THE STUDIO BUSINESS ISSUE

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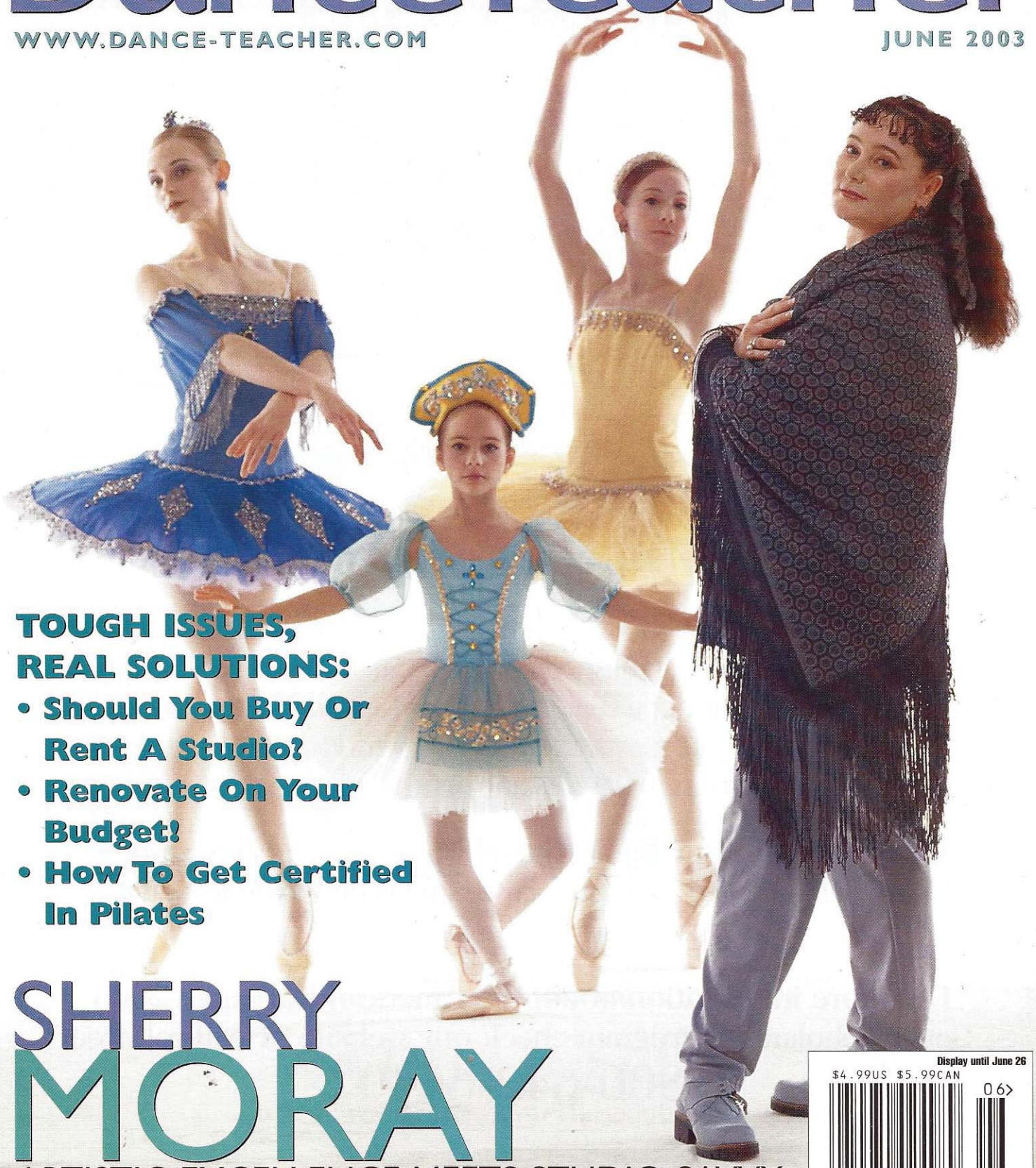

TOUGH ISSUES, REAL SOLUTIONS:

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- **Renovate On Your Budget!**
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SHERRY MORAY

ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE MEETS STUDIO SAVVY

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by alyssa roenigk
photography by william frederking

