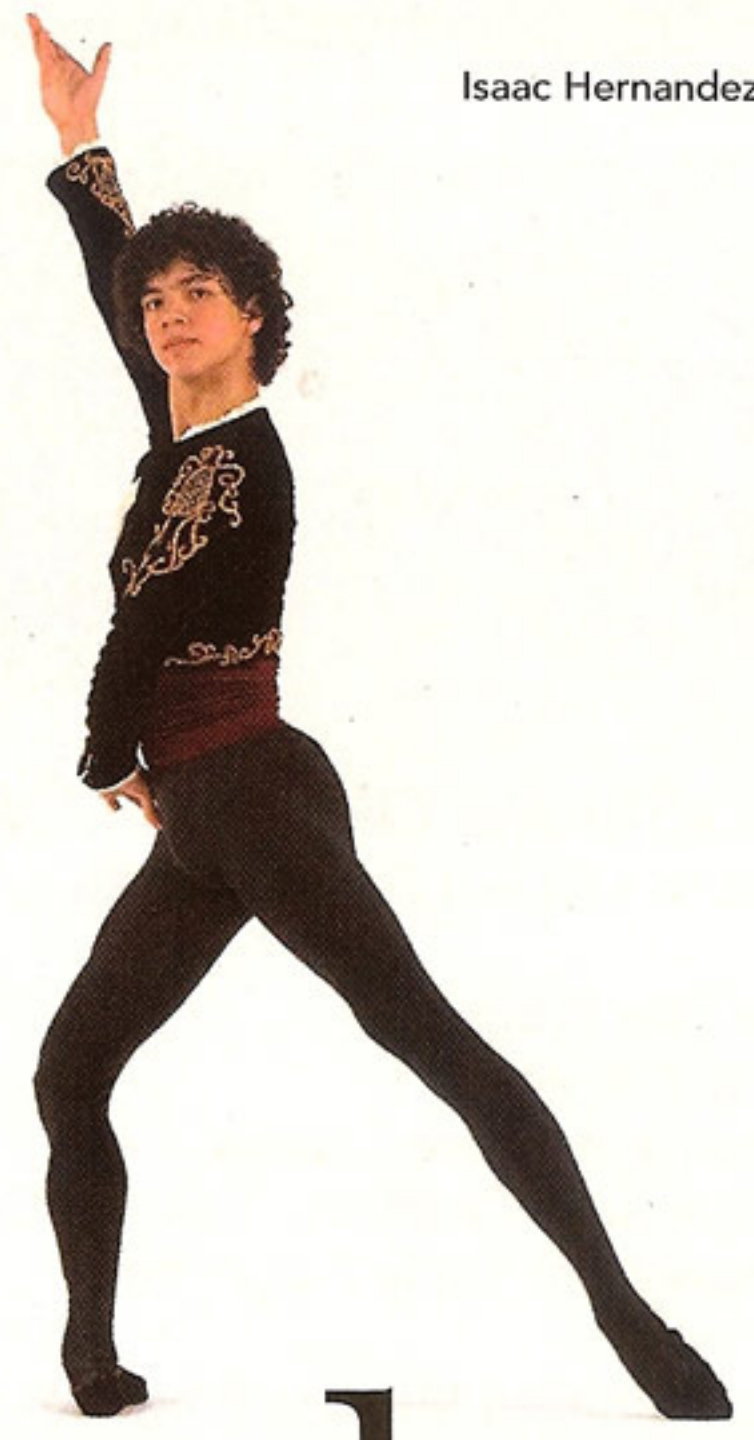
