

Paper Tutus

WRITER LAUREN KESSLER'S

NUTCRACKER JOURNEY by Rachael Carnes

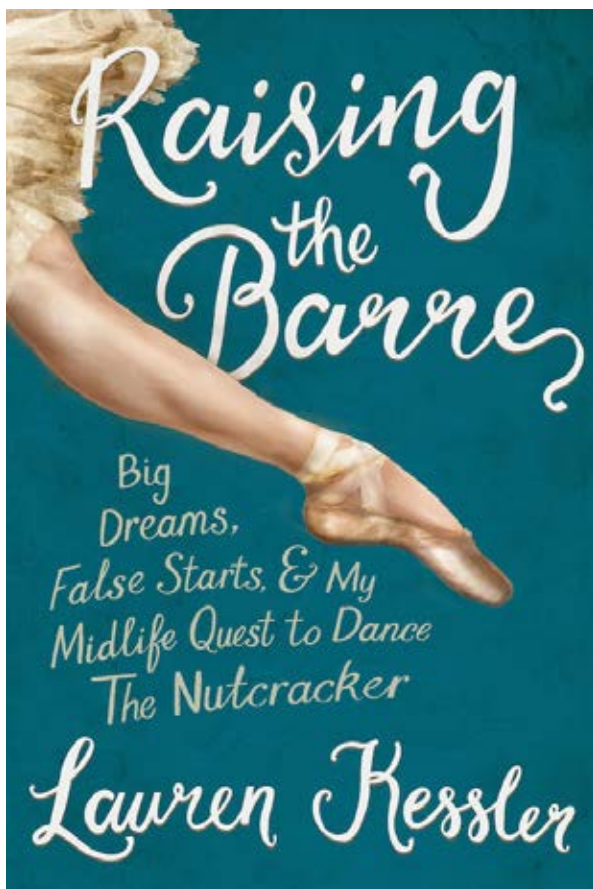
Raising the Barre: Big Dreams, False Starts, & My Midlife Quest to Dance the Nutcracker (Da Capo Press) by local author Lauren Kessler begins with the moment, a little over a year ago, when — in the midst of her middle-aged working-mom life — Kessler gets a bee in her bonnet to dance *The Nutcracker* with the Eugene Ballet Company.

With a funny and warm writing style, Kessler describes a history of doubts, from the poking comments of her early dance teachers to her powerful drive to succeed in EBC's performances — by any means necessary.

Once she meets with EBC's artistic director Toni Pimble, who agrees to give her a shot, Kessler is off and running, taking every opportunity she can to ready herself. In just a few short months, she'll share the stage with professional dancers, and she wants to look the part.

"The book is about taking on challenges when you don't have to and pushing yourself out of the comfort zone you worked so hard to get to in the first place," Kessler says. "Doing that brought me face-to-face with the experience of being a beginner, which is all about humility and patience and depending on others. That was a great lesson to re-learn."

Throughout the rigorous rehearsal process, with many hours spent in dance class and on the road, Kessler's story hits its stride: "Dancing moved me out of my head, where I almost always reside, and into my body," she says. "It



gave me back (if only for fleeting moments) the kind of embodied joy I remember experiencing as a girl."

Raising the Barre reads as a who's who in Eugene dance and bodywork. (I was tickled, for example, to see my next-door neighbor Summer Spinner featured as a Barre 3 instructor.) And Kessler chronicles her pursuit of the "ballet body" by checking out fitness and dance classes all across town.

"Researching this book, joining the company and befriending these professional dancers reignited my interest in the art form and made me realize what I hadn't as a child — this is a life of enormous sacrifice," Kessler says.

In the book, Kessler explores the history of ballet in a fascinating romp through the last few centuries. Kessler finds lively ways to tell the story of an evolving pedagogy and art form.

"I have been interested in and in love with ballet ever since I sat, transfixed, at age 5, watching my first *Nutcracker* at Lincoln Center with my mother," Kessler explains.

Kessler says her experience onstage has given her a new appreciation for the inner workings of dance-making and choreography, as well as its financing and the life of the (few) dancers who make a (modest) living at it.

"What strikes me the most after this experience is the difference between how effortless ballet looks to us in the audience and how agonizingly difficult it truly is — how light, airy and otherworldly the dancers appear to us on stage and how disciplined, intense and often grueling their lives actually are," Kessler says.

"Most dancers — like most writers, musicians and artists — cannot make even a modest living just by dancing. Seeing how the EBC dancers manage their lives to make dancing possible made me admire them even more."

Kessler says she looks forward to reprising her role as Aunt Rose in EBC's *Nutcracker* at the Hult, Dec. 18-20.

"If I can still fit into the costume," she adds. ♦

Raising the Barre is available from DaCapo Press. Lauren Kessler presents her new book 7 pm Monday, Nov. 30, at the UO Global Scholars Hall.

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