

Abi Stafford Living Ballet Dream

from Howard Richman

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Abi Stafford, a homeschooled senior in the PHAA diploma program, is living a ballet dream this year. Though she is only a high school senior, she has already danced two principal roles with the New York City Ballet and has even received rave reviews in the *New York Times*.

Abi is the youngest of three in a long-term homeschooling family from Carlisle PA. She and her siblings grew up dancing more than 15 hours per week at the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet. Some of you might remember her oldest sister Melissa (who just finished up her junior year in the honors college at Houghton.) performing ballet at PHAA's 1997 graduation ceremony. Her brother Jonathan, who graduated with PHAA in '98, preceded Abi at the New York City Ballet where he also dances.

During the summer after her sophomore year, Abi attended the 5-week summer ballet program of the School of American Ballet and was invited to stay on as a scholarship student. She danced four hours each day getting stronger in partnering and stamina, and setting aside four different time periods each day to do her book work for her homeschool courses.

Beginning in November, 1999, she was accepted into New York City Ballet as an apprentice and she danced minor parts in several ballets. On January 6, she moved up the ladder from apprentice to member of the Corps de Ballet. On January 14, she received a huge break when the female principal in Balanchine's *Valse Fantastique* got the flu and she was chosen to fill in. (She had learned the part the previous year at the School of American Ballet.) Here is her description (from a report she wrote) of that performance:

As soon as I got on the stage, all the nerves vanished and I danced out of the sheer joy to have such an opportunity. I was dancing with a soloist...We received three curtain calls and I got my first chance to bow in front of the curtain as I have seen all the principal dancers do.

On January 17, a flattering review by Jennifer Dunning was published in *The New York Times*:

Anticipation ran high on Friday night when the lead female role in George Balanchine's "*Valse-Fantasia*" was performed by Abi Stafford, a 17-year-old corps dancer who joined the company a mere two weeks ago and was not even listed on the roster. Ms. Stafford was astonishingly authoritative, particularly given her meager performing experience and rehearsal time.

Her phrasing was impressively exact but never careful or self-conscious looking, a trademark quality of Marcia Dale Weary, the noted teacher who trained her. It was not until Ms. Stafford's slightly uncertain curtain bows that one realized fully how young she is.

Later on she stepped-in, with only an hour's notice, for a dancer who had injured an ankle, and danced the principal role in Ballo Della Regina partnering with renown dancer Peter Boal. She went on to dance the same dance twice more. In a review in the February 26 New York Times, Jack Anderson wrote:

Ms. Stafford, a slender dancer whose legs rose high and remained secure in arabesque, was partnered by Peter Boal, a noble cavalier. Although some young technicians might dance the entire ballet in an extroverted fashion, Ms. Stafford wisely brought touches of delicacy to her first pas de deux with Mr. Boal. She let her interpretation gain in intensity and her lucid allegro steps became increasingly bouncy....

Her year has been a dream come true. In a report about her experience she wrote, "I get to dance for a living, which I love, and now I get paid for it."