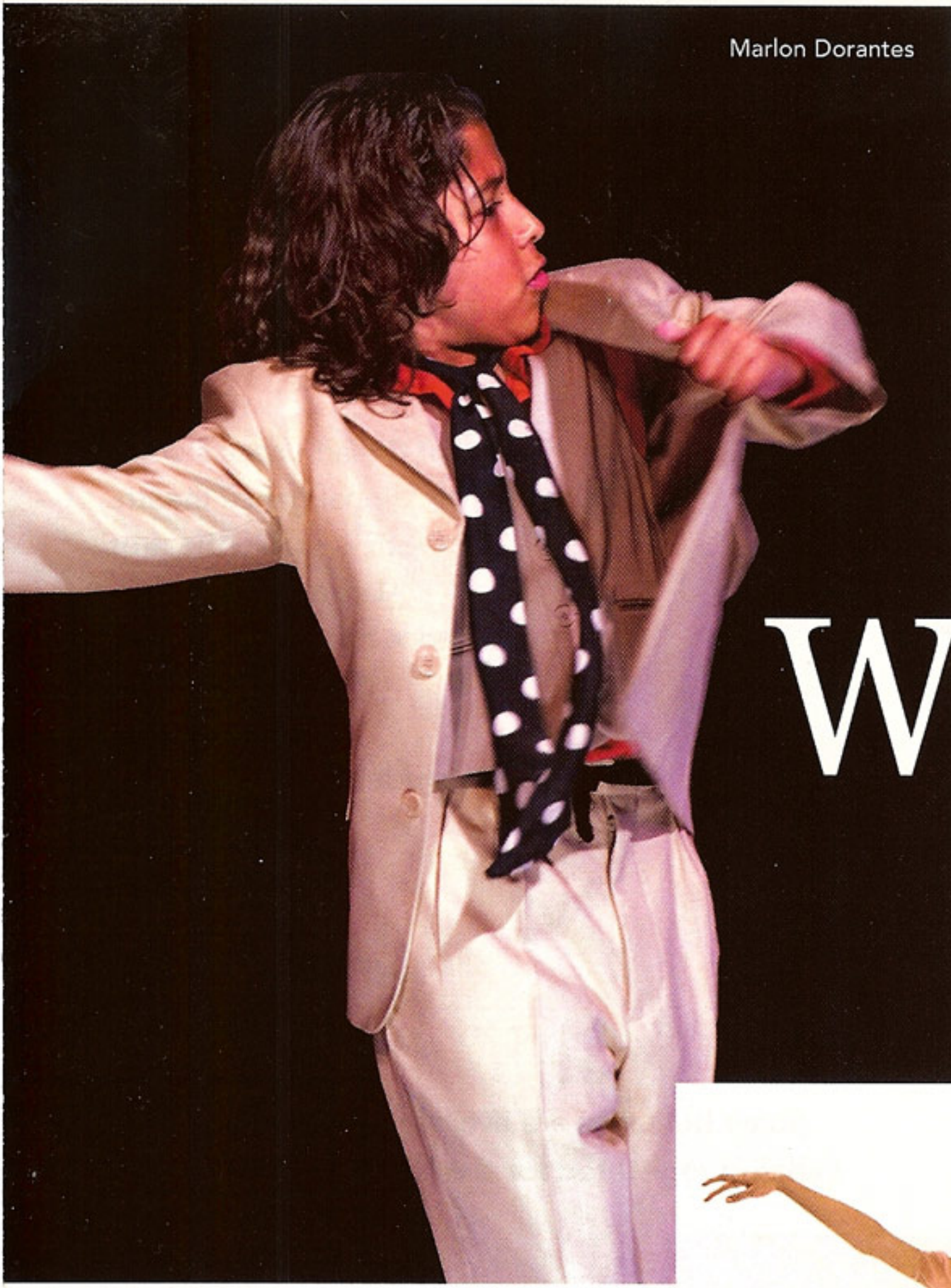


