

# Degree leads to... ballet?

by Miriam Korn

Is there life after school? This is the question I have found myself asking over and over again lately, just as many fellow ex-students do upon finishing their degrees.

Last year, the answer seemed obvious—exploring the world. But as this academic year began, and my peers were off to their various graduate schools' Orientation Weeks, my lack of participation left me unexpectedly disconcerted.

After seventeen years of institutionalized education, I was finding my new-found and long-awaited freedom rather baffling.

Indeed, it was a classic case of post-graduate syndrome.

Hence, I tried to answer what seemed to be an easier question: "Is there life before school?" I dug deep in the dregs of my long term memory to think back to my pre-kindergarten days when my ambitions were simple and admittedly stereotypical: I wanted to be ballerina.

I will use any excuse to go in interview a ballet dancer—one of my favourite things to do.

Thus I began my quest by getting to know a couple of ballet dancers. They were Julia Vilen and James Taylor, of the National Ballet Company.

Both started their dancing early, however, their academic lives, up to the point they joined the company, were quite different.

Starting dancing at the age of six years, Vilen managed to balance going to regular American public school with practising her art. She concedes that, over the years, she has missed out on academics, but she does not feel she missed out socially. "I couldn't get into the teenage phase, going

to McDonald's every night to talk about boys and make-up. I was happy to go home, do my homework and go to sleep."

Vilen's dance partner, James Taylor, also started at a young age; however, he was focussed on his future career much earlier, enrolling in the Royal School of Ballet when he was eleven years old.

have to do it again."

"I love the freedom and the power of being able to use my body as an instrument and then show it to other people."

Her counterpart wholeheartedly agrees. "The frustration when it doesn't work is often very hard to deal with," relates Taylor, "but performing really makes it worth all the work."

involved help one explore life. For example, in *Steptext*, William Forsythe's contemporary dance in which Vilen and Taylor perform together, examines various aspects of relationships. "It deals with manipulation and power, and their limits. Bill expands on structures to express this," points out Vilen.

She refers to her periodic improvisational signals she does with

schedules.

And, alas, just as this pursuit of perfection, as Vilen describes it, is by no means perfect, it also cannot last forever, for ballet dancers are, believe it or not, merely human. Most performing careers end at the age of about 35 years. Many stay in the performing arts as stage managers, ballet mistresses or go on to theatre. However, some choose to pursue an academic route. It was for these people that the Dancer Transition Center was established by Joyce-Anne Sidemus six years ago—to help ease the process of a dancer changing into a regular person.

For now, however, these two marvellous people were by no means regular. I was truly in awe of how they had spent the majority of their lives learning about every dimension of themselves, before going on to exploring the thoughts of others and the mechanics of the world around them.

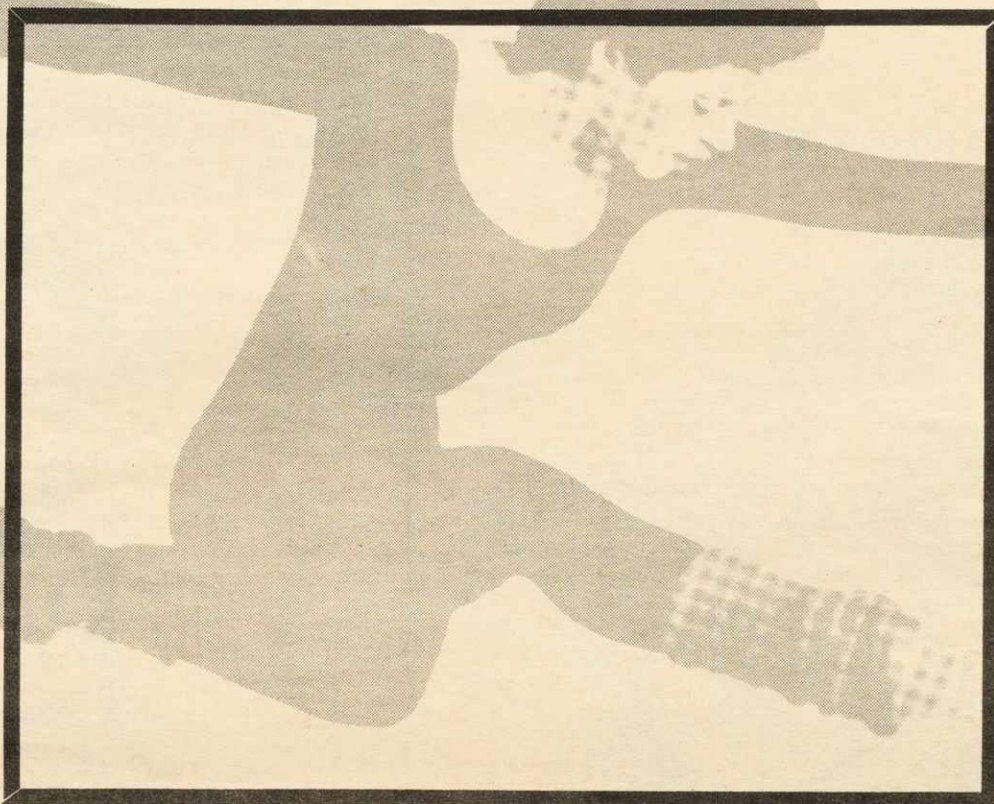
"Wow," said I, upon discovering that Vilen was nearly my age, "You've done so much, and I've done so little."