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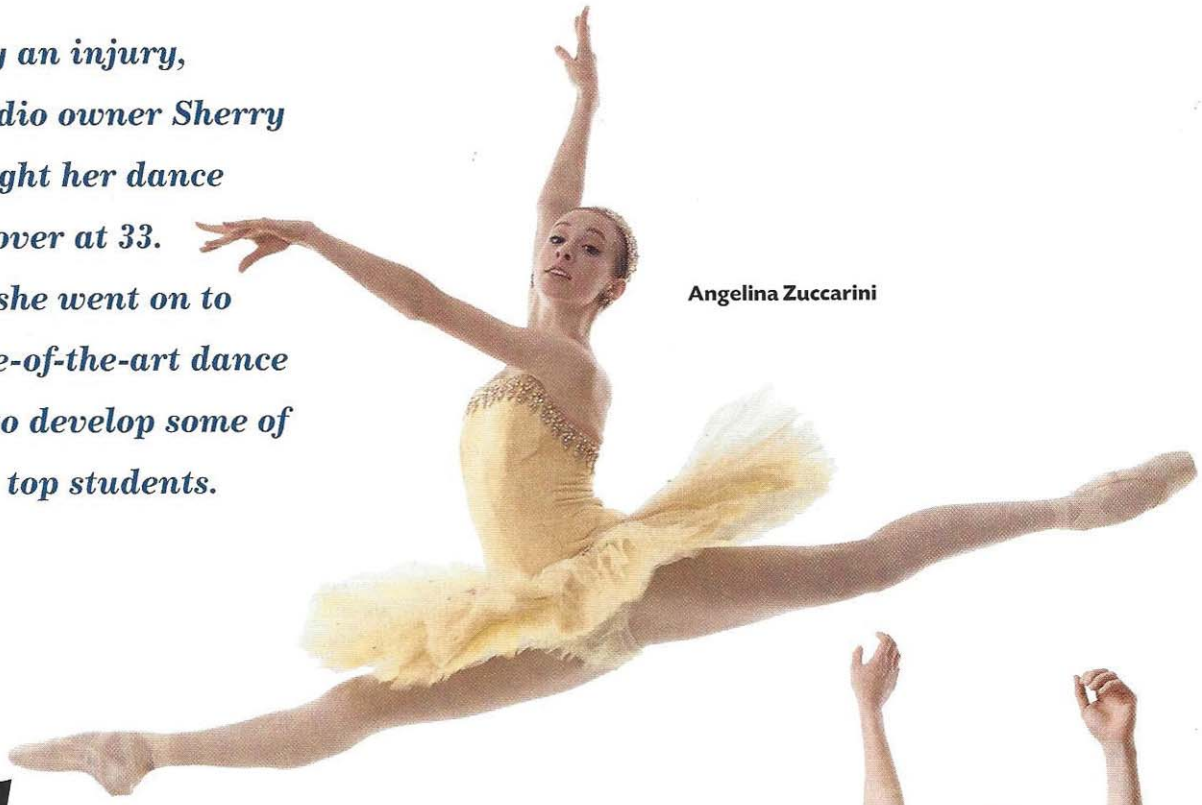
Sherry Moray with students (clockwise from left)Tristan Bruns, Angelina Zuccarini, Kristin Laubenstein, Sean Kaminski, Alexis Caruso and Shannon Kaminski; (inset) with her dog Wolfie

Sidelined by an injury, Chicago studio owner Sherry Moray thought her dance career was over at 33. Here's how she went on to build a state-of-the-art dance school and to develop some of the nation's top students.



Angelina Zuccarini

the better

Years before Sherry Moray founded one of the most successful dance studios in the Chicago area, she gained some valuable entrepreneurial advice from her parents at the family breakfast table. At nine years old, Moray often listened to her mother and father, owners of a truck and trailer rental business, talk shop. They stressed the importance of customer service in every decision they made.

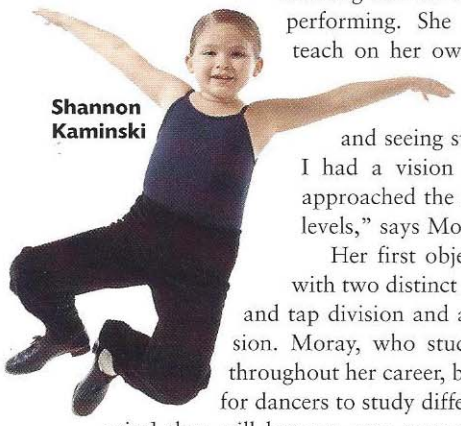
Tristan Bruns

"I didn't know it then, but I was learning such important business advice at that table," Moray says. "My parents were always giving their customers 'bang for their buck,' and it's stuck with me how, from a business point of view, they were so loving and concerned about their clientele."