Isaac Hernandez



Marlon Dorantes



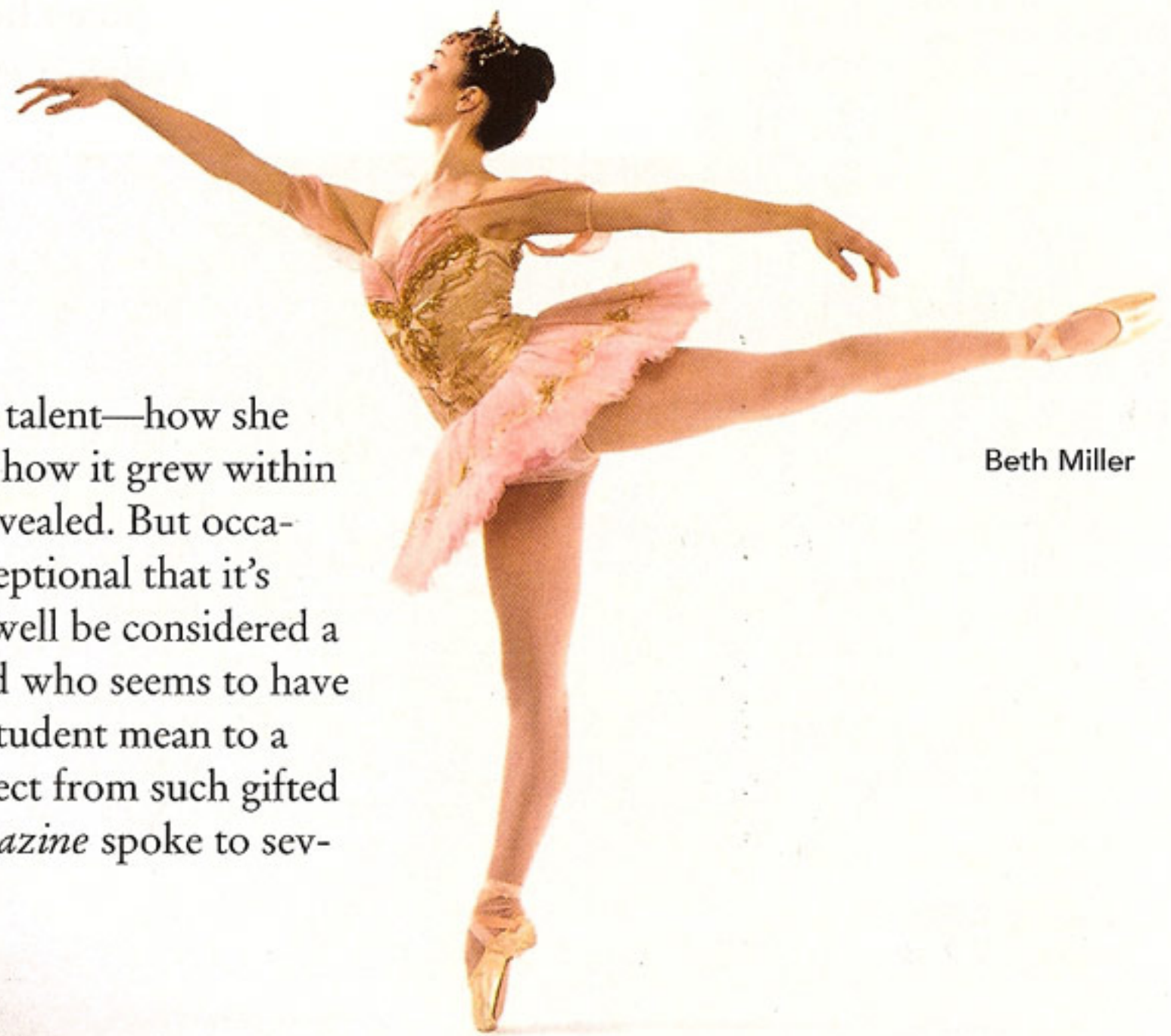
Wunder KIDS

Child Prodigies in Dance

BY LEA MARSHALL

Within each dancer lies the story of her talent—how she discovered it, how a teacher fostered it, how it grew within her. It may take years before talent is revealed. But occasionally a student's raw ability is so exceptional that it's almost spooky. That's when she might well be considered a prodigy. What does dance mean to a kid who seems to have been born doing it? What does such a student mean to a teacher? What can the dance world expect from such gifted young people? To find out, *Dance Magazine* spoke to several such children and their teachers.

