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This Girl's
Got **Heart**

Reinventing Alice

Our String of Luck:
Jun Iwasaki

The **Dance** of a
Dragonboat

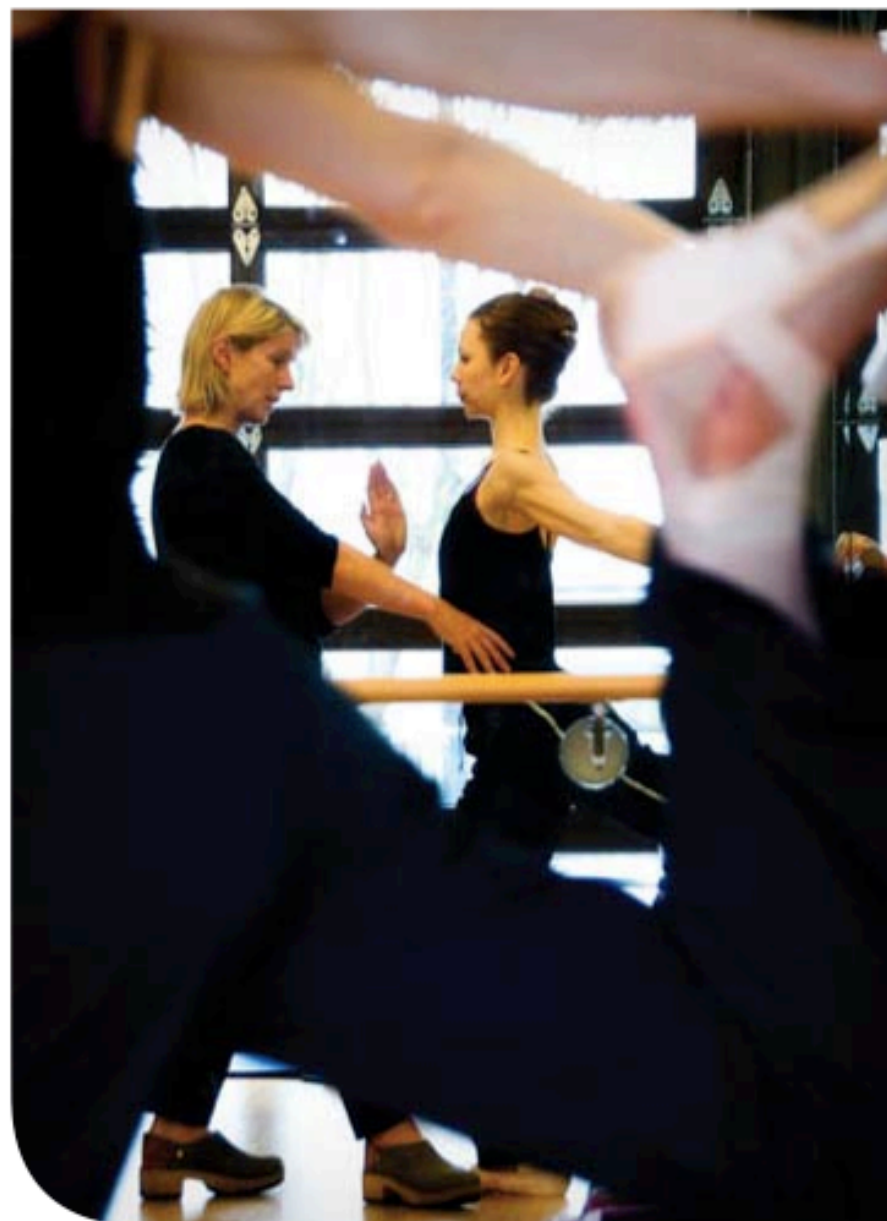
A Different
Kind of **TLC**

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A Different Kind of TLC:

A Look behind the Scenes of Human Art in Portland

*I*f you've ever been to a ballet performance, admiring the grace and ease with which the dancers seem to fly across the stage, you have likely asked yourself how they do it. Doesn't it hurt? The answer is, it does. And that's why nothing is quite as important to ballet dancers than the care they receive from their physical therapists.



