

Teen gets leading role in Tulsa Ballet production

The young dancer from Montana came to Tulsa after studying in Moscow

Tulsa World

By James D. Watts, Jr.

10/27/2013

Read full story [here](#)

For want of an airline ticket, Jennifer Grace was unable to graduate from the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow this year.

But Grace isn't at all disappointed by this turn of events. If it had not been for this travel snafu, Grace would not be preparing to dance leading roles as part of Tulsa Ballet's production of Christopher Wheeldon's ballet of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"This is my first time to dance this ballet," Grace said. "But then, just about everything is brand new for me."

Grace, a native of Bozeman, Mont., recently turned 17. She is a member of Tulsa Ballet II, the preprofessional troupe within Tulsa Ballet.

While Tulsa Ballet II has its own repertoire and schedule of performances, its members also perform with the main company in its productions.

Grace had a major role in one of the ballets in Tulsa Ballet's "Rite of Spring" mixed bill. For "Midsummer Night's Dream," she will alternate between the roles of Hermia and Titania for the run of the ballet.

It's not often that a member of the preprofessional company is cast in a leading role.

"It's very ... " Grace paused for a moment, then said, "exciting."

Daniela Buson, one of the company's ballet mistresses, has a different word for it. "It's quite a challenge, especially if you are dancing Titania," she said. "It's a very difficult role, but Jennifer is doing a great job. She's working very, very hard.

"And there are times when I say, 'There's the 17 coming out,' " Buson said, with a laugh. "Mostly it is in the way that she's shy about expressing herself fully through her dance. You can't be afraid to show what's inside your soul because that is what it takes to be a dancer."

Grace was about 7 years old when she saw the film "Singin' in the Rain" with Gene Kelly. The famous scene of Kelly singing the film's title song while tap dancing in the rain sparked her interest in dance.

"Unfortunately," Grace said, "there wasn't a tap dance instructor in Bozeman. But there was a ballet school, and that's where I fell in love with ballet."

Four years later, at age 11, Grace attended a summer intensive workshop with the Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington, D.C. She later took part in a similar program with the Bolshoi Ballet, which led to her being accepted into the Bolshoi Ballet's school in Moscow at age 13.

Grace went to Russia on her own and was assigned to a dorm with students several years her senior.

"They didn't exactly like me," she said of her fellow students. "I was one of the first American students there. But there were a couple of students from England, Greece and Finland who spoke English, and they helped me get settled. We still keep in touch."

Grace was supposed to attend the Bolshoi school for three years. However, her attempts to return after the first semester were thwarted by regulations involving an unaccompanied minor traveling overseas.

"I wasn't able to get an airline ticket —it had to do with the length of the layovers," she said. "But we were able to find a school in Southern California that taught the Vaganova method that the Bolshoi uses. It gives you the best basis —it teaches you the control you need to do classical ballet, the articulation to do things like Balanchine, and the muscularity you need to do contemporary dance. It lets you push yourself physically to your limit without hurting yourself."

What brought Grace to Tulsa Ballet's attention was a dance job fair held in New York City. Buson was there to assess dancers auditioning for places within professional dance companies.

"Most of the dancers had these numbers they were wearing," Buson recalled. "But all of a sudden my eye went to this person in the back of the room who didn't have a number. Apparently she hadn't registered for the job fair, but a friend has told her it was an opportunity to take class."

"But there was something there that caught my eye —this person in the back of the room," she said. "Freddie Franklin used to call it 'the stuff' —that something special that some dancers have."

Tulsa Ballet wasn't the only company to offer Grace a contract. Orlando Ballet also offered her a place in its second company. What swayed her to Tulsa was an email from Alfonso Martin, the former principal dancer who now oversees Tulsa Ballet II.

"He explained how things worked with Tulsa Ballet," she said. "I liked the fact that Tulsa Ballet II had its own repertoire, and that we would also have the chance to learn the repertoire of the main company. I realized that I would have more experience and get to dance more.

"And Tulsa has seasons," Grace said, laughing. "That meant a lot to me. When I was in Moscow, it never snowed once."



Jennifer Grace, in costume for the role of Titania in the Tulsa Ballet production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," is seen after a rehearsal in Tulsa last week. MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World