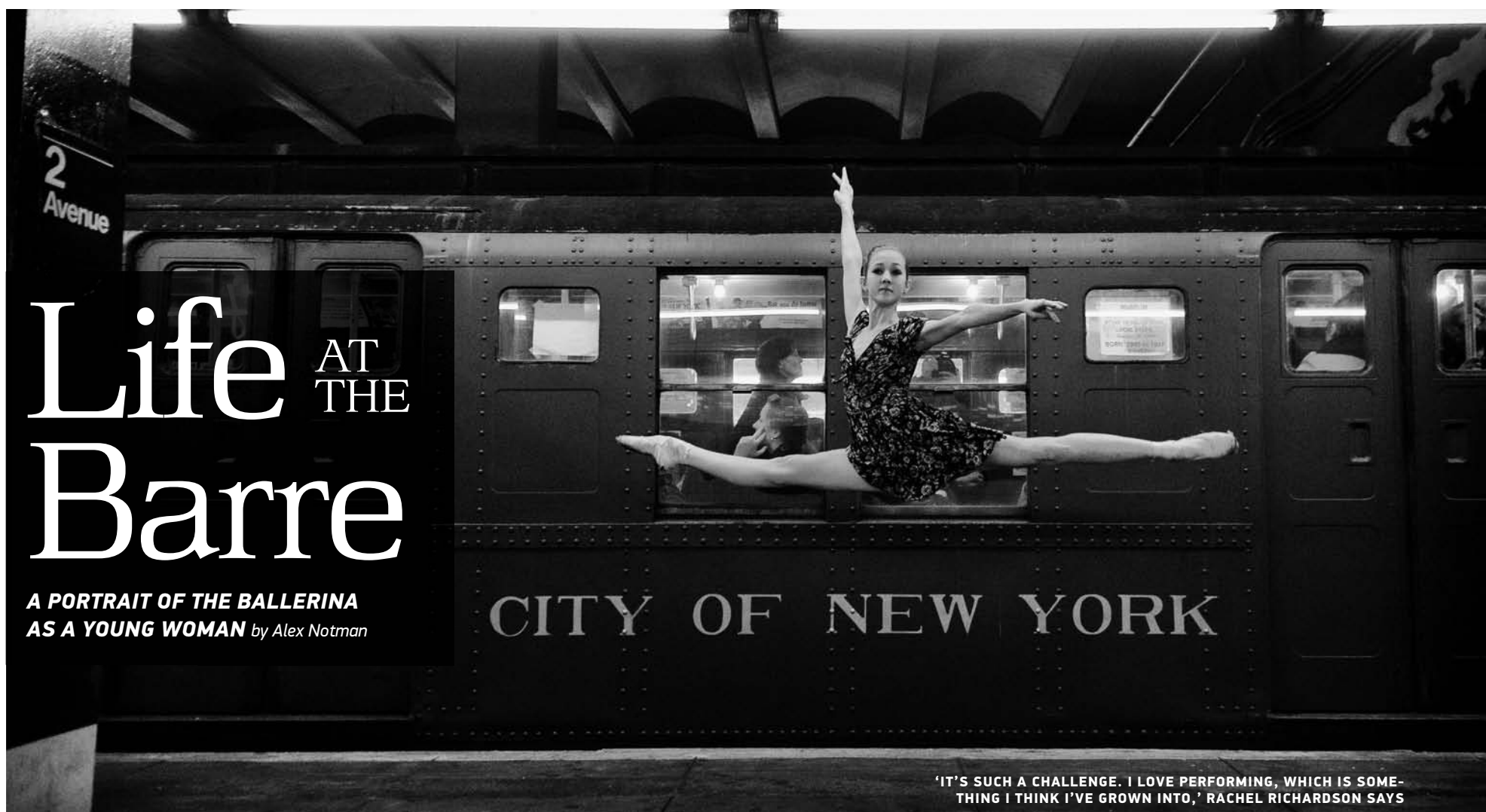




Life AT THE Barre

A PORTRAIT OF THE BALLERINA
AS A YOUNG WOMAN by Alex Notman

'IT'S SUCH A CHALLENGE. I LOVE PERFORMING, WHICH IS SOMETHING I THINK I'VE GROWN INTO,' RACHEL RICHARDSON SAYS

LUIS PONS PHOTOGRAPHY

While in Moscow last autumn, ballet dancer Rachel Richardson experienced a decidedly Russian moment at the gilded Kremlin Palace.