Those insights came rushing back when, at age 33, Moray found herself battling degenerative disc disease and two herniated discs—and the end of a 17-year professional career with such prestigious ballet companies as Ballet Chicago and Germany's Stuttgart Ballet. With her parents' words in mind, Moray launched a second career as a teacher and studio owner that today has garnered her awards and a reputation as a superlative choreographer and savvy business owner.

It has been a long journey. Sensing her eagerness to return to the dance scene after her injuries, a colleague gave Moray an open invitation to teach classes at his studio as soon as her body allowed. For the first few months, the intense pain made even small tasks a chore but, as soon as she could walk, Moray knew she had to dance. "I took [my friend] up on his offer," she says, "and found that I had a natural affinity for communicating with students. I was able to really reach them and get them thinking outside the box."

Moray spent the next five years as a guest instructor before realizing that she loved teaching as much as performing. She decided she wanted to teach on her own terms and in her own studio. "Because of all my years of travel and seeing studios all over the world, I had a vision of what I wanted, and approached the school on many different levels," says Moray.


Shannon Kaminski

Her first objective: to design a school with two distinct educational tracks, a jazz and tap division and a professional ballet division. Moray, who studied tap, jazz and ballet throughout her career, believes that it's important for dancers to study different disciplines. "[Otherwise] they will become very narrow in what they do," she stresses. "Jazz and tap are a part of our American heritage and each form complements the other." In her own studio, she also wanted to offer classes geared toward the recreational student. "[All children] should experience dance in their lives to see if it is something they're good at, and I wanted to offer them that chance."

Since opening The Academy of Dance Arts in Chicago five years ago, Moray has done just that, wearing a variety of hats. Moray the instructor teaches ballet and expects as much from her students as she does from herself. "I once described myself as a [drill] sergeant with kid gloves," she explains. "I think that's me in a nutshell." Moray views her own teaching style as a compilation of those of the many great teachers she's studied with over the years. "Dance is an artform that is passed down from generation to generation," she says. "It can't be taught though a book or by video, and I am a mixture of the people who taught me so lovingly over the years."

Those teachers ingrained in her the importance of finding a niche in teaching and of not forcing something that is not there. "My forte is not with young children," Moray admits. "I have instructors who better understand how to reach them; my niche is with older children in a one-on-one environment." She prides herself on her ability to look deeply inside students and figure out what motivates them, what makes them tick. "Then," she says, "I push those buttons."

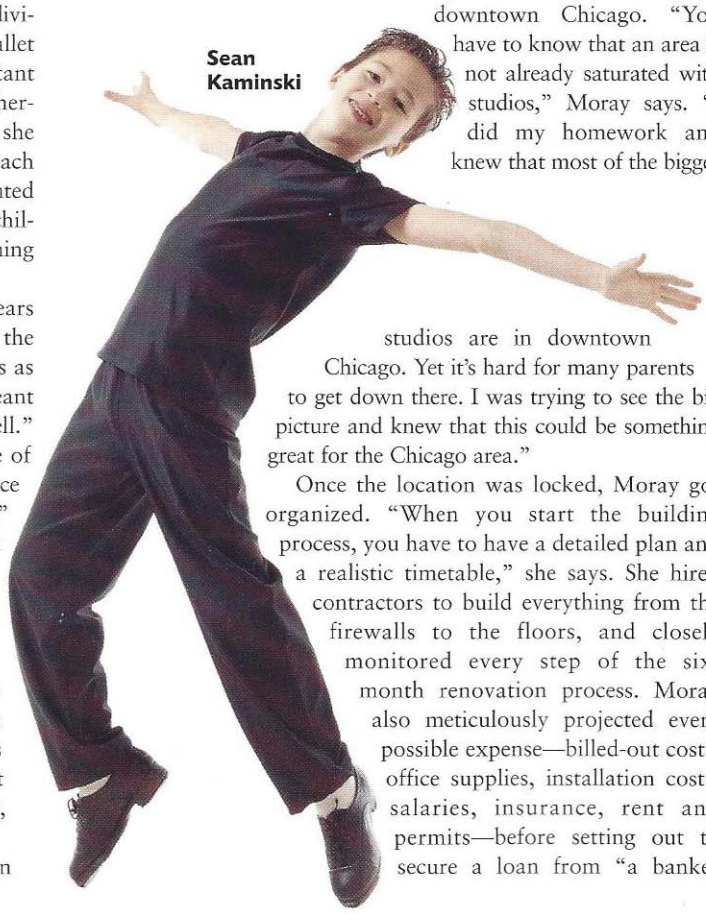
Her students, many of whom have gone on to careers on Broadway, in film and in ballet companies around the country, say Moray pushes them beyond the limits they've set for themselves. "Sherry has high standards," says 16-year-old Angelina Zuccarini, who has been training with Moray since she was eight. "She's so generous with her time and talents and offers us so many life lessons. She has so much heart and love for dance and passes that on to everybody she teaches."

