

MAG ZINE
DANCE

DanceTeacher®

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Biography, by Melissa Pihos**

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Ballet Montana

**SALLYANN MULCAHY'S SUMMER
RETREAT FOR PROFESSIONAL DANCERS**

When Sallyann Mulcahy left home to study ballet seriously, she never imagined she'd one day be back in the mountainous terrain of Montana—and even more amazing, running a much cherished summer ballet company.

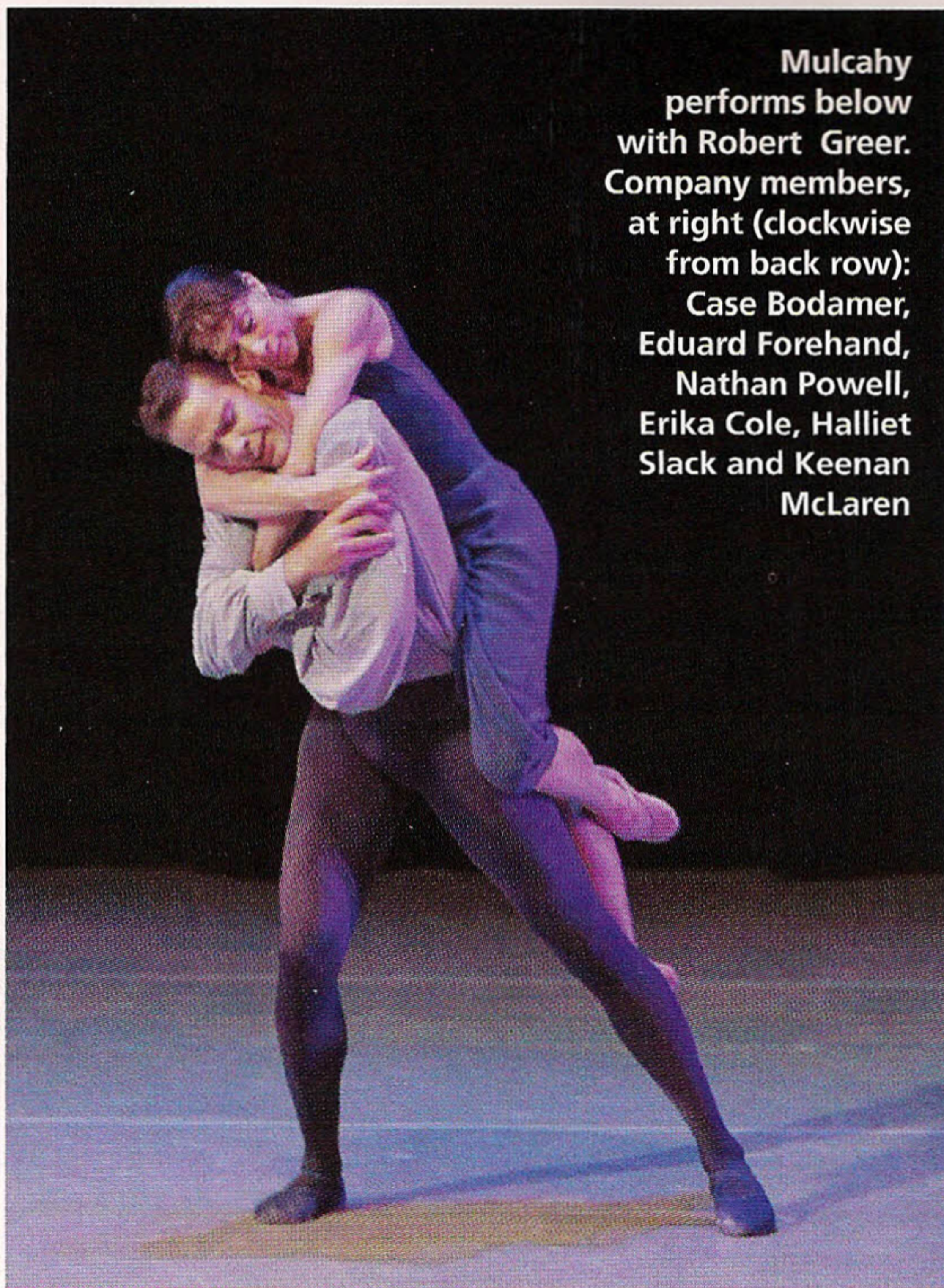
But following a 14-year professional performance career with Royal Winnipeg Ballet and other companies, Mulcahy did exactly that. Her summer company has grown to become a jewel in the state's busy tourist season. And though she never set out to be a teacher, she now runs a dance school, and her incisive coaching draws dancers at all stages of their careers to Helena, Montana, each summer to learn, renew and soak up the fresh air.