"It was crazy," she recalls with a laugh. "While we were backstage, 80 military men in the stereotypical fuzzy hats with their machine guns were marching through, literally right next to us as we were warming up."

The native Eugenean traveled with New York's American Ballet Theatre for the famed Bolshoi Ballet's 240th anniversary. It's an hour into our discussion over coffee at Noisette Pastry Kitchen, and her mention of the trip to Russia is the first time Richardson (who is home for summer break) sounds like the teenager she is. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. It was totally amazing," she says. "First of all, Russia is not somewhere I would pick to go on my own but I was really grateful I had a reason to go because it was really cool." She adds, "The food in the Bolshoi Academy was like, *horrible*."

Pursuing a career in ballet would cause anyone to grow up fast. The life of a dancer starts early with years filled by long, regimented days, as well as often having to leave home at young age.

At 17, Richardson has been dancing almost half her life. She is gearing up to begin her second year in the Studio Company for the America Ballet Theatre (ABT), considered one of the most prestigious classical ballet companies in the world. And in the ballet world, 17 is known as the year a dancer must start looking for a job in a profession with limited, and highly coveted, spots. This is the pivotal year in Richardson's path from Eugene to New York City, and the journey has been one of adventure, discipline and self-discovery.

Shelly Richardson, Rachel's mother, tells me over the phone that her daughter first tried soccer and gymnastics

before coming to ballet, adding that hers is not the traditional ballerina story. "She did not have posters of ballerinas in her room when she was little," Shelly Richardson says, laughing. When Richardson was nine, her sister's ballet teacher, John Grensbeck of Eugene's Oregon Ballet Academy, noticed her "good feet" and persuaded her to take a class.

"At 13, we saw that she had some potential," Shelly Richardson says, adding at that point, "As a family, we committed to go full bore for one year at a time."

That was the year that Rachel and Shelly Richardson made the big leap and relocated to Philadelphia — leaving her sister and father behind in Eugene — to attend the Rock School for Dance Education, where she trained for the better part of four years. There the duo lived in co-ed dorm apartments across the street from the school with ballet students from around the world; Shelly Richardson was the designated dorm mom. Rachel's days were spent balancing her classes in classical ballet technique, contemporary dance, pointe and pilates while homeschooling with her mom.

"It was really different," Rachel Richardson says. "It's a really big city. It's pretty dirty and kinda more grungy but it was exciting."

At the Rock School, students are encouraged to compete. That's when Richardson began entering the Youth American Grand Prix — or, as Richardson calls it, the YAGP — the largest international student dance competition on the globe for ages 9-19. The Grand Prix is such a crucial step towards a ballet career — securing dance scholarships and company contracts — that a 2011 documentary, *First Position*, focused on six competing dancers. One such dancer, Michaela DePrince, was a fellow student and good friend of Richardson's at the Rock.

"For ABT, they saw me at YAGP," Richardson says. "But I was really happy at the Rock. My mom wasn't

really ready for me to move to New York. I mean, *I* wasn't ready to move to New York either."

The following year, ABT again offered Richardson a spot with the Studio Company — a student branch; this time, she was ready.

Shelly Richardson returned to the family in Eugene and Rachel Richardson moved into a SoHo apartment in New York City, provided by ABT, where she now lives with seven dancers and a "house mom." At ABT Studio Company, Richardson takes classes and performs in ABT's annual performance of *The Nutcracker* alongside company dancers as well as principles and soloists, which has been challenging.

"I was terrified in my first company class. I didn't want to move," she says of training with company dancers, some who have been with ABT for 15 years. "It was really good for me but it was scary."

Richardson returns to ABT in September for this decisive year and she remains unsure but confident of her future. "If you're in the Studio Company there's a pretty good chance of you getting an apprenticeship. Since they saw me at YAGP, they told me that they were interested in me ..." she pauses. "I have no idea. It's a really wonderful company and it would be great to dance for them."

Regardless of where Richardson ends up, she says that ballet has taught her a lot about life. "I think a lot of life lessons I've learned are just from the sort of — not peculiar — but less normal experiences, like the fact that I moved away, living with so many other people and so many foreign people so young and then living alone in New York."

"Ballet specifically, discipline is a big one," she says, adding, "I think definitely sense of self and knowledge of yourself. You have to grow into it. You have to really understand yourself really well." ■





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