

Dancing: ‘A big lesson in using your body to be more expressive’

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Clatsop County, like every county in Oregon, is considered a “child care desert” — a fact only exacerbated by the pandemic as parents struggled to care for children and continue working while schools, day cares and other care facilities shut down or were severely restricted in how many children they could accommodate.

Sweet had already run a performing arts preschool out of Encore for 10 years and was familiar with the state’s requirements for child care, as well as the lengthy paperwork involved. At the end of the summer, she shifted Encore’s operations entirely, changing it from a dance studio into emergency child care. The faculty who stayed on became certified to work in child care.

“I wanted to do everything I could to help our families through this year,” Sweet said. “It was either going to work or it wasn’t.” Encore serves around 100 students, down from the 275 to 300 enrolled in dance classes before the pandemic. Now, the students do their school work at the studio, whatever distance learning program or school district-based curriculum their families chose to follow. Then, depending on their age, they have one or two dance and movement classes.

Sweet is looking at developing a full Encore-based academy next school year — her own “Fame” school, she likes to say, referencing the competitive performing arts school showcased in the 1980 film.

Dana Jones’ daughter has attended classes at Encore since she was 5 years old. Now, at 13, the studio has become one of the few options she has to socialize



Emily Madsen teaches a ballet class at Maddox Dance Studio. All students and instructors are required to wear masks while in the studio.

with her peers during what has proved to be an isolated school year for many students.

Online school through the Seaside School District was a rough transition — an alternate reality at first, Jones said. But being able to do schoolwork at the studio and continue dancing has been transformative for her daughter. She’s doing things like running for student vice president that she wouldn’t have done in middle school.

‘Mind your spacing’

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was little talk about going virtual in the dance world, Wall said. “I think because nobody thought it was going to be for very long,” she said.

But over the past year, many of the studios have relied on some virtual component to supplement classes or to deliver a type of performance.

When the studios were required to be fully shut down, Wall would send out links to her students

— videos created by other professionals for classes they could take at home. It exposed her students to a variety of styles, but it couldn’t replace in-person instruction.

Still, she added, filming things like a small showcase from “The Nutcracker” that her students performed in December meant even out-of-town family could easily enjoy a recital without needing to travel to Astoria.

At Maddox Dance Studio in Warrenton, Jeanne Maddox Peterson’s young students helped her navigate Zoom so she could teach one group in person while other students followed along at home. For Peterson, these virtual lessons made it feel like she could better pinpoint things she needed to address with dancers.

But there are logistics of dance as an art form that are difficult to overcome — even with all the technology in the world.

“So much of ballet is speaking without words,”

Wall said, “and your face is so expressive.”

Because of the coronavirus, everyone’s faces are covered in masks. When her ballet students film their spring recital in April for release in May, they will all be wearing masks. Wall and her students practice being expressive with their eyes and foreheads, but they must rely on body language even more.

“It’s a big lesson in using your body to be more expressive,” Wall said. After all: “A person in the back of the theater can’t read your eyes or your face, but they can read your whole body language.”

At Maddox Dance Studio, large squares are marked out on the studio floors, designating where students can stand and move during lessons. In the center of each square, a printed circle reminds them to “mind your spacing.”

But even this limitation has turned out to have some benefits, Peterson said.

A dancer doesn’t always

and the students have been resilient.

know what size of stage she or he might be asked to dance on. The social distance boundaries help reinforce to Peterson’s students that they can’t just go “gallop into the wild blue yonder.”

It has been a scary, long and traumatic period, Wall said, but coming back together in classes has felt joyful. Weird, yes, — dancing in masks, sanitizing everything — but joyful,

“As dancers we’re trained to pivot and turn and leap: Go to the floor, get up, turn, go the other way, change lanes,” Sweet said. “It’s constant changing and you have to be prepared. You can’t get flustered when the gear changes. You have to adapt and you have to adapt with grace and style.”

You have to make it look good.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Astoria School of Ballet director Maggie Wall sanitizes a hula hoop that the dancers use in their routine.

Clam digs: State called situation a ‘perfect storm’

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In mid-January, one razor clam came back with a test result of 140 parts per million, well over the state’s threshold of 20 parts per million.

