LEAP FORWARD

Dancers Receive College Credit for Professional Experience

BY RACHEL HOWARD

Vanessa Zahorian enrolled in college for fall 2003 because she was feeling "settled" and "established" as a principal at San Francisco Ballet. Little did she know that in the season ahead, she would step in for an injured dancer and perform a string of opening night debuts that would test her like never before.

Yet 25-year-old Zahorian describes her first two semesters of classes as "meditative." "It's a good break from constantly thinking about the roles I'm performing," she said one afternoon between rehearsals of the lead in Mark Morris's new Sylvia.

If she sounds surprisingly un-frizzled, due credit goes to St. Mary's College's LEAP (Liberal Education for Arts Professionals) program. It's designed for working dancers, and practically tailor-made for SFB members, though the program also has a cluster in Los Angeles. Often Zahorian dances that day's matinee, showers, and grabs a bite before class. Sure, she's exhausted after a week of performances. "But what would I do at home?" she says. "Watch TV and go to sleep."

Her spring semester class helped her find new, non-physical ways of communicating. Called "Personal and Professional Assessment," it teaches writing skills and allows dancers to earn up to three units by creating essays about their dancing experience. "It's a little like therapy," says Zahorian, who drew upon her year as a Kirov apprentice to write about Russian stage culture. "Dancers express through our bodies, but it's great to get your thoughts down, or just to raise your hand in class and speak. You don't get to do that at the ballet."

Zahorian's desire to brush up her Russian prompted her to consider college. She doesn't know what she'd like to do with her degree yet, and is hardly approaching the twilight of her performing career. Still, she says, "I didn't want to wait. Time is too short."

And the opportunity to broaden her perspective was appealing. "The focus at a ballet company is so extreme," Zahorian says. "I was ready to use my brain in a different way."

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