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Rising stars aim for their dreams

By Nancy Shoet West | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 23, 2014



JOHN TLUMACKI / GLOBE STAFF

Framingham High freshman Nadja Peschke focuses on her technique during a dance class at Massachusetts Ballet, where she is in an intensive preprofessional program.

Jack Libresco loves to be on stage. The Arlington High junior has been acting in community theater and school groups since before he can remember.

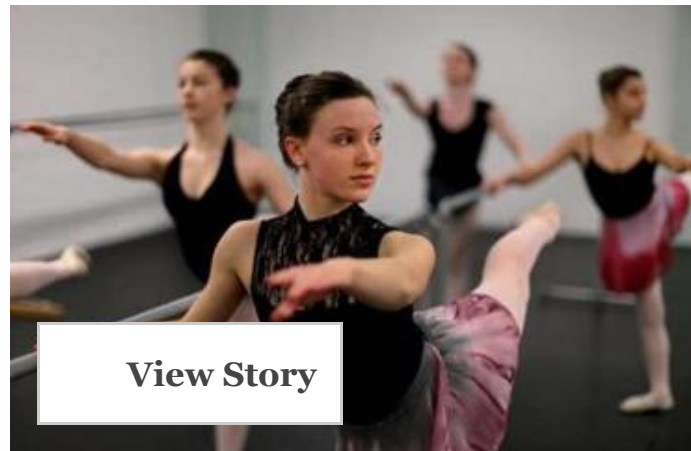
Nadja Peschke started taking dance lessons at the age of 3; today the Framingham High freshman takes five or six dance classes a week as part of the preprofessional program at Massachusetts Ballet.

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Aaron Harel, a college sophomore from Needham who first learned to play drums and then how to make his own, has a patent pending for a specialized drum system he designed.

All three are rising stars — and among the many teens in area communities whose devotion to art and performance is driving them ever forward, even as they balance the demands of school, other extracurricular activities, and their social lives.

Though not every teenager has their range of talents — or time-management skills — it's important to be well rounded, according to Lisa Evans, who knows a bit about children and theater.



Three local rising stars

Here are three local rising stars.

Not only is she the Concord Youth Theatre's longtime director, she is also the mother of four grown children who each cultivated a passion for acting as youngsters; one of

them is Chris Evans, a Hollywood film star perhaps best known for his role as Captain America in several films and counting.

“As a mother of young children who wanted to act professionally, I knew the worst thing was to be a ‘Mama Rose,’ a stage mother,” Evans said, referring to the notorious stage mother in the musical “Gypsy.”

“I insisted that they act only locally. I wouldn’t allow them to pursue careers while they were still children. Chris was the one I had to hold by the back of the neck and say: ‘You are going to have a complete childhood. You are going to attend high school, go to your prom, watch football games.’ The minute he graduated from high school, he dashed to New York and started working in a casting agency.”

The rest is history, for Chris and for his brother Scott, an actor on the soap opera “One Life to Live,” but the point their mother wants to make is that there are other equally positive outcomes for children who like theater.

Her daughter Carly spent a short time as a Broadway actress and then became a drama teacher at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, and Lisa Evans says she can think of at least 10 other alumni of her Concord Youth Theatre program who parlayed their acting talents into related careers. Some are directors; another is a television script writer.

Though Jack Libresco’s driving passion is theater, the 16-year-old from Arlington participates in a range of activities from music and poetry to sports.

“I would definitely like to continue theater in college,” he said. “But I’d also like to pursue poetry, literature, and law. I always want theater to be part of my life. I wouldn’t enjoy living it without it.”

As a 4-year-old, he played Owl in a children’s theater production of “Winnie-the-Pooh,” and at 7, he joined a cast of thespians 10 years his senior to put on “The Music Man” at Arlington High.

In the nine years since, Libresco has acted in productions including “Footloose,”

“Fame,” and “The Wedding Singer” at various community theaters throughout the region. Last year, he was nominated for an Eastern Massachusetts Association of Community Theaters award for his portrayal of the Artful Dodger in the Arlington Friends of the Drama production of “Oliver.” This month he played William Barfee in “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee” with the Alexander Children’s Theatre School.