Ballet dancers of all ages seek the professional care and support of physical therapists they can trust and work with regularly. At West Portland Physical Therapy Clinic, Kathi McCoy, founder and co-owner, and her staff go out of their way to provide this and more to the dancers at Oregon Ballet Theatre. WPPTC is located in SW Portland, on Morrison Street, and while the outside of the building is rather inconspicuous, the inside appears tastefully elegant, the walls painted a subtle yellow, making even the darkest winter day bright and sunny.

I have been invited by Kathi to follow a physical therapy session. We meet at the on-site gym, the walls decorated with signed photographs of performers. Kathi extends a warm welcome and introduces me to Patty Koehler, a physical therapist, and to Gavin Larsen, a principal dancer at Oregon Ballet Theatre. Patty and Gavin have known each other for years. Gavin, who has had surgery on both ankles, needs much attention in this area, and while Patty does her magic on Gavin's feet, I get a chance to talk to Kathi. She gladly offers stories about her many years of experience as a physical therapist and certified Pilates instructor, her travels abroad, and her missions to make the world a better place.

Kathi is proud of the partnership between the clinic and OBT. For the past two-and-a-half years both companies have worked together to provide the best possible care for OBT dancers of all ages. This includes a team of on-call doctors, who, in case of an emergency, can be seen by the dancers within 24 hours. What makes this cooperation even more special is that the clinic offers its services to OBT at a discounted rate. When asked why she decided

by Ute Mitchell
photo by Joni Schrantz

to extend this offer to OBT, Kathi replies with genuine admiration, "I'm humbled by the dancers. I'm inspired by their level of dedication to their art." She adds, "We work with many athletes: soccer players, football players and so on, but ballet dancers don't make a lot of money. They are not appreciated enough despite the hard work they do. They dance out of love for the art, and that's why we, at the clinic, are especially dedicated to them."

Gavin, who has been listening to the conversation, nods. At the young age of 34 she is an "aging dancer," as she puts it, but with the wonderful support of the clinic, she believes she can dance for several years to come.

"Unfortunately during busy times, I rarely get to come here. I miss it," says Gavin. She loves the familiarity at the clinic, as well as the dedication and welcoming demeanor of the therapists. "I have grown stronger in so many ways," she insists. Whenever she can, she uses the exercise equipment, which the clinic offers to the dancers free of charge.

Patty, who is a member of the International Association of Dance Medicine, and a certified Pilates instructor, has provided physical therapy services to OBT since 1992. She has worked with dancers of all ages and skill levels, and her expertise is valued by Gavin and many others in the profession. I ask her about her dedication to this cause. She says, "I love dance. I believe in the organization (OBT). The arts are vital to the community, and that's why I donate my money back to OBT." She says that many other physical therapists at the clinic do the same, and Kathi agrees. She and Patty have worked with hundreds of dancers over the years. Ballet dancers make up about 5 to 10% of the patient population.

While Gavin requires work mostly on her feet today, the therapists at WPPTC work on all areas of "their" dancers' bodies. They help improve mobility, decrease swelling, and teach proper body mechanics to avoid injuries. This is especially vital for male dancers, who often have to lift their female partners and hurt their shoulders in the process.

Kathi says, "I listen to [the dancers], and they help guide me. Pain is often referred. The dancers will usually focus on one specific thing, so I listen and watch carefully, to find out what the real cause of their pain is."

WPPTC's goal is to provide quality care to the hard-working dancers, but also to offer friendship and support when it is needed. Some of the dancers train eight to ten hours per day, during rehearsal times even more. "They sustain a lot. They have an understanding of their bodies. They are in tune with their bodies," says Kathi passionately.

The positive atmosphere at West Portland Physical Therapy Clinic shows on the faces of the staff, the therapists, and patients alike. The smiles are contagious, and I can see how this place is a haven in the busy lives of the OBT dancers. I leave the building with a much better understanding and an all-new appreciation for Gavin Larsen, who has graciously answered all my beginner questions about ballet.

As for Kathi, Patty, and the other wonderful people at WPPTC, they proved that sometimes people come together to do great things, simply out of the goodness of their hearts. "From the moment you cross the threshold of West Portland Physical Therapy Clinic, you know that you have entered a special place," reads a statement from WPPTC's website. I dare say this is a gross understatement, and I applaud Kathi and her staff for their ongoing commitment to the dancers of OBT. 

Ute Mitchell is a freelance writer and homeschooling mom of two in Beaverton.