The surge followed a large, harmful algal bloom in the fall, just after clams finished a second, late-summer spawning and were gobbling up food in preparation for the lean winter months. Unfortunately, the food they were eating — and storing for energy reserves — was full of toxins, said Matthew Hunter, the shellfish project leader for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

A “stall” in ocean winds and currents in the early fall

helped create conditions for the bloom and essentially held it along the Oregon Coast. More normal conditions during this seasonal transition period would have likely broken up the bloom.

The state called the situation a “perfect storm of harmful algal blooms, weather, ocean currents and the clams’ own physiology.”

Now, fishery managers are waiting to see what an upcoming spring transition period brings. If there is not the usual transition in ocean conditions, waves and winds, “we could see some issues,” Hunter said.

To reopen beaches for razor clam digs, the Oregon Department of Agriculture requires two consecutive tests with results below

the closure limit.

Harmful algal blooms have become a regular part of fishery managers’ considerations when it comes to both razor clam and Dungeness crab fisheries.

In 2015, a massive harmful algal bloom shut down razor clam digging in Oregon from the spring into the winter. In 2016, the fishery weathered another bloom with a closure that continued through 2017. But the blooms remain unpredictable.

The cells that produce the toxin may be present in huge concentrations in the water, but not producing any toxin. Then, if there is toxin present, whether clams and crabs accumulate domoic acid in their tissues can depend on

the time of year, food availability and their need to hold onto food.

Oregon does not have as many razor clams as Washington state and the Clatsop beaches account for the bulk of the clams harvested in the state each year. Unlike Washington state, which opens digs at set dates and times throughout the year, Oregon’s beaches are generally open to clamming except for a seasonal closure from July 15 to Sept. 30 north of Tillamook Head.

As of March 4, Washington state is continuing to sample razor clams regularly. Fishery managers are waiting for domoic acid levels to drop to safe levels before they announce harvest dates.

Exporters: Demand is high for consumer imports

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Containers have traditionally then gone to rural areas of the Pacific Northwest and have been loaded with products such as hay cubes, potatoes and lumber, before being sent back for export, said Peter Friedmann, the executive director of the Agriculture Transportation Coalition.

But demand is high for consumer imports, which earn ocean carriers a higher freight rate. The pandemic and uneven economic recoveries around the world have led to a shortage in containers and a dramatic increase in shipping costs. Carriers have opted to send containers back to Asia empty to expedite the import of more high-value consumer goods.

“The steamship lines are all private companies all around the world,” Friedmann said. “They apparently don’t care about the U.S. exporter, and they don’t really care about the consumer either. They’re just carrying the cargo and maximizing profits.”

“THE CONTAINER SHORTAGE IS CREATING MAJOR SUPPLY PROBLEMS IN THE U.S. IT’S A BIG FACTOR LIMITING HOME CONSTRUCTION AT THE MOMENT BECAUSE SO MANY BUILDING PRODUCTS COME FROM CHINA. SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS A DOOR JAMB IS IN SHORT SUPPLY RIGHT NOW.”

Kristin Rasmussen | spokeswoman for Hampton Lumber

The Federal Maritime Commission ordered ocean carriers and marine terminal operators to provide information determining whether legal obligations related to detention and demurrage under the Shipping Act of 1984 are being met. Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, and 23 other senators wrote the head of the commission, calling for appropriate action against ocean carriers.

“The need is urgent, especially with record container

volumes at the nation’s major ports,” the senators wrote. “These volumes, and the resulting congestion, will only grow as the global economy recovers from the coronavirus pandemic. Producers rely on competitive access to foreign markets, and the reported actions by certain (container carriers) to undermine this access pose significant ramifications for agricultural exporters and the industry at large.”

A representative of

Wyden’s office said the senator has not heard back yet regarding the fact-finding mission.

One of the exporters affected is Hampton Lumber, which exports premium wood products to Japan through Tacoma and Seattle. Kristin Rasmussen, a spokeswoman for Hampton, said the company is even more affected by the carrier issues when trying to import specialty construction products.

“The container shortage is creating major supply problems in the U.S.,” she said in a statement. “It’s a big factor limiting home construction at the moment because so many building products come from China. Something as simple as a door jamb is in short supply right now.”

The Chinese government has previously taken action to control freight rate increases. “We want the U.S. to be as aggressive in supporting our exports as the Chinese have been aggressive in supporting their exports,” Friedmann said.

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