Beth Miller



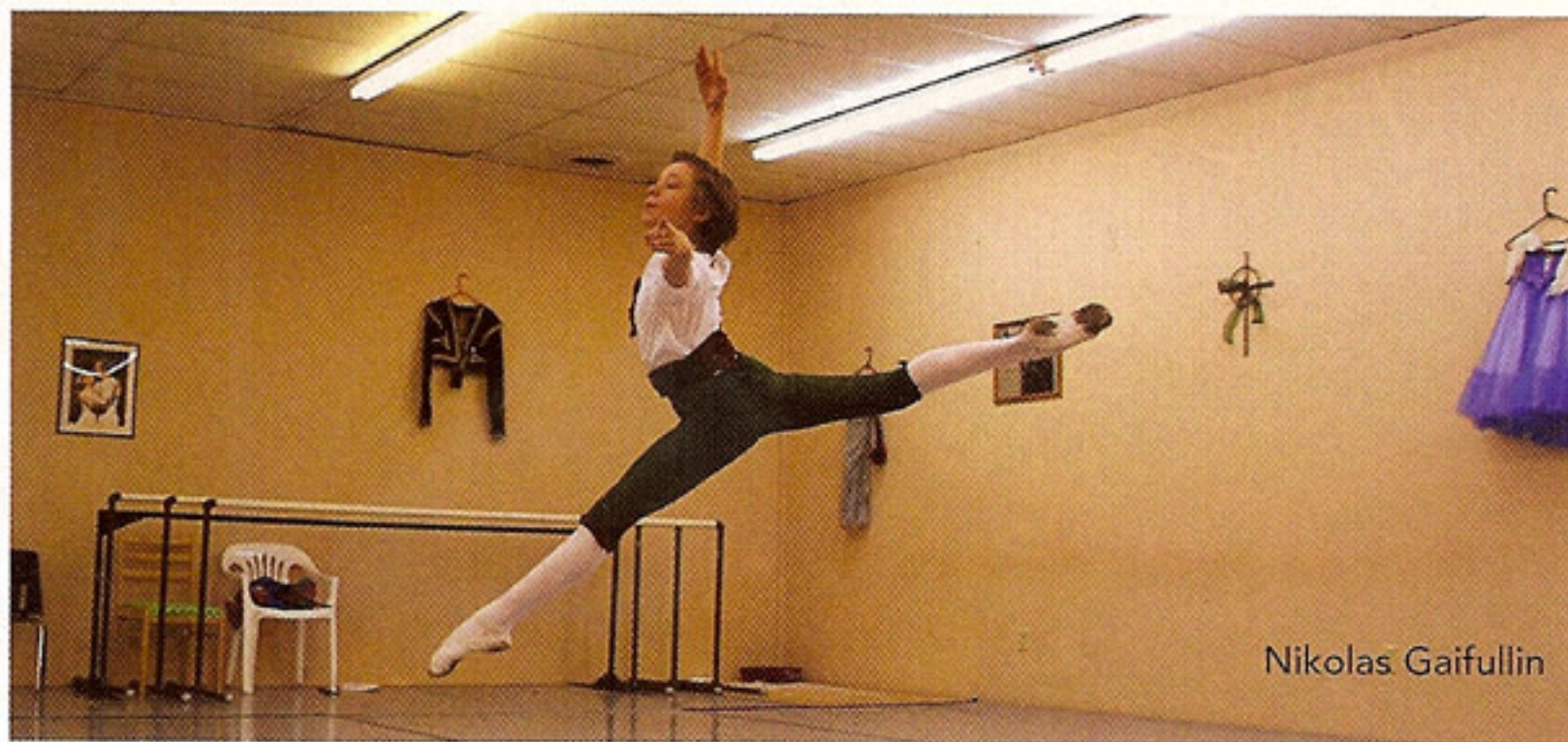
The Soul of a Gypsy

Marlon Dorantes, an 11-year-old boy from California, dances flamenco like a gypsy in Spain. Inspired by his older sister's dancing, Marlon tried a flamenco class at age 4 and loved it. Seven years later, he's taking advanced classes with adults and performing with great success around Los Angeles. "Audiences just eat that little boy up," says Linda Vega, one of his teachers. "Marlon totally gets flamenco. It's a complicated art form. It's not just the dance moves, it's the rhythms, the singing, the hand clapping, the guitar, and all of it together."

Juggling classes, homework, and rehearsals can be hard, Marlon admits. "But dancing feels really fun," he says, "and it's a time when you can express your feelings." He loves the fast footwork, and he likes performing to live music. "The singers can sing to you in different ways and it really gets me into the music," he says. His dream is to go to Spain to study and perform, and his teachers share that dream. "He's got an amazing talent. He belongs in Spain where he can be challenged, studying every day," says Vega. "When I announce him in my shows, I call him the *niño prodigio*."

From a Dancing Family

As a toddler, **Nikolas Gaifullin** sat in the lap of coach Pavel Fomin while his parents, Daniil and Stephanie Gaifullin, rehearsed *Raymonda*. His father has a



Nikolas Gaifullin

video of him performing the mad scene from *Giselle* with his mother in their living room. Now 12, Nikolas placed second in his division at the Youth America Grand Prix 2007 Finals, and has performed by invitation at the Spoleto

Festival in Italy. The Gaifullins, co-founders of Ballet Amarillo in Texas, remain dumbfounded by their son's talent, even as they teach him themselves. "He's like an old-soul personality. It's really rare in the ballet world," says Daniil. **Larissa Saveliev**, artistic director of **YAGP**, first saw Nikolas perform when he was 9 years old. "He really lights up the stage. Somehow he can smile without smiling. Everybody around him gets this warm feeling."

