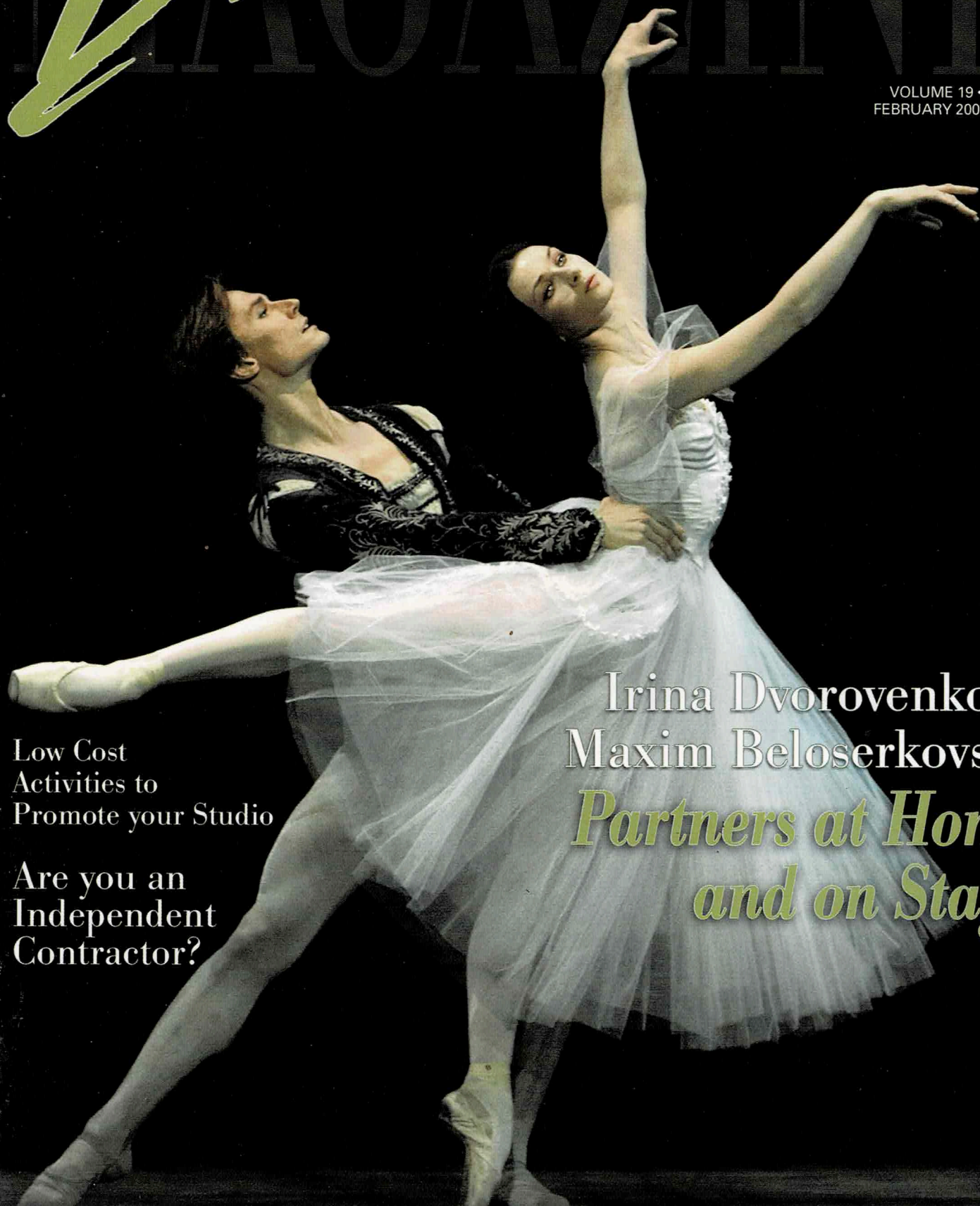


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Seeking A Healthy Dance Community, Part I

By Jasmine Rios

Vera Ninkovic, Deborah Greenfield and Batista Gremaud, "Respirame" Photo: Assaf Stoler

When the opportunity finally emerges for a young talent to reach professional status, the accomplishment is monumental. The transition marks the beginning of a rewarding career with financial compensation and benefits. In most professions, healthcare benefits are a basic part of an employment package. In the dance world, health care benefits are a rare commodity.

The rewards of a dance career are primarily about doing what you love, performing often and mastering your art. Though dance is a considerably low paying profession, the personal rewards and travel perks are what make dance such a desirable occupation. Considering the physical demands of dance and the minimal financial compensation, one might presume that health insurance would be the one provided benefit. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Due to the high cost of health insurance, most dance companies do not provide health coverage.

In this article, spokespeople from five different California-based dance companies and one independent artist will share their position on how healthcare impacts the dance community. From Southern California, members of the Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project, SonneBlauma Danscz Theatre, State Street Ballet, San Diego Ballet and dancer/choreographer, Deborah Greenfield will address the need for healthcare in the arts. From Northern California, Ballet San Jose will share the company's success story with their health insurance program.

In the US more than 50% of dancers are uninsured and approximately 80% of all dancers will undergo a major injury during their career. Research also shows that some dancers face challenges in acquiring individual health insurance. Coverage can be denied for any reason that is considered high risk including age, career, income, credit history and even driving records.

Esther Baker-Tarpaga, co-artistic director of Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project begins by sharing "People in our company and pretty much every company I know including every single friend/colleague are uninsured."

Dancer/choreographer Deborah Greenfield adds, "Dancers like myself, are freelance, often with limited income. We have no employee benefits, no workers' comp. and no unemployment. I personally, have 'winged it' without insurance for about 10 years so far."