But acting isn’t all Libresco does. He plays the trumpet in his high school band and was recently named to the Massachusetts Music Educators Association All-State Choir. He’s the president of the poetry club and the editor of the literary magazine at Arlington High. He’s also on a team that is competing this season on WGBH’s “High School Quiz Show.”

And he’s an athlete as well, playing on the varsity ice hockey and lacrosse teams. Last summer he interned in the Massachusetts State House with Representative Sean Garballey, and was invited to speak at a conference of family lawyers about a bill he helped write.

“Jack is interested in a lot of things,” said his mother, Nicole Libresco. “As a parent, as any parent would, I try to make it possible for him to do as many things as he wants and not close off any options.”

But, of course, some art forms require a single-minded focus that doesn’t leave much room for other extracurricular activities. For example, 15-year-old Nadja Peschke takes classes six days a week as a high-achieving dancer at Mass Ballet, a program based in her hometown of Framingham that not only teaches young people the skills and techniques of dance but also follows the American Ballet Theater curriculum and exam format.

Nadja started dancing in community dance programs when she was 3 years old. It wasn’t until she was about 11 that her interest became focused enough that she decided to pursue a future as a dancer.

“We certainly never pushed her,” said Nadja’s mother, Ingrid. “But she always

expressed so much creativity and joy when she was dancing. Once we realized how serious she was, we allowed her to enter the preprofessional dance program at Mass Ballet.”

“It had the challenge I wanted,” said Nadja, quick to take full responsibility for the decision to pursue dance so intensely. “I take dance classes three or four hours a day, every day except Sunday. Fortunately, Mass Ballet is right next to my high school, but it’s still a squeeze to keep up with everything.”

Sometimes, she said, she starts her homework at school, otherwise she does it as soon as she gets home. “You have to be dedicated and organized with your time to do this, but you also have to find the passion within yourself,” she said. “It can’t be something that other people tell you to do.”

Both Jack and Nadja dream of a future on stage after they complete college, though both know there may be other ways to pursue their art form as well.

Nineteen-year-old Aaron Harel is an example of a young person who has found a different way to carry his artistic passions into adulthood.

Harel began playing drums in fourth grade, taking traditional lessons. Two years later, he found his way to Plugged In, an after-school program in his hometown of Needham that gave him the chance to form rock bands with other kids his age.

“We used to play at the Regent Theatre in Arlington, which was the first stage I ever played on, and at street fairs and other live performances. It was super-inspiring.” Harel said. As he made his way through high school, he performed in benefit concerts and even organized a music and arts festival.

But more recently, Harel has become something of an entrepreneur as the founder of Zone Custom Drum Enhancements, a company that builds multitoneal snare systems that evoke different sounds from drums than what is typically played.

Like the drumming itself, his drum-building career dates back to childhood.

“When I was just starting to play drums, I went to an arts camp in Maine,” he said. “There was a little recording studio and I found an abandoned set of drums. I asked the camp director if I could take them apart, which was something I had always wanted to do with my drum set but was afraid to actually do.”

The camp director brought him a whole truck full of drums. “I started taking them apart, painting them, putting things inside of them,” he said. “One day one of my teachers asked to buy one from me, and that was the beginning of my career designing and building drums.”

Now, along with working toward a degree at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Harel travels with nationally touring bands that use his drums, including Passion Pit, Wilco, Rebelution, Zoogma, SOJA, Iration, and Stick Figure. He has a patent pending for his product. “Hearing a drum I made being played is the best thing in the world,” he said.

His words almost echo those of Jack Libresco’s.

“Acting makes me happy, but it also gives you the chance to make other people feel the same thing you are feeling at the same time,” Libresco said.

“When you’re on stage, you’re telling a story. The whole audience is watching you, and you make them part of your story, too. When I was 7 years old and in ‘The Music Man,’ I remember thinking all those people were watching me and it was the best feeling in the world. And it still is.”

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