"I've been thinking about ballet since I was 2," says Nikolas. "When I'm dancing, I feel very confident; I know what I'm going to do. And I feel proud of myself." He likes turns and jumps; he's

working on beats. His favorite ballet is *Spartacus* because of the sword fighting, and he hopes one day to dance for Ballet Amarillo in *Swan Lake* and *La Bayadère*. As teachers and parents, Daniil and Stephanie are doing their best to lay the

right path for Nikolas. Even in the face of his obvious talent, they say, "We're trying to take care of our son slowly. We're just wishing him a happy, not too stressful, artist's life."

Mind Body Spirit

"There used to be a ceiling fan in my grandma's house, and when I was a baby my feet would move to the beat of the fan. Whenever I heard music I would start banging my feet on the floor," says **Krithika Rajkumar**, a 15-year-old student of the Indian classical dance form Bharata Natyam in Oak Park, Michigan. From the age of 4, Krithika has studied with Sudha Chandrashekar, who noticed right away that she was exceptional. "Her attitude toward the dance was very happy—excited to perform and very happy to learn," Chandrashekar says. "She retained what she learned, and I could try the most difficult moves with her."

Krithika made her debut at age 12. Her preparations included long hours of rehearsals, strength training, and focus on expression—not her strong point at the time, she says. But with a successful debut behind her, Krithika continues to delve into different branches of Bharata Natyam. "It is such a big world," she says. "It's like an ocean of knowledge."

In Krithika, says Chandrashekar, "The mind-body-spirit link is very much there. She has a natural talent for it. All this success has not gone to her head. I believe that she has understood the essence of the dance."

