



The Healing Touch

An OU physical therapist keeps the Tulsa Ballet Theater on its toes while offering his students a lab experience that is truly “hands-on.”

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

The curtain has risen on Act Two of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the nationally renowned Tulsa Ballet Theater is playing to a packed house in Oklahoma City’s Civic Center. While Juliet’s portly nurse attempts to deliver a letter between the star-crossed lovers, and falls victim to a rowdy Verona street gang onstage, Romeo is getting worked over on a table upstairs. Romeo, at least, is in very good hands.

For the past seven years, Ken Randall, professor and director of Physical Therapy at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa, has been manipulating dancers from the Tulsa ballet company in all the right ways. From tibialis to trapezius, dancers are notoriously hard on their bodies, and Randall is there to soften the blow. He attends nearly every performance, ready to pinch, pull and coax rebellious muscles into submission so the show can go on.

“You would never know they were hurting,” Randall says of the dancers. “They smile as they run offstage, often in unbelievable pain.”

After a breathtaking Act One, Romeo, played by principal dancer Alfonso Martin, needs relief from cramping calf muscles. Company members know they can find Randall waiting in the wings for a quick fix or more extensive manual therapy when time allows. Nearly a third of the corps will seek him out the day of a performance for some preventative maintenance.

Tonight Randall’s makeshift office is a massage table on the second floor of the Civic Center, squeezed in between the elevator and the dressing room doors.

“Welcome to my clinic,” says Randall, gesturing grandly around the hallway. “Fortunately, all you need as a physical therapist is a table and your hands.”

Randall got involved with the Tulsa Ballet eight years ago when colleague Mary Staley asked if he would like to help her backstage for a performance of *The Nutcracker*. “Mary started the physical therapy program with the Tulsa Ballet 25 years ago,” says Randall. “She asked me if I would be interested—she said they could use someone with knowledge of the musculoskeletal

OPPOSITE: Ken Randall, professor and director of Physical Therapy at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa, gives student Mary Larsen-Purvis, a chance to practice what she has learned in class at his clinic in the OU Family Medicine Center. The Tulsa Ballet Theater donated the barre and floor as part of an ongoing collaboration between the clinic and the ballet company. Photo by Lynette Lobban



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Physical therapy student Ali Dodd watches as Randall relieves the cramping calf muscles of Tulsa Ballet's Romeo, principal dancer Alfonso Martin.

problems of the spine, which is my area.”

Although the physical therapist admits that he did not know “a plié from a bidet” at the time, he accompanied Staley to the performance and was mesmerized by the athleticism and grace of the dancers. The dancers were equally impressed by Randall’s healing touch. “When they started asking ‘Is that tall guy coming back?’ I felt like I was in,” he recalls.

Now in his seventh full season, Randall has become indispensable to the company. In addition to attending performances, he offers weekly sessions at his clinic at the OU Family Medicine Center on South St. Louis. There he not only addresses the immediate concerns of stressed joints and pulled muscles, but also offers “exercise prescriptions” in the form of yoga, stretches and balance balls, as a means to prevention.

As a professor, Randall realized the incredible opportunity for a partnership between the University and the Tulsa Ballet Theater by including his physical therapy students in the vis-

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its. The Department of Rehabilitation Sciences is one of the fastest growing programs in OU’s College of Allied Health, which offers degrees at both the Oklahoma City Health Sciences Center and Tulsa’s Schusterman Center. Randall, who teaches graduate level courses to students on both campuses, envisioned a beautiful pas de deux between the college and the ballet company.

“Ballet dancers are perfect specimens for surface anatomy,” says Randall. “It seemed like a win/win. The dancers get on

the spot therapy, and students get to see anatomy at its best.”

Judging from student response, the program has been a success. Typically there are more students signing up for the performances and clinics than available slots, but Randall tries to make sure everyone gets a chance during the course of the semester.

“The clinic is really beneficial because it lets us take everything we learn in class and apply it,” says Mary Larsen-Purvis, a second-year student in rehabilitation sciences at OU-Tulsa.



