

The Hometown Advantage

Seven local studios that are cultivating top talent

By Ashley Rivers

It's the American dream, ballet-style: A small-town girl works hard, turns heads in the big city and wins her way to the top of a world-class company. Teresa Reichlen is one such story: Before joining New York City Ballet, she studied at The Russell School of Ballet in Chantilly, VA. "It's nice to be a big fish in a small pond to start out," she says. Instead of always dancing in the corps, "you get to perform the challenging parts."

Several small studios around the country are producing professional-caliber dancers. These schools may not receive the same publicity as their counterparts with companies or boarding schools attached, but they prove that you don't need high-profile training to make it as a dancer. In fact, the extra attention, performance opportunities and lower-stress environment might be what you need to grow—not just as a dancer, but as an artist.

GREENWICH BALLET ACADEMY Greenwich, CT, and Port Chester, NY

GBA has only been around since 2006, but its strong Vaganova training (modeled after the Vaganova and Bolshoi academies' eight-year program) is unique in the region. Students get lots of one-on-one attention—classes only have 4 to 15 students. Plus, the studio's close proximity to New York City means that guest teachers such as American Ballet Theatre principal Irina Dvorovenko and NYCB legend Allegra Kent can easily drop in for the day.

Classes: Ballet, pointe, repertoire, pas de deux, modern, contemporary ballet, men's class, character, yoga

Number of students: 105 (audition required)

Performances per year: Two or three

Competitions: Youth America Grand Prix

Alumni: Kelsey Connolly (Julliard)

Fun fact: The Port Chester loft-like studios used to be a Fruit of the Loom factory.

ALEXANDRA BALLET Chesterfield, MO

Founded in 1949, Alexandra Ballet has made a reputation for itself through Regional Dance America—the school's pre-professional company recently represented RDA's Mid-States Regional Ballet Association at the 2010



Irina Dvorovenko gives a master class at Greenwich Ballet Academy

International Ballet Competition in Jackson, MS. Alexandra Ballet also keeps up a connection with Cincinnati Ballet, whose dancers often give master classes and perform with students.

Classes: Ballet, modern, character, pointe, pas de deux, men's class, variations, Pilates



Alexandra Ballet

Number of students: 200 (no audition required)

Performances per year: Up to 12

Competitions: The school doesn't emphasize competitions, but supports students who compete.

Alumni: Louise Nadeau (former PNB principal), Antonio Douthit (Alvin Ailey), Rodney Hamilton (Ballet Hispanico), Makensie Howe and Dillon Malinski (Houston Ballet II)

Fun fact: The school was recently filmed for a British documentary called *SwanSong*, about Alexandra Ballet alum Ian Archer-Watters (former Les Ballets Grandiva dancer).

METROPOLITAN BALLET ACADEMY Jenkintown, PA

MBA students benefit from an inside connection to Pennsylvania Ballet: Led by former PAB assistant ballet mistress Lisa Collins Vidnovic, the faculty includes several current and former PAB dancers and artistic staff, including the artistic director of the second company.

Classes: Ballet, modern, jazz, repertoire, pas de deux, men's class

Number of students: 375 (no audition required)

Performances per year: At least nine

Competitions: Youth America Grand Prix

Alumni: Phoebe Gavula (Pennsylvania Ballet II)

Fun fact: MBA has a special Boys' Scholarship Program with more than 60 boys enrolled.

SOUTHLAND BALLET ACADEMY

Fountain Valley and Irvine, CA

Students at this California studio gain connections all over the world—SBA regularly brings in top master teachers, such as Royal Ballet School director Gailene Stock, NYCB principal Megan Fairchild and even Kirov director Yury Fateyev.

Classes: Ballet, pointe, pas de deux, men's class, Russian character, modern, stretch, Pilates, jazz, hip hop

Number of students: 400 (no audition required)

Performances per year: Three

Competitions: Youth America Grand Prix, Prix de Lausanne, USA International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Helsinki International Ballet Competition

Alumni: Bryn Gilbert (Ballet Memphis), Jamie Kopit (ABT apprentice), Kirby Wallis (Ballet Austin), Jade Payette (The Washington Ballet), Quenby Hersh (Scottish Ballet)



Southland Ballet Academy



Russell School of Ballet

Fun fact: Southland students are loyal: The school (now almost 30 years old) currently has third-generation students—the grandchildren of some of its original dancers!

THE RUSSELL SCHOOL OF BALLET

Chantilly, VA

Directors Karla and Hans Petry, the husband and wife team at The Russell School, offer a nurturing environment, and students and teachers become close in this tight-knit community.

Classes: Ballet, pointe, variations, character, jazz, tap, modern, lyrical, stretch

Number of students: 375–400 (audition required for higher-level classes)



Metropolitan Ballet Academy

Performances per year: Three

Competitions: No

Alumni: Teresa Reichlen (NYCB principal), Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch (Martha Graham Dance Company principal), Ian Thatcher (formerly with SFB, PNB and Ballets de Monte Carlo)

Fun fact: The school is beginning its 47th year.

WESTSIDE BALLET

Santa Monica, CA

Westside students have a direct link to George Balanchine himself: Director Yvonne Mounsey was an NYCB principal under the choreographer, so she teaches his style as she learned it firsthand.

Classes: Ballet, jazz, pointe, pas de deux, variations

Number of students: 390 (no audition required)

Performances per year: Two

Competitions: No

Alumni: Andrew Veyette (NYCB principal), Melissa Barak (choreographer), Anna Liceica (former ABT soloist), Kylee Kitchens (PNB)

Fun facts: This past summer, New York's School of American Ballet held a two-week summer session at Westside Ballet.

INTERNATIONAL BALLET SCHOOL

Littleton, CO

IBS takes the "international" element of its name seriously, inviting former Bolshoi and Paris Opéra Ballet dancers to teach master classes, and producing stylistically versatile students who go on to dance all over the world—from Monaco to Switzerland to Germany.

Classes: Ballet, character, contemporary, pointe, variations

Number of students: 60 (no audition required)

Performances per year: Two, plus outreach

Competitions: Youth America Grand Prix, Prix de Lausanne, World Ballet Competition

Alumni: Erin McAfee (The Joffrey Ballet), Anisa Scott (Dresden SemperOper Ballet)

Fun fact: IBS has recently begun purchasing sets and costumes from companies like London Festival Ballet and Houston Ballet. In a recent *Peter Pan* production, the school rented rigging so that the dancers could fly onstage! **P**



Westside Ballet



International Ballet School

Checklist from top: E.A. Kennedy/III, Todd Lechtick, 11th Door Photography, Thomas Russell, Dave Friedman