

Rick Clark leaps from biology to ballet to two-step

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A medley of talents makes it difficult to fit dancer Rick Clark into any kind of a mold. On his four and a half acre farm in Havana he raises, trail rides, and cares for his horses, Lacy and Tiny. By day he works in the Invasive Plant Management division at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, controlling exotic plants that overpopulate the landscape. His evenings and weekends, however, are dedicated to the inside of a dance studio.

Clark has been a company member of Tallahassee's Pas de Vie Ballet for nearly 20 years, and he simultaneously teaches adult classes in country western and ballroom dancing. He took second place in the United Country Western Dance Circuit's World Championships with his dance partner, Seah Hagan, also a member of Pas de Vie. Actively training to take first place, they go from four hours of country western rehearsal straight into Nutcracker rehearsals.

Pas de Vie Ballet's Nutcracker kicks off its holiday show over the Thanksgiving weekend.

"In the same day usually I go from white tights and ballet shoes to my jeans and boots," says Clark. "The competition judges always say if you ever want to get to the elite divisions in country western dance you have to have a ballet background to master the poise and arm lines. My and Seah's ballet background really make us stand out because we're so used to partnering each other, though the hardest part for us is to make our country dance not look too graceful or classical."

In explaining the style, Clark says the only true difference between ballroom and country western dancing is that the latter is done with boots and a hat. Though the American impression of country dancing takes place in a nightclub or with line dancing, country western dance has standards similar to ballroom's cha-cha and waltz, such as the two-step and polka. Out of the two divisions in the competition world, Clark and his partner compete in the showcase division, which allows aerial tricks and one-footed turns.

Though nowadays he's completely immersed in the dance world, growing up in small town Chipola didn't offer Clark many outlets for organized dance opportunities. He took up country western clogging, similar to tap dance, in high school and practiced martial arts for six years. After enrolling in his local college, Clark took up country western classes and fell in love with the form. He went on to pursue his master's degree in biology at the University of South Alabama where he was exposed to classical ballet for the first time.

"I was dancing at a bar competition in Mobile where the [former] President of Mobile Ballet [Winthrop "Wink" Corey] was judging the competition," recalls Clark. "He offered me free classes because they needed guys. I'd never even seen a ballet performance, but I started taking classes with the company and performing little light roles that just required fairly simplistic things like walking to counts."

Though Clark was 23 years old at the time of his first ballet class, he remembers dropping everything both socially and physically in his life in order to focus on improving on his technique. He remains grateful for the encouragement of his first mentor, "Wink" who lit the spark of ballet within him. Clark appreciated how the now Artistic Director of the Mobile Ballet made it easy for any male who had an interest in



Rick Clark and Seah Hagan in country western dance competition.



ballet to come take classes.

Within five years, Clark began to dance lead roles in the company. As he enjoyed ballet's extreme athleticism, Clark felt his experiences with martial arts allowed him greater flexibility in class. However, because karate was a far more rigid form, ballet's grace challenged his body.

"I liked that ballet was just as physical but in a different way," said Clark. "It forces you to become more fluid. You're dancing with music and you have partners, too, whereas with martial arts you didn't have another person to learn or develop with the way you do in ballet."

He feels the balance he strikes between his dance life and science career complement each other. When aspects of dance technique was first explained to him, such as engaging and turning out the muscles, his biology background allowed him to have a higher level of understanding and connect with the material. Now as a 44-year-old dancer, he says it's especially helpful in injury prevention, as it's very difficult to maintain a high level of athleticism unless you really take care of yourself.

Clark has danced as a guest artist with the Mobile Ballet, Albany Ballet Theatre, Bainbridge Ballet, and many other regional companies. When his career brought him to Tallahassee, Clark was recommended to work with Pas de Vie Ballet as his mentor at the Mobile Ballet had once danced with its directors, Natalia Botha and Charles Hagan. For almost 20 years since, he's danced with the local ballet company and has felt entirely at home with their mission of embracing the whole dancer and performing as a family.

"Everyone is supportive," smiles Clark. "They take care of their dancers, and they do what they can for you outside of dance. There's a lot of competitiveness in the ballet world, but you don't feel that here."

He also considers himself lucky to be part of a company where the lead directors choreograph movement that fits the company's individual bodies and athleticism rather than forcing them to perform in a conventional way for tradition's sake. He also feels that Pas de Vie's fresh take on storytelling allows choreography to be more accessible to someone who may have never attended a ballet. Clark takes company class four days a week and rehearses on Saturdays for a four- to five-hour time block, which increases to include three to four hours on Sundays as well when a performance nears.

In reflecting on the upcoming Nutcracker performances on Nov. 25 and 27, Clark recalls playing almost every male role in the show. Recently, he's

If you go

What: Pas de Vie Ballet's "The Nutcracker"
When: 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 25, and 2:30 p.m., Sunday, Nov. 27
Where: Lee Hall Auditorium, Florida A&M University
Cost: Prices range from \$25 for children/seniors to \$40 for adults
Contact: For more information, call 850-290-2247 or visit www.pasdevieballet.com.

regularly performed the Arabian role, which is slower and more athletic in terms of acrobatics and lifts. This year he's excited to be returning to the more classical roles in the Snow scene's Pas de Deux, or partner dance, as well as the Waltz of the Flowers where the crazy array of colors feels like a large celebration. Being able to go out on stage and jump and fly around and throw your body to the crowd is an incredible

"Each role has its own flair and character, and you get to present it with your style," says Clark. "There's a lot of classical romance, magic, and beauty in the snow scene with the large corps all in white, the lead couple all in white, and the dancing in the snow that comes from the ceiling. There's also this freedom of just letting your body go in the Waltz of the Flowers where the crazy array of colors feels like a large celebration. Being able to go out on stage and jump and fly around and throw your body to the crowd is an incredible

scene to be a part of."

Clark says that after being part of the show for so many years, it helps him to truly get into the Christmas spirit. He wishes to bring attendees into the season as well in the flurry of family gatherings and Black Friday shopping with Tchaikovsky's score, the elaborate costuming, the growing Christmas tree, and the Land of Sweets.

Outside of this iconic show, dance continues to feed Clark as a passion and a lifestyle. Ballet is therapy after a hectic day at work, where he can get lost in the music and focus on the combinations being thrown at him. It forces him out of his daily life and stresses, and with country dancing it's about hitting that final hurdle and fighting to win in spite of any obstacles or challenges. As he embodies both forms, he looks to the younger generation for inspiration.

"We have so many young athletes at Pas de Vie who can do the tricks and the turns that I wish I had been able to start doing at their age," says Clark. "These kids have no fear and never back down. It's inspiring to me to see them so passionate and supported by this passion."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

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