

## Photography: A Perfect Fit for Former Dancer

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by Kathy Valin

"Cincinnati Ballet at 50: Photographs by Peter Mueller" opened September 6 and runs through May 2014 (coinciding with the close of the company's 50th Anniversary Season) at the Cincinnati Ballet Center, 1555 Central Parkway. Consisting of about twenty oversized photographs displayed on walls throughout the lobby of the Mickey Jarson Kaplan Performance Studio, the exhibit is an affiliated activity of Cincinnati's FOTOFOCUS 2012, and a testament to the considerable skills of Mueller, a freelancer hired by the company, with a few strong hints at his own intriguing artistic vision.

What we see in the photographs (all but one are color photos) are dancers on stage and in the wings, presumably during performance. There are shots of one dancer, duos, and group shots. I've picked a few of my favorites and the reasons why at the end of this article.

Mueller estimates that he's taken several hundred images per cast per show over the past "five or six" years, and staged studio photo shoots as well. Many of his photographs have appeared in playbills, brochures, ads and the like. "Obviously, there were a lot to go through. I pulled a group of them for Victoria Morgan (artistic director and CEO) and she narrowed the selection down from there."

It also turns out that after the photographs for the exhibit were chosen, Mueller asked that he be allowed to include one of his personal favorites. I discovered his pick after I'd seen the exhibit. I was amazed that out of the twenty, my favorite was the same shot. The most fun, for me, was to think I could discern the one he felt that was not necessarily the "best," but the one that was closest to his own evolving vision, and this also leads me to hope that the future will give him more opportunities to express himself through photography.

These days, Mueller commutes regularly to Cincinnati, having moved his home base to North Carolina, where he lives with his wife and two cats. The week before last, as we talked by phone, I wanted information about his background, and especially how he transitioned from dancer to photographer. I wondered what things he brings from his experience as a dancer to his work today, and hoped to get some insight about the manner in which he takes and processes photographs for the company's needs.

Peter Mueller joined Cincinnati Ballet "right out of high school," in 1993. He danced with the company for four years, and spent a few years afterwards as a freelancer in California and at North Carolina Dance Theater and Dayton Ballet. When he stopped dancing, he tried graphic design, but it was not a good fit. Meanwhile, he took a trip to Yosemite National Park. "I kind of pinpoint that as when I became interested in photography," he remembers. "It's where Ansel Adams lived and did a lot of his work. Seeing his images and his inspiration put the seed of photography in my mind."

Later, he took classes at the Art Academy and ended up going to the Ohio Institute of Photography and Technology (which no longer exists) in Dayton. But the emerging photographer was no stranger to art and the idea of an artistic vision – "my mother always had me in art classes, and I'd done a lot of drawing and illustration and painting when I was younger. Eventually, I started a freelance business. I've always been that way – I didn't start with another photographer, I wanted to be my own one-person operation."

After an audition shoot, Paul Kaine, formerly Executive Director at Cincinnati Ballet, asked the former dancer if he would work for the company on a formal basis. "Paul had an eye for art, and he and I connected on that level," says Mueller.

Today he works regularly with other Cincinnati Ballet photographers in a variety of settings. "I joke sometimes that we are basically set up in the same area – we are clicking at the same time – but I can pretty much guarantee that we would each process that picture differently, and therefore the moments we capture will all be different.

"Victoria (Morgan) is all about energy. She just goes for certain images. You can just feel that was probably on her mind.

"As a former dancer, line is extremely important to me. The knee? The foot? But after that, what else does the picture say?

"The biggest misunderstanding people have is that these images just don't come right out of the camera. But there are no Photoshop tricks – just basic adjustments such as exposure, contrast, sharpening and white balance. The lighting on stage is constantly changing in color and intensity. It can drive you crazy!

"So, there's a lot involved getting shots to the finished stage. That's part of my art, too.

"For instance, in a jump, the way it is cropped, focused – that's where the art comes in, as an artist you put your stamp on it, you say 'this is important, this is what I want you to think about.'"

