and his mom Zen Menasche-Slayen agree.

"The funny thing is, Ben only got involved with ballet because I dared him to," said Menasche-Slayen, noting she has danced for 10 years as a child and perhaps recognized he could excel at ballet. "He always had a dancer's grace and great turn-out, so I challenged him (I told him I'd give him \$10) to audition for OBT



BEN SLAYEN of Portland has taken a giant leap toward the professional dance career he dreams of with his acceptance to the School of American Ballet.

(Oregon Ballet Theater) seven years ago when he stopped playing soccer. He came out of the audition smiling. That's really how this whole journey began."

Slayen danced at both OBT and PABT until the family moved to Baltimore after he graduated from PJA. He quickly took charge of his own dance career, said his mother. Realizing that the ballet training available in Baltimore was not seri-

ous enough, he decided to move alone to Pennsylvania to train with the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, one of the best ballet schools in the country, she said.

"This was a courageous and dedicated step from a child who had not spent more than three nights away from home before because he didn't like sleep-overs," she said. "Two years later he moved back to Portland by himself and lived with a

family here so he could resume training at PABT."

His mom and sister Gali moved back to Portland last spring, while his father Anthony Slayen remained in Baltimore working as the health and fitness director for the JCCs of Greater Baltimore.

Now Slayen is once more on the move in search of the training he needs to achieve his dream. Though he praised his training at PABT, he said the center was small.

Asked how it would feel to go from being the star in a small setting to such a large program, he said, "I think that will help push me to work harder. But it will be kind of a shock when I first get there."

Slayen said the things he enjoys about ballet are performing in front of an audience and the physical demands it places on his body. He typically dances four to five hours six days a week and longer when he is rehearsing for a show.

In years past, Slayen has received full scholarships to attend numerous summer intensive programs including programs at The Royal Ballet School in London, San Francisco Ballet School and Chautauqua School of Dance, as well as CPYB, OBT and PABT.

Unfortunately scholarship funds for ABS were already exhausted when Slayen was accepted there. To help meet the nearly \$1,600 per month cost of tuition and room and board in New York City, the family has established the "Menasche-Slayen Fund for Artistic Excellence" at the Bank of America. Any branch will accept donations to the fund.

"Ben's acceptance to SAB is indeed the catalyst for the establishment of this fund, but he is determined to 'pay it forward' someday so he can help other students make their dreams a reality too," said Menasche-Slayen. "Any donations made in his name will go directly to SAB ... Long-term we would like to set it up as a not-for-profit organization that will provide help to all those students struggling to make it in the world of performing arts."