Vilen, however, disagreed, pointing out the fact that I did have my degree, a goal which she has had to postpone. "It depends on how you look at it."

So, happily, my perspective has changed, thanks to discovering an affirmative answer to what seems to be the opposite of my original question.

Finally, as she was whisked off for CBC's filming of "A Day in the Life of a Ballet Dancer", Julia whispered, "Travel, travel, travel."

So, reassured by the advice of this wise young woman, I decided to stick to my original plan. For as you read this, I'll be off in the Old World hanging out, looking around and perhaps even finding myself.



Both dancers joined the company when they were 17 years old and both have no regrets about sticking to the commitment they made at such a young age. "It's a fantastic life!" exclaims 21 year old Vilen.

"You physically exhaust yourself every night," says Taylor, "You really have to like it a lot to wake up each day knowing you

Ballet teaches lessons that go beyond academics. Dancers develop extremely heightened awareness of themselves. "It teaches you so much about life. It's so giving, both emotionally and physically," relates Vilen, "In order to find out about yourself, you need to work with your mind and body."

Not only does the training in-

her arms, "The signing I do represents communication."

However, just like university, this learning experience also has its drawbacks. Firstly, ballet dancers, as most artists in general, are still seeking more recognition for their field as a profession. They have little power in determining their repertoire nor are they well paid to maintain their very hectic

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## Ntl. ballet sub par

by Cigana Raven

The National Ballet was in Halifax last week, bringing a collection of classical and modern dances to the stage.

The evening opened with "Concerto for Flute and Harp", a neoclassical piece liberally choreographed for twelve men and two women. The National did not launch the programme in good form. Instead the dancers were often out of step with each other, and one of the ballerinas, Chan Hon Goh, demonstrated less than perfect technique.

After the first intermission, sitting patiently, I waited for the lights to go down and the next piece, "Steptext", to begin. How-

ever, "Steptext" is in the modern style, nearing post-modern, and the dance commenced sans music with lights over the audience still on. A few slashes of violin interrupted the bright silence and a dynamic arm-wrenching dialogue of dance ran its course, sharp and well executed. I should add that at some point the lights did dim, and the music of dueling violins continued for longer than a startling two second interval, but predictably enough the lights went up and the applause followed - in that order.

Next was the only true classical piece of the night, a pas de deux from Don Quixote, danced by Margaret Illman and Kevin Pugh,

in my opinion the high point of the evening. Performed in traditional costumes, the dancers were elegant and well matched, and they delivered a virtually flawless performance exhibiting impressive technical merit.

The evening drew to a close with a collection of short dances of a contemporary style accompanied by international folk songs. The aptly titled Dream Dances would be best characterized as light and flowing, in keeping with the vibrant and colorful film costumes. Although they look prettily performed, like the rest of the evening's performance, it was not awe-inspiring. But that is about as good as it gets this far east.