In the future, Krithika hopes to use

Krithika Rajkumar

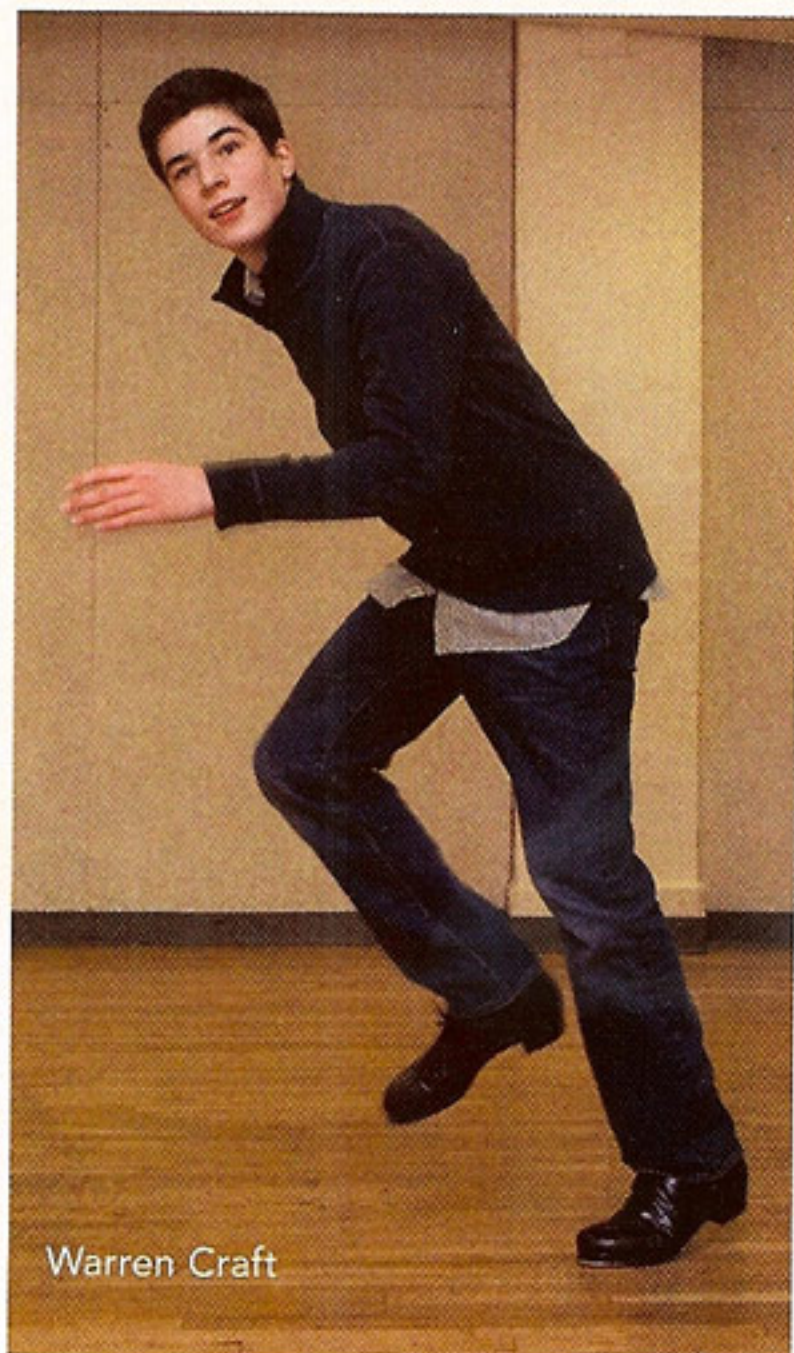


her dancing as a tool for community service, offering workshops to children with disabilities. And of course, she hopes to continue performing. "I like to connect with my audience, and I like when people enjoy my performance," she says. "When you get involved in it, it's an uplifting experience."

Tap City

New York-based tapper Ayodele Casel started teaching **Warren Craft** when he was 9 years old, and she saw immediately that he had the gift. With tap, she says, you can tell right away who has that ear, that natural ability to pick it up. Warren did, and Casel taught him privately every Sunday for two years. "He was the dream student. I was able to communicate advanced concepts with him the way I would with an adult. If there was anything he'd have trouble with, he'd have it corrected by the next week." When talking about him as an improviser, she mused, "I wonder if I'll ever have a student like that again."