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Randall and students provide on-the-spot therapy during performances of the Tulsa Ballet Theater. Between acts, Lindsay Imel, left, applies pressure to a tender toe of dancer Leah Gallas.



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Another second-year says the performances are equally rewarding. "I had only been to the ballet once or twice," says Jeremy Willhite, "but watching the dancers up close, you really appreciate the work that they do. Along with the play-by-play by Professor Randall, it's an excellent experience."

The "play-by-play" Randall engages in with the students does not offer an analysis of the performance, but instead helps students anticipate problems by watching the choreography and correlating the cause and effect of repeated, strenuous muscle movements. "She's having Achilles discomfort. What do you think caused that?" he will ask from the wings.

"I quiz them: it's my nature as a teacher, and it's fun for me to see them putting it all together," he says.

Passing a prop table, Randall stops and asks his students to pick up a stage sword that weighs close to 20 pounds. "What problems do think could arise from dancing around with this?" he asks.

A student pauses, hefting the sword. She feels the pull in her own muscles. "Shoulder," she asks, "and lower back?"

"Right," answers Randall. "We'll need to watch out for the lower back on whoever is dancing around with this one."

Between acts, dancers queue up for their turn on the table. "Hang on," he tells a dancer as a student begins manual therapy on the muscles of her foot. "This is going to be intense." As the student applies pressure, Randall studies the dancer's face.

"It's OK," she says. "It hurts, but it's a good hurt."

That is, in fact, a compliment. The entire company has come to appreciate what one dancer called "the dee-lee-shus torture" Randall prescribes with his hands.

After carefully observing dozens of performances, the professor has become not only a fan, but also a connoisseur. He knows when a cue is late or dancers are off-tempo. Even more important, he knows the dancers as patients and as people.

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AT LEFT: Ballet dancers are notoriously hard on their feet, but Randall has relief at his fingertips, prompting one dancer to describe his carefully applied pressure as "dee-lee-shus torture."

TOP RIGHT: Randall offers Tulsa Ballet's Alberto Montesso as a visual aid for student Casie Westfahl as she studies the muscles of the neck. Through the partnership between OU-Tulsa and the ballet company, dancers receive physical therapy and students see anatomy at its best.

LOWER RIGHT: Preventative medicine is part of the prescription at Randall's Tulsa clinic. Here, Serena Chu follows the physical therapist through a regimen of yoga stretches.



Christopher, Jean-Richard

“By now Ken not only knows the physical history of most of our dancers, he also knows their psychology,” says Tulsa Ballet artistic director Marcello Angelini. “He knows who will ‘hide’ injuries to continue dancing and who will complain of small problems that are part of the life of a dancer. He also knows how long each dancer takes to heal and which recurring injuries to look for in each member of our company.

“His treatments are both gentle and effective; you can see that there is thought process behind everything he does. We love working with him and his group and look forward to continuing this relationship.”

Randall's rapport with the artists is warm and genuine. As the company assembles in the hall before a performance, he greets dancers by name and injury. “Leah, how's your foot?” or “Alfonso, how's the cramp?” Walking down the hall of the Civic Center with students from the OU Health Sciences Center, he stops to joke with dancer Alberto Montesso.

“Alberto hasn't had any trouble with his neck, knock on wood,” says the therapist, playfully knocking on the dancer's head. “He's in pretty good shape for parts made in Italy.”

He affectionately refers to demi-soloist Megan Keough as his '57 Chevy, because “she's always needing work.” One emergency tune-up took place in the middle of *Swan Lake* when Keough subluxed her first rib while onstage. In extreme pain, she finished the dance, and ran onstage to find her trusty mechanic, who was able to push the rib back in place.

“We were able to treat it before the muscles had time to



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spasm,” says Randall. “She was off for maybe two minutes and was back onstage without missing a beat.”

Dedication like that impresses the physical therapist. “This company is world class. They are amazing,” he tells his students. “The challenge is knowing when you can send them back in.

“What stretches my ability as a physical therapist is to rehabilitate them as quickly as possible, but as safely as possible. And that's really one of most rewarding things for me. They live to dance, and I live to make sure they can.”

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.