Mueller is a dancer at heart, and his art is a testament to his love of dance and his ability to capture the beauty of the human form in motion.

Mueller is also clear about how his work has evolved. Early on, he was fond of studio shoots, where he is responsible for coming up with ideas, but now he is invigorated by performance shots, which he thinks have an energy that can't be manufactured in the studio.

He's also clear about the nature of the collaboration between photographer and dancer. "There's a lot of faith involved in the photography that I do. You never know what you are gonna get. Of course, there are those moments you've always seen in other ballet photographs, and I'll try and get those.

"But I think I'm at the point where what is most interesting to me is finding those in-between moments. It's a more introspective look. It's a process, and in many ways it's my own journey, my own evolution.

"I give a lot to the dancers. Without them and their trust that you will not publish a picture of them cross-eyed, there is nothing. They do have approval, but in general, that's the whole reason that it all works."

Following are notes on a few photographs from "Cincinnati Ballet at 50: Photographs by Peter Mueller." I've titled them as they are in the show, by dancer/group name, date and production.

Kristi Capps, "Seeking Velocity," 2004. This shot (which illustrates my article) is obviously offstage, and from Kristi's pose, I'd say she is catching her breath after performing and also thinking about the performance she's just given. I love the red of her costume, and the arc of the stiff tutu, the hyperextension of her arms. The "punctum" for me (to use Roland Barthes' idea of the intriguing moment in a particular photograph) is the look on her face: not of the moment, but as she considers the moment that has just passed. This is the photograph Peter Mueller added to the exhibit as one of his personal favorites, and I can see why.

Cervilio Miguel Amador, "All Too Wonderful," 2004. Pure exuberance, as this muscular dancer launches his body into space.

"Swan Lake," 2009. Here we have a momentary pause of the corps de ballet with three different arm poses, in the classic guise of Swan Maidens. In the front, in the center, is dancer Dawn Kelly. Her downcast expression and the exact certitude of her arms, express to me "the one among many."

Gema Diaz, "The Nutcracker," 2011. The only black-and-white photo of the exhibit, this is another shot of the interior life of a dancer. Standing offstage, with her right hand cradling her left shoulder (and the left arm curled on top of her tutu) I see a woman who is also resting and thinking: perhaps gauging the extent of a sore muscle.

Janessa Touchet, "In the Upper Room," 2010. Here is that one perfect moment of effortless elevation – the dancer in profile, in absolute focus, at the height of a sauté arabesque, alone in space.

"Infamous Love Songs," 2011. The photographer has contrived to bring us up close and personal to a group that seems to be exploding away from each other and towards us, filling the entire frame with the energy of their movement.

Jill Marlow and Anthony Krutzkamp, 2011. In real life, these two dancers are a couple. When I talked to Mueller about the shot, he wondered if the expressed intimacy between the two would be obvious to those who did not know.

Janessa Touchet and Ogulcon Borova, "Mozart's Requiem," 2010. The two dancers are caught in a momentary extended pose. She, supported by his right arm around her waist, has let her head fall back as her right leg shoots up in a battement. His left arm, thrust high with open palm, echoes the line of her leg.

Courtney Connor, "Firebird," 2011. With her supporting right leg in plié (bent at the knee), her left leg is extended to the side. The musculature of her legs is highlighted, as is the extreme point of her left foot.

I could write more about some of these shots – they are all worth a look. I do encourage those with an interest to take a closer look. I believe the exhibit space is open regularly to the public throughout the week. Those interested can get details at 513-621-5219.



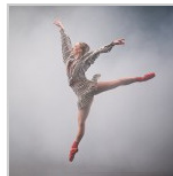
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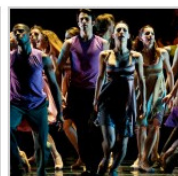
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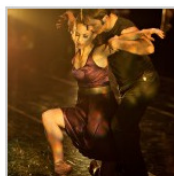
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