

# ARTS & CULTURE

## 'Down the rabbit hole' of dance



SOPHIA EDELBLUTE/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

**Darcy Rust (pictured left) has been dancing since third grade. Her performance, entitled "Cheshire Cat," was her senior showcase before she starts attending American University to study dance.**



**Kenady Conforth (pictured right) started dancing at six years old and has since explored a variety of dance styles. Her solo performance, entitled "Wonderland," displayed her dance skills after nearly 13 years of experience.**

**BY SOPHIA EDELBLUTE**  
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The scene in Bohemia Park on Friday, June 25 and Saturday, June 26 was bustling with dancers. Their expert bearings in tutus, ballet shoes and plenty of bobby pins, would never have betrayed the weather to be in the upper 90s, peeking through into the 100s at points.

But the show must go on, and through the near unbearable heat, a truly amazing feat of performance came to life through South Lane Ballet Academy's "Down the Rabbit Hole" 2021 performance.

"It's 85 kids, costumes, stage, lights, sound, distanced seating, dressing rooms and then also trying to keep everyone cool and safe in 102-degree heat on Saturday, on top of teachers, choreography, it's a lot of work," says Mandy Conforth, academy administrator and tap instructor at South Lane Ballet Academy (SLBA). She also spearheaded the organization for the entire show.

Practice starts in September with weekly classes and then through January and February specific performances are choreographed and the show starts to take shape.

"The plan was to do an

outdoor show," says Mandy. But with COVID-19 regulations constantly shifting, the specifics of the show were up in the air.

"We just didn't know," she says. "We had to go ahead with the show like it was gonna be happening."

Luckily for the studio, the show did come to life. Without the ticket sales income, the studio would lose its nonprofit status. "To lose [that] means we'd have to move out of our building and at that point I'd just close," says Mandy.

Dancers like Kenady Conforth and Darcy Rust, both graduating seniors, have spent years at the studio and see it — and performance — as a way to express themselves.

"We have this saying in dance that is leave your baggage at the door, and it's really good for us because we just leave everything behind and we go in and we just dance it out and we feel better," says Kenady, "It's a really great way to deal with emotions as well."

Kenady is a dancer as well as an instructor at the studio and choreographed eight performances for the show, including her own senior solo. She works with a vast array of students; the studio teaches kids from ages three to 18.

"I have a lot of age ranges and so it was interesting

to work with everyone and get them all to do the same thing and they did it," says Kenady. "It is definitely a blessing for our community to be able to have something like this because I know that there are those kids [who] need to have a safe place like a studio and friends who are coming every week and learning together."

Darcy, a dancer and classroom assistant at SLBA, also choreographed her own senior solo titled "Cheshire Cat."

"I hadn't choreographed a lot of pieces for myself, especially something like this, so there was lots of moments where I just felt like I couldn't do something," says Darcy, "but then I would try it and it would turn out really great and I'm really proud of it."

She also started ballet at a much later age than most kids, at 13 years old.

"Starting ballet at an older age is difficult because ballet is so specific with the technique and the structure you have your body in," says Darcy. At times she felt discouraged but "then I pushed through it, worked hard and got to where I am."

She has plans to continue on to American University to get a bachelor's degree in dance. After that "I hope to be a teacher at a studio somewhere and really just

open the world up to — I mean in general the dance community can be a little toxic towards certain body shapes, races or gender identities and sexual identities — If I open a studio I'd like to make it open for everyone, because dance isn't about that. It's about the passion."

It's no easy feat to get to the skill level of Kenady or Darcy, but some younger dancers, like Taylor, who's in Hip-Hop 2 class at SLBA, are starting out not because of grand plans, but because it's just plain fun.

"I think it's very stress relieving. It's really fun. I think it's maybe something I'm gonna do next year," says Taylor, "I think I really love it. I started this year because there's not much sports to do and I actually really liked it."

His favorite style is hip-hop and he says dance is "really fun and you won't regret it. It also gives you something to do and look forward to."

After over 20 performances per show night, the dancers of SLBA have shown the town of Cottage Grove what they are capable of. From the Creative Movement Monday class' "Bread and Butterflies" performance to Kenady and Darcy's senior solos, dance is everywhere and for everybody.

"Some kids, the performance is all they care about. Some love the training. But for most of them it's the performance," says Mandy. "Getting to be on stage and create a character and wear a costume, it feels magical for them."

"We have another saying in our studio that every

body is a dancer's body," says Kenady. "Anyone can do it. If you are feeling nervous, so is everyone else in the class. Everyone's nervous but everyone ends up being really great friends and you end up making great memories with everyone and it's definitely worth it."

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