



Dedicated to Dance

Grand Forks and the Boundary region are home to myriad dance groups of all styles and ages

STORY BY *Joan Thompson*

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“I love this town! People aren’t afraid to dance, no matter how old they are!” Gemma Greengrass, the very young and enthusiastic new owner of Dazzle Dance Studio in Grand Forks, blithely notes. “And the incredible diversity of dance here — belly, Irish, can-can, ballroom — it is really amazing for the size of the community!”

It does not take long for a newcomer to Grand Forks to size up the phenomenal pull that dancing has on residents of this valley. It is a force that ignites imaginations, drives schedules, seduces audiences and compels multitudes to strive for a more elegant pirouette, a higher grand jeté and a better relationship with their body. Students from ages five to 80 struggle to choose between belly dance and ballroom, jazz and ballet, zumba and Irish dance, jazzercise and bellyfit, lyrical and tap.

Dance instructor Michele Cipressi Dean tries to explain dance’s popularity: “People are drawn to dance because it is something healthy, social, fun, and can be tremendously uplifting because of the goals accomplished and the way it impacts the whole being. Movement is such a key to healthy body/mind connectedness.” But to get people to this point, a team of skilled instructors and choreographers is needed and a culture of dance that is motivating to all students at every level. Looking more closely, these certainly are and have been hallmarks of dance in the Boundary.

While dances and society balls proliferated during Grand Forks’ boom-town years of copper smelting and sawmills, people today pinpoint the participation of a dance troupe from Grand Forks at Expo ‘86 as a pivotal event in the emergence of dance as a discipline and performing art in the



city. Led by Gisela Ko, a physiotherapist and Berlin-trained Modern Dancer, her Adult Folk Dance Ensemble awed Expo audiences with their varied program. Buoyed by their success, folk dance classes ranging from highland to flamenco, children's ballet classes and an adult dance group defined the dance landscape in the town for the next ten years.

This was to change when a high-kicking, spirited can-can group — Les Folles Jambettes (Crazy Legs) — burst onto the scene. One of its founding members, Mona Mattei, recalls that moment. "I had just moved down from Fort St. John and was pining for the can-can troupe I had left behind there. With the help of a friend, I decided to rustle up a group of dancers for a competition just months away in Rossland. It was insane, and likely another reason for our name!"

The group's initial bravado has not dimmed and they have gone on to win the respect of local, regional and international audiences, touring twice to Germany. Fellow

dancers Mel Shenstone and Cynthia Garnett are keen to set the record straight about can-can technique. "Can-can is one of the most physically demanding forms of dance; it requires a tremendous amount of stamina, flexibility and resilience." "But," Mel adds, "it is a fabulously fun way to keep fit, to perform and to travel with a group of like-minded women!" Always popular with their audiences, this semi-professional troupe's choreographers, Mona, Mel and Cynthia, thrive on keeping the Les Folles Jambettes' dances robust and entertaining, often blending elements of jazz, tap and Charleston to underscore the theatrical character of the dances.

As a way to raise funds for their first trip to Germany, Les Folles Jambettes hosted in 2003 what was to become an annual institution in the community — the Dance Extravaganza. New to the stage at that event were a bellydance inspired fusion group — The Hip Sisters — and a youth Irish dance ensemble, The Spirit of the Dance. Dance

in the Boundary, in all its complementary colours, had truly begun.

The Hip Sisters, since their unveiling in that first Dance Extravaganza, have become, along with their sister fire-spinning group "Luminosity", a well-known entity across the Boundary and beyond. They work from a core desire to maintain the beauty and artistic integrity of the bellydance form, and their performances clearly attest to that. Fusing bits of Bollywood, classic Egyptian and Turkish Romani into their dance, the Hip Sisters' repertoire of styles and ideas dazzles on stage.

While choreographers Cynthia Howard and Laurie Nichols take pride in the group's success, they take the greatest pleasure in knowing they are helping to create a women's circle in action, the spirit of which is always evident in performance.