Misa Kelly, artistic director/founder of SonneBlauma Danscz Theatre says, "I believe there needs to be something in place for such a high risk profession. I have a small contemporary dance company and my dancers only get an honorarium to perform. This isn't uncommon at all with smaller companies."

Healthcare reform is a key issue in the 2008 Presidential race and quality affordable health coverage is the common goal. Under this program, all people would have access to health care. Presidential candidates Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack

Obama and John Edwards support Universal Health Care and strongly emphasize how the US is the only major industrialized nation without this program.

"I hope for Obama or Hilary to revamp healthcare," says Baker. Robin Sherertz-Morgan, founder/executive director of San Diego Ballet adds, "We believe in government subsidized healthcare for everyone; a modest amount and equal care."

Greenfield shares, "Until there is such a thing as a Universal Health Care system in this country, such issues are very unlikely to be addressed. As a dual UK/US citizen, I plan to return to Europe in the very near future, where dancers don't have to live such a perilous existence and the arts in general are more supported."

Kelly says, "We deal with health insurance by trying to find 'bread and butter' gigs that provide us with health care coverage. I have dancers sign liability waivers and make it clear that risk is a factor. There always seems to be some minor strain or injury, but so far working with awareness has served us well. I prioritize with giving an adequate warm-up with a company class. I know some choreographers don't factor in this time and expect dancers to begin rehearsing without time for a warm-up. This sets the scene for accidents. I think if a company doesn't provide health insurance then adequate preventative action is essential."

Seeking qualified physicians to treat dance injuries is another common issue for many dancers. Baker has a history of knee and shoulder injuries and shares, "I think that in general, every physician I have ever seen knows way less than I do about how to work with dance related injuries; this goes for the physical therapists as well who are not used to working with people who already know so much about their bodies. Alternative health care such as acupuncture, massage, chiro., Alexander technique and Feldenkrais help repair dancers' bodies," says Baker.

"I once went to a highly recommended chiropractor. He charged \$180 dollars for a treatment that didn't help at all. I wouldn't risk such a waste of money again. Usually I go straight to acupuncture before anything else. It is relatively cheap and I've found it to be very effective," says Greenfield.

Though San Diego Ballet is currently without health coverage, Morgan says, "At one time, we did provide dancers with insurance. Sharp Medical Group offered a two-year discount group plan. It was wonderful! Unfortunately it was a grant that wasn't renewed. Now, when dancers are injured they can collect workers' comp., but it's very expensive if too many dancers make claims."

In California, employers are required by law to pay for workers' compensation even if they have only one employee. Workers' compensation provides medical care, temporary and permanent disability, supplemental job displacement and death benefits.

Ana Zafarris, operations manager with the State Street Ballet says, "We're unable to provide health insurance at this time, but we are always looking for ways. We do offer our dancers workers' compensation."

Healthcare provisions are a priority for the State Street Ballet. Zafarris and founder/artistic director, Rodney Gustafson work

hard to generate more revenue so that the company may someday provide health coverage for their dancers. Each year the State Street Ballet has company tours to Colorado, New York and New Hampshire to help extend their seasons, increase exposure, and raise additional funds. The company also holds various annual events for members and donors. It's a lot of work for two people to plan and execute, but that's the reality. "Rodney and I are it. We are the full staff!" says Zafarris.

Ballet San Jose is a large union company and has offered a group insurance plan for years. Publicity spokesperson, Lee Kopp shares, "We provide health care for our dancers and they receive full benefits, including medical and dental. Massage services are also available five days/week. We have on-site chiropractors and doctors at all performances as well, in case there's an injury."

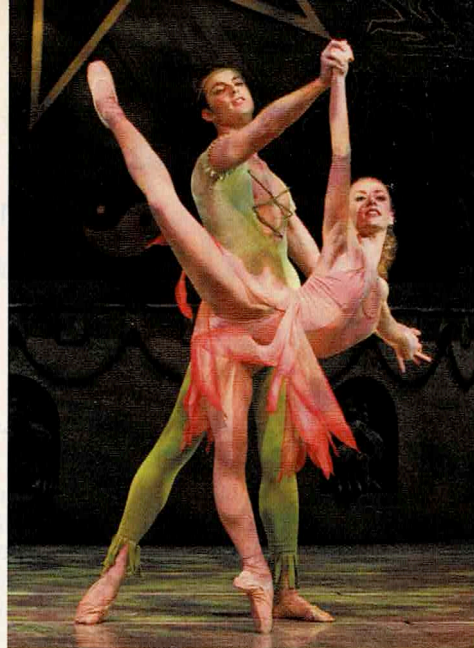
Elizabeth Bowden in human resources adds, "The artistic director, Dennis Nahat takes the best care of his dancers. Coverage is made possible primarily through donated medical services. Successful ticket sales also have a part in the company's ability to provide coverage."

The best advice Bowden can provide for other dance companies seeking health coverage, "Keep donors happy to acquire what's needed and provide them with a detailed cost breakdown. Sponsor a dancer programs are also very effective fundraising vehicles."

The story continues in next month's issue of *Dancer Magazine*. Coverage will include responses from dance injury specialists, spreading awareness on dancer health care needs and insurance program sources designed specifically for dancers.

To share your comments, please email minacommunications@gmail.com. ■

Jasmine Rios is a freelance writer and consultant for the arts. For further background information visit www.minacommunications.com.



Maximo Califano & Alessandra Meijer,
"Carmina Burana," Ballet San Jose
Photo: Robert Shomler



Kaita Lepore and Gwenna Devries,
SonneBlauma Danscz Theatre
Photo: Am Wu