Moray the artist generates choreography for Steppin' Out Dance Company, the competitive dance group she founded at the same time as The Academy, and Illinois Ballet Theater, the professional company she founded in 2001. Her works have won choreography awards and the attention of schools across the country, including the renowned Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, where she often visits as a guest choreographer.

But it is the studio owner hat that Moray continually works the hardest to fit. "I had to become the tough businesswoman and learn to be more hard-nosed on certain things," she says. "Even though it's not my natural inclination to think from a business point of view first and an artistic second, it's something I have worked on. I learned that you can't take anyone's word for anything. When you're dealing with so many people—bankers, contractors—you have to follow up on everything."

When she was just starting her school, Moray the businesswoman found herself saddled with more homework than a classful of her students combined. She spent weeks scouting for a site that would be, above all, convenient for parents. "I knew [immediately] when I had found my studio," she says of the space she settled on, a 20,000-plus square-foot warehouse, steps from several shopping centers and accessible from two major highways and a number of major streets. "It was raw, but had enormous potential. I knew parents could leave their children to run errands and know that they would be safe there."

She also realized that the community needed a studio outside of downtown Chicago. "You have to know that an area is not already saturated with studios," Moray says. "I did my homework and knew that most of the bigger studios are in downtown Chicago. Yet it's hard for many parents to get down there. I was trying to see the big picture and knew that this could be something great for the Chicago area."


Sean Kaminski

Once the location was locked, Moray got organized. "When you start the building process, you have to have a detailed plan and a realistic timetable," she says. She hired contractors to build everything from the firewalls to the floors, and closely monitored every step of the six-month renovation process. Moray also meticulously projected every possible expense—billed-out costs, office supplies, installation costs, salaries, insurance, rent and permits—before setting out to secure a loan from "a banker

who thought I was worth the risk."

She stresses the importance of preparation—and of finding a good contractor. "I'd heard horror stories about bad contractors," Moray says, noting that it is important that they abide by your wishes and stick to the budget. "My contractor had worked on dance studios before and understood where I was coming from." He was able to point her in the right direction when she was selecting lighting and mirror companies. When it came time to select the floors, however, her own injury trumped all other deciding factors.

"I still live with my injury every day," she says. "And it makes me very injury-conscious with my students. With wood floors on top of cement, you are pounding your joints every day, and from such a young age. So I decided to install sprung floors in each studio." It is equally important, she adds, to decide what each studio will be used for before selecting which type of floors to install. "You want to make sure the dancers are on the right floor for what they're doing," she explains. "You don't want ballerinas dancing on a floor designed for tap."

Although the school as it was originally built was large by most standards, it was only a fraction of the superstudio she had her sights on, and she planned for a future expansion from the very beginning. When The Academy first opened its doors, it did so with three studios, one for both tap and jazz, one for ballet and one strictly for tap. Moray has since added two studios. "I was up-front with my landlord from day one, asking him if he could assure me that I would have room to grow," she recalls. "I had plans in my head of what I wanted: more room to accommodate parents, viewing rooms, cubbyholes, dressing rooms. It was a process to arrive at the studio I have today."

It was also a financial gamble. "If you're going to attempt this on the scale that I did, you really have to have the credentials and the knowledge," Moray says. "You have to truly feel in your mind and in your heart that you have what it takes to do it." She suggests starting out with a small but high-quality studio, with proper ballet barres, sprung floors, ten-foot mirrors, Marley overlay and a top-notch sound system. According to Moray, a prospective owner could outfit a dream studio with an initial investment of around $80,000.