It all started in 1991, when Mulcahy returned home from New York City to recover from an ankle injury. (She had been working with New Jersey Ballet and Finis Jhung's Chamber Ballet.) With time to reflect and heal, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, she was able to slow down and consider her options. "I was burned out with Manhattan," she says.

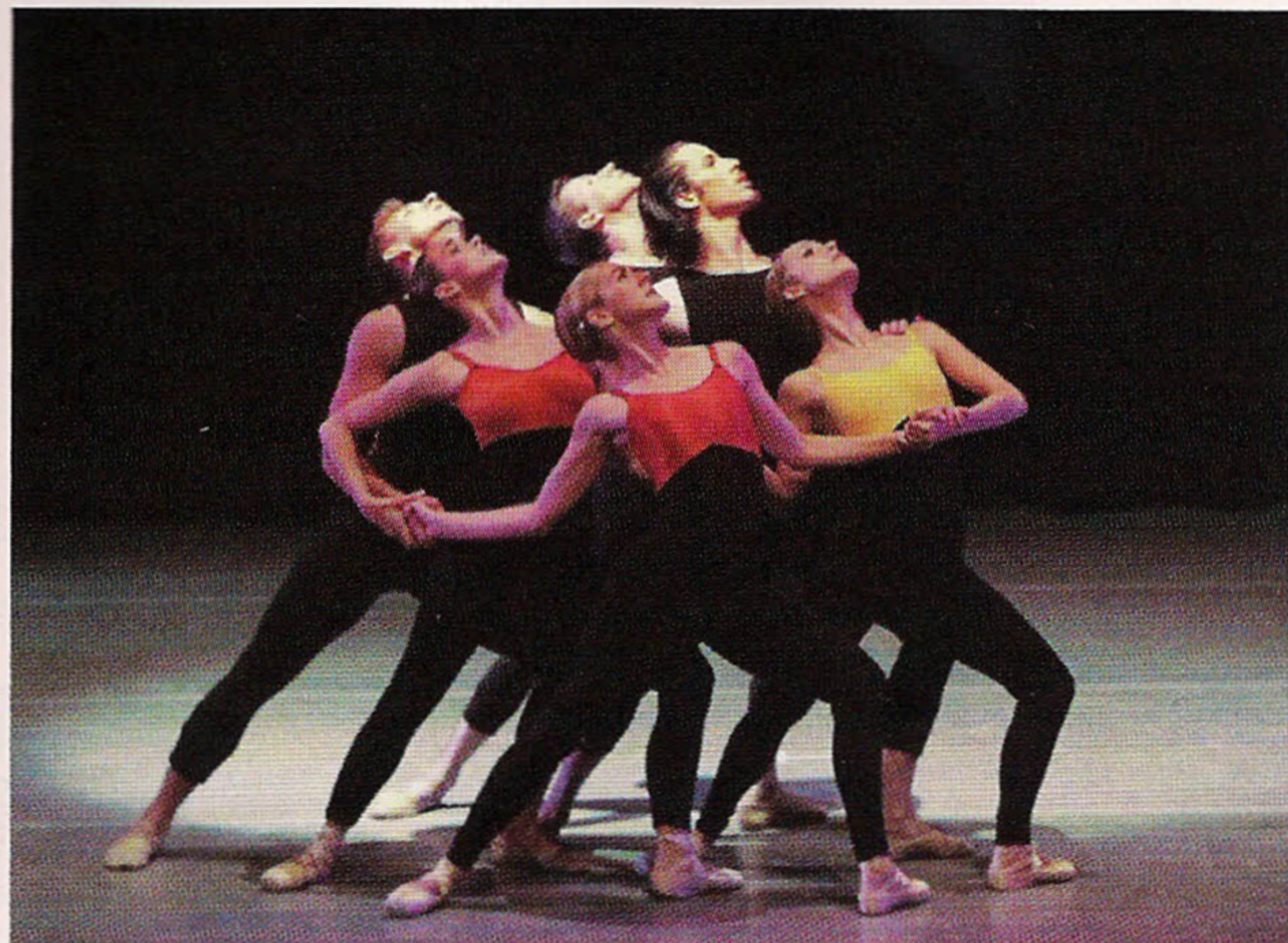
Not long after, she was invited to Milwaukee Ballet for a brief teaching engagement. Afterward, a group of students contacted her and said they would be willing to travel to Montana if she was willing to teach them. "What an amazing thing," she recalls. "It was such a compliment." She had just begun teaching at Carroll College, so she even had a place to hold classes.

