WE ❤ CHLOÉ ARNOLD

Five teachers tell why they LOVE THEIR JOBS

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE: Teaching ballet for adults

TEAM COSTUMES: DT's favorite looks

ONCE MORE, WITH MEANING... Broadway moves with Andy Blankenbuehler
DT NOTES

13 NEWS
10 Moments from NDEO and more

18 COMPETITION
High Five
Rebecca Tingle and Melissa Verzino of The Dance Centre
by Alison Fellner

20 FACE TO FACE
Chelsie Hightower
From small-screen stardom to even bigger dreams
by Courtney Rae Allen

22 GOODS
Go Bold!
Makeup for teen dancers
PLUS application tips
by Jenny Dalzell

FEATURES

24 FIVE TEACHERS, FIVE VENUES
The job of dance teacher is as varied as where it is practiced.
by Katie Rolnick, Guillermo Perez, Nancy Wozny, Jen Jones and Margaret Fuhrer

32 NIGHT SCHOOL
What it takes to open your doors to adult students
by Mary Ellen Hunt

36 TECHNIQUE
Andy Blankenbuehler
How I teach musical theater dance
by Jenny Dalzell

40 FASHION
Halftime Heroines
Amp up team spirit with these winning costumes.
by Jenny Dalzell

DEPARTMENTS

44 MUSIC
Judy Rice
Setting the barre for ballet
by Rachel Zar

On The Cover:
WE ♥ CHLOÉ ARNOLD 24
TEACHING BALLET FOR ADULTS 32
ANDY BLANKENBUEHLER'S BROADWAY MOVES 36
TEAM COSTUMES 40

Chloé Arnold photographed by Rachel Papa
Hair & makeup by Sylvester Castellano

46 HEALTH
Mindful Moderation
Stretches for adult students
by Hannah Maria Hayes

50 HISTORY
Talley Beatty
Defining black tradition in dance
by Rachel Straus

54 THEORY & PRACTICE
Armed for Tap
Effective upper body use in tap
by Hannah Maria Hayes

58 K–12
Dance Your Troubles Away
Arizona educators develop curriculum to tackle teen issues.
by Janet Weeks

64 HIGHER ED
Students Teaching Students
Indiana University’s community dance program
by Hannah Maria Hayes

68 BUSINESS
Setting Boundaries
Policies for student-teacher communication
by Jen Jones

IN EVERY ISSUE
6 Editor’s Note • 10 Chat Room • 70 Ad Index • 71 Classifieds • 72 Final Pose

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Setting the Barre for Ballet

Judy Rice offers alternatives to the classics.

BY RACHEL ZAR

Judy Rice has been teaching ballet at the University of Michigan for 20 years. That's more than a decade longer than the two other ballet teachers on faculty, but Rice chooses to have her colleagues teach advanced classes while she focuses on levels 1 and 2. “I think it’s important for me to set the students up,” she explains. “My class is all about the mechanics. Everybody has habits. I just happen to be obsessive about finding them and fixing them.”

A graduate of the National Ballet School of Canada, Rice performed with the Joffrey Ballet, The National Tap Dance Company of Canada and American Ballet Comedy. She has taught nationwide at DMA, DEA, the Joffrey Ballet, Steps on Broadway, Broadway Dance Center, Co. Dance and the Dance Teacher Summit.

When it comes to music, Rice has taken things into her own hands and produced 11 albums for ballet. And she likes to mix things up in class, creating combinations to everything from classical to rock to hip hop. “The bottom line is, it's not a matter of who the artist is or what the tune is,” she says. “But does it speak to you? If you're inspired, your students are going to be inspired.”

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Series: Behind Barres
Artist: Judy Rice and Paul Lewis
"I co-created Behind Barres with pianist Paul Lewis and producer Rob Martens, because anything that I used prior to my music didn’t have long enough tracks. I'd spend all of my time running back and forth to the CD player. The design of these albums is user-friendly without any repeat in tunes. And Paul Lewis is truly one of the most masterful ballet pianists in the world."

Album: Ballet and Opera Classics for Kids
Artist: David Howard and Adam Pernel
"The key to good recorded music is that it should have real live passion in it. Adam Pernel used to be a pianist at the Joffrey Ballet, and you can hear his passion in this album. You don’t feel like you’re working with a CD, but with a live pianist."

Artist: Queen
Song: "Somebody to Love"
"I was sitting on the subway one day flipping through my iPod. My dog had died, I had made a major move to New York and I was a little lonely. This song came on, and I started to cry. It just spoke to me. That’s when I started making dances for class to music that was relevant in my life. And I love using rock and roll."

Artist: The Fray
Song: "Never Say Never"
"I don’t think I’m hip, so I have a 12-year-old girl and a friend of mine who’s 26 who I use as my meters. I found this tune and I went to the two of them and said, ‘What do you think about this piece of music?’ I wanted to use it for a teen group ages 11-13 on a convention tour. They both said yes to this song, so I used it, and the kids loved it."

Artist: Jay-Z, featuring Alicia Keys
Song: "Empire State of Mind"
"I choreographed a little ballet variation to ‘Symphony in C.’ Then, I changed the music a couple of times, keeping the routine exactly the same. One of the final songs was ‘Empire State of Mind,’ which is a rap song. I had other teachers watch the change in the way the students executed the movement and their excitement level. It was dramatic. Many of them loved ‘Empire State of Mind,’ and very few of them reacted the same way to the classical music. It was an exercise to show teachers a way to inspire their students. Yes, it’s important that kids listen to classical music and be inspired by it, but in this day and age we’ve got to be a little more flexible."