Warren, now 14, loves improvisation. He also trains in ballet, which he believes helps his presentation as a tap dancer. He has performed with American Tap Dance Foundation's Tap City, and in Casel's *Diary of a Tap Dancer*, in which voiceovers of each dancer described their



Warren Craft

personal relationship to dance. "I talked about how accepting the tap dance community is of me and how willing they are to share their knowledge with me," says Warren. Looking ahead, he would like to perform with Tap City on tour. "My dream job would be to become a song and dance man."

Positive Energy

With high arches, gorgeous extensions and a brilliant smile, 15-year-old **Beth Miller** has been catching teachers' eyes since she began studying ballet in the second grade. In sixth grade, she saw Sylvie Guillem perform Juliet with The Royal Ballet in London, and she realized then that dancing was what she wanted to do. "Dancing is one of those things I just can't imagine my life without," she says. Studying in The Washington School of Ballet's Release-Time program, she has worked hard to develop the strength to support her flexible frame, and is extending her technique past her comfort zones. "I'm starting to like turns more and more. That used to be my weakness, but I've worked hard on them." Beth hopes to perform the role of Juliet herself one day, and she dreams of dancing for The Royal Ballet.

Becky Erhart, artistic coordinator of The Washington School of Ballet, has been working with Beth for the past two years. "The thing that really stands out is her passion and her natural movement quality," says Erhart. Beth's work ethic and positive attitude shine through everything she does. "You can tell how much she wants it, and how much she loves to dance," continues Erhart. "When I'm teaching her, I get caught watching her do a very simple port de bras; she's so involved in the movement. In rehearsals, when everyone's tired and they've worked seven days in a row, Beth is in the corner smiling. She has such a positive energy."

A Storybook Success

When he was 9 years old, **Isaac Hernandez** began studying ballet in his backyard in Guadalajara, Mexico, with his father, Hector Hernandez, who had danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem and Houston Ballet. Within three years, Isaac had won medals at competitions and a scholarship to The Rock School in Philadelphia.

Bo Spassoff, co-director of the school, recalls seeing Isaac for the first time at **Youth America Grand Prix** in 2002 and being floored by his technique—and his wonderful onstage personality. "He has a beautiful physique, gorgeous legs and feet, a beautiful line, natural coordination," says Spassoff. "And he turns like a top." Once he began at The Rock School, co-director Stephanie Spassoff says, "There were times when we'd sit there and watch him, and we'd all just turn and look at each other, and the whole faculty would have tears in their eyes."

"Ballet was a huge door that opened my world," says Isaac. "It was the way for me to express myself, and now I enjoy the challenges that I have." Of all his 10 siblings, only he and his brother Esteban latched on to ballet when their father offered it. (Esteban, now 13, was named Best Male Dancer in his age range at the 2006 American Ballet Competition in Miami.) Isaac loves the classical repertoire and has performed the *Don Quixote* variation since he was 11. It's his yardstick now, the way he measures his progress in technique and expressiveness. "I guess it's the Latin blood in me. I feel like I was born doing it," he says. Still, he hopes one day to perform full-length versions of his favorite ballets—particularly *Don Q* and *Giselle*. At 17, with a place now in American Ballet Theatre II, that hope seems likely to be realized.

Though a young dancer may possess extraordinary talent, the same work must be done to move the dancer toward success. Commitment, a positive attitude, and hard work combine with time and luck to make an artist out of a prodigy. What Sudha Chandrashekar says applies to both talented students and their teachers: "The inner meaning of art is to strive for excellence. You have to fight against all kinds of obstacles, and then through art you can find yourself."

Lea Marshall teaches dance at Virginia Commonwealth University and directs Ground Zero Dance Company in VA.

Do you have experience as, or with, a child prodigy that you would like to share? E-mail Emily Macel at emacel@dancemagazine.com.