From this group of soul-searching students sprang Ballet Montana in 1995 (it was first known as Artisan Dance). Every summer, between 10 and 14 dancers from all over the nation gather for a six-week, three-performance season.

Many return year after year with about three new dancers per year. They range in age from 19–40, so there's an exchange between young and more mature dancers. Some have contracts with regional companies (including Dayton Ballet, Louisville Ballet, Ballet Idaho, Smuin Ballet, Sacramento Ballet and Nashville Ballet) and are off for the summer. Others are coming back from an injury. The summer offers time to focus on technique and artistry in a nurturing and beautiful environment.



Mulcahy performs below with Robert Greer. Company members, at right (clockwise from back row): Case Bodamer, Eduard Forehand, Nathan Powell, Erika Cole, Halliet Slack and Keenan McLaren



“What I found was a dance haven. Sallyann puts dance into your body, no matter what that body is like.”

—Megan Wrigg, dancer

Although there have been repertory coaches from time to time, such as Arnold Spohr, former artistic director at RWB, Mulcahy does all of the teaching. Carroll College houses the dancers free of charge, and the company rehearses in the school’s ballet studio. A typical day involves a two-hour ballet class followed by rehearsal until 6 pm. “They come for the work with me, for the training and the coaching,” she says. “That’s the draw.”

Mulcahy does not hold traditional auditions. Instead, an underground network of dancers simply know about the program and call Mulcahy or send her a DVD. “The dancers are normally very experienced—ranging from corps members to principals in their respective companies,” she says. “There is a common thread that unites every dancer who comes here: They have a passionate work ethic and a strong desire to grow and satisfy their need for personal fulfillment as dancers.”

Former Milwaukee Ballet trainee Megan Wrigg came to Montana in 1999 at a low point in her dance life. “What I found was a dance haven. It was a place that you could dance as an individual,” she says. “Sallyann puts dance into your body, no matter what that body is like, instead of my previous experiences where every company wanted you to be a clone of their latest star. You have to come to Montana already a dancer—which is really a state of mind with a desire and passion—and then she can put her technique, inspiration and style into you. From there it is the dancer in you that expresses it.”

As to why the dancers keep returning, Mulcahy has

an idea. “My dancers say I’m brutally honest. We all need honesty to grow into who we can be, and there are different rates of maturity,” she says. “I paid attention, looking at dance from the inside. I know how to put ballet into people’s bodies. I get the diamond out. They come in so rough, I can chisel it out of them.”

Now, after 17 years, the residents of Helena believe their summers should include ballet, thanks to Ballet Montana’s steady presence. “The weather is warm and dry, it’s a perfect summer refuge for the dancers,” says Mulcahy. “Everything lights up when they come. You can hear people say, ‘Look, here are the dancers.’”

The company presents a mix of classical and contemporary choreography by Mulcahy (and occasionally by company members) at the Myrna Loy Center. This year, the repertory includes *Voices in Hand*, and a reprise of *The Inquisition of Don Miguel*. “It’s important to me that our rep offers a full diverse mix with compelling intensity, that it’s dramatic and highly energized—both through music selection and by challenging the dancers’ ballet technique and the audience’s emotions,” says Mulcahy.

Two years ago Mulcahy established the Ballet Montana Academy which offers three levels of classical-ballet technique for serious students who enroll by audition. The idea is that local residents will finally have a place to study with mentorship provided by summer company members. “They take class with the company and even learn rep,” she says. “I had to get out of Montana to train, but finally they don’t have to leave home like I did.” —Nancy Wozny