The Spirit of the Dance ("Spoirad an Damhsa" in Gaelic), who had also made their debut in 2003, were soon turning heads and attracting keen recruits. Founded by direc-



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tor Michele Cipressi Dean, planting the seeds of Irish dance in a valley long cultivated by the Doukhorbor community has proven to be surprisingly propitious. Though the group was started to provide recreational Irish Dance entertainment in the Boundary, students have gone on to achieve success in competitive Irish Dance.

Affiliated with the Haran School of Irish Dance in Kettle Falls, Washington, and the Blakey School of Irish Dance in Kelowna, two graduates of the program — Ally Riddle and Adrian Palek — are now poised to compete at the Nationals Level in Rhode Island this year with the hopes of advancing to the Worlds being held in Montreal also this year.

Another graduate, Clarissa Palek, on track to earn her teaching certificate in Irish dance, comments on the “take no prisoners” world of competitive Irish Dance. “There are so many rules in Irish Dance — it is the most structured dance form in the world. Style of dance, metre and tempo of music, hairstyle, makeup and dress have to be precisely according to regulations right down to the sock glue you wear to hold your socks up while dancing! It’s crazy, but after 11 years of doing it I still love it. You have to put so much effort and thought into it that when you finally can do it, it is so rewarding, and the audience response is the icing on the cake!”

When not managing the intricacies of Irish Dance training, or dancing in the adult fusion belly dance troupe she founded in 2006, “Rara Avis Dancers,” Michele Dean is teaching the other classes she offers under the umbrella of her new business, “Granby Dance and Wellness”. Formerly a dance studio owner/operator, Michele’s passion — dance & movement as therapy — now inspires her dance instruction. “I love the fact that my job — keeping people moving — does incredible things for people’s physical and emotional health. I see that in Bellyfit, where women of all abilities, ages and sizes walk out of my class feeling renewed and strengthened.

“Bellyfit was designed to help women connect with the ‘divine feminine’ within themselves and the planet, thereby empowering an energy that is often blocked in our everyday lives. It is powerfully releasing bodywork!”

In her bellyfit classes and her “Last Chance Belly-dance” class, Michele caters to women 50 and up only.

If the Last Chance Belly Dance option doesn’t excite you, there are plenty of other classes for the 50+ set in Grand Forks. On any given day, one can find a jazzercise class (taught by Edie Raspberry-Faulkner), a zumba class (with teacher, Sonia Wood), low-impact bellyfit or ballroom dance. The latter, taught by May Berge, has been tuning up ballroom dance enthusiasts in Grand Forks for the past six years. For a \$2.00 drop in fee, May will unravel the mystery of a bucket list of ballroom steps for you — foxtrot, waltz, rumba, salsa, cha-cha, night-club two-step, tango, samba — and might throw in a country step or two.

During my visit, ten couples had braved the evening to master the country two-step, and with May’s guidance and encouragement, were gaining confidence with each step. Her positive energy was palpable: “I love it when people have that ‘Aha moment’ — when they realize that they don’t have two left feet, and can learn to dance!”

Since 2004, children have been well served by the dance studio in town. Now called Dazzle Dance Studio and owned/operated by Gemma Greengrass, its roster of seven other teachers — Michele Cipressi Dean, Geena Hall, Nicole Hirtz, Sarah Leslie, Stacey O’Donnell, Sage Sherstobitoff and Kristy Zamec — ensure a comprehensive dance education for students in the area.

An impressive team of talent has already been assembled in the teen competitive jazz/lyrical class and Gemma reports that “They are enjoying dance classes for much the same reasons I did as a kid. Its exciting, challenging, you get to work with a team, and to gain a sense of belonging with the people you train with. And they practice between classes. I’m really impressed by how dedicated they are!”

Dedication has been key to the success of dancers, dance instruction and dance companies in the Boundary. It has been the reason for the respect given the business of dance in Grand Forks, the sell-out shows and the disproportionate number of alumni that have continued on in the challenging field of the performing arts.

And the reason for the dedication? My suspicion is that the dancers knew about the importance of living life unapologetically long before behavioral scientist Steve Maraboli lay it down in his book, *Unapologetically You: Reflections of Life and The Human Experience*. “Live your truth. Express your love. Share your enthusiasm. Take action towards your dreams. Walk your talk. Dance and sing to your music. Embrace your blessings. Make today worth remembering.” Or simply, just dance! **3**