Moray found selecting barres, mirrors and flooring easy. Selecting teachers and support staff was a more painstaking process. "You have to keep your eyes and ears open for people you see something special in," she says. "I look at the overall picture with teachers. They have to have the credentials, but more importantly, they have to be able to teach children. Some people are excellent teachers, but can't teach kids." To train teachers, Moray runs an onsite training program for recent graduates. "They assist a veteran teacher for a period of time, often while continuing their own training," she explains, adding that a great teacher not only has the skills, but the

Studio Stats

The Academy of Dance Arts
1524 Centre Circle Drive
Downers Grove, IL 60515
630-495-4940
www.TheAcademy-IBT.com

Students: 500
Ages: 3 years and older
Levels: Pre-dance and pre-ballet to professional level
Faculty: 22 part-time instructors
Staff: One full-time manager and five support staff members, including onsite seamstress
Genres: Ballet, pointe, variations, tap, jazz, hip hop, lyrical, repertory, adult classes
Studio specs: 20,000 square feet; five studios with sprung wood subfloors and Marley flooring, viewing windows with one-way glass, male and female dressing rooms, kitchenette, warm-up and stretching area

Kristin Laubenstein, Alexis Caruso and Angelina Zuccarini

personality, etiquette and ethics to match (see box below for more on The Academy's teacher training program).

Jill Economakos, 25, has been teaching at The Academy for a year and a half and, according to Moray, fits the bill perfectly. "Teaching allows me to still be involved in dance and give back to the community that gave me so much," says Economakos, who was a student under Moray for four years before making the leap to teaching. "Hopefully I will make as good an impression on my students as Sherry made on me."

Although top-notch teachers may cost more, Moray says they're worth it. "Your pricing depends on your staff, and when I did my homework, I looked at the pricing in the area and in the overall market and took into consideration how qualified my staff is," she says. "It's the difference between buying a Porsche and buying a cheaper car that you'll be worried about if you get into an accident. If you can convince one or two people who convince two more, word of mouth spreads like wildfire. When kids go out and dance and people see the high standards and technical skills or hear of the facility, they want their child to be a part of it."

When Moray is setting her pay rates for teachers, however, even the most experienced mentors have to earn their keep. "It depends on the person and their credentials," says Moray. "When I first hire someone, even if they are overly qualified, they have to prove themselves to me first. I have high expectations."

But are there any other kinds of expectations when taking on an endeavor of such a huge scale? "I had many sleepless nights because this was an extremely huge risk," admits Moray. "It was like playing the market. I put every part of my being both emotionally and financially into it." But for her hard work, she was rewarded with a studio that continues to fulfill even her greatest expectations. "It's such a risky thing. You could lose everything." Or gain much more.

"I was never blessed with children," she says, "so these are my kids. I feel like it's my duty to do my best by all of them as if they were my own. I don't want to just teach them dance. I want to give them something they can take with them for the rest of their lives." **DT**

New York City-based freelance writer Alyssa Roenigk also writes for ESPN the Magazine.

More On Moray

Company Credits: 1969, began studying at Stuttgart Ballet in Germany on full scholarship; 1973, became a company member of Stuttgart Ballet; 1975, joined Chicago City Ballet as principal ballerina; appeared as a guest artist with various U.S. companies, including Ballet of Los Angeles, Rockford Ballet, Salt Creek Ballet and Eglevsky Ballet
Honors (selected): 2003 Youth America Grand Prix Regionals, best choreography, best school, first in classical and contemporary; 2001 Youth America Grand Prix Most Outstanding Choreography award; 2000 Youth America Grand Prix Most Outstanding School award; 1996 Sarasota Ballet International Choreography Competition, first place; 1991 *Book of Notable American Women;* 1991 *Who's Who of Women in America*

The Academy of Dance Arts' Teacher Training Program

Founded: 1998
Participants: Varies by year (five currently)
Length of required training: A year to a year and a half, depending on the student
Average Age: 17 or 18
Training technique: Students teach side-by-side with an experienced instructor, learning how to structure and run a class and how to handle themselves in front of students. They are provided with supplemental materials to read and must also keep up with their own studies and training.
Program purpose: "When we see a student who has a natural knack for understanding the material and communicating it to others, we bring [him or her] into the program," Moray says. "I want to give [students] an opportunity to see if teaching is something they can handle, something they have the patience for and want to do on a long-term basis. Many of the students go on to study dance education in college and I've had a few come back and teach at my school."

Sherry Moray amid an array of tutus custom-designed at her studio

WILLIAM FREDERKING

Hip Hip Moray!

Sherry Moray stands proud amid students (clockwise from left) Tristan Bruns, Angelina Zuccarini, Kristen Laubenstein, Sean Kiminski, Alexis Caruso and Shannon Kiminski.