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THE UPSIDE

## Pennsylvania Ballet soloist Peter Weil is the product of a Jenkintown ballet school that boys actually want to attend

by Ellen Dunkel, June 29, 2019

**H**ow do you get boys into ballet classes? Don't make it awkward — and train them for free.

That's the method Lisa Collins Vidnovic, a former Pennsylvania Ballet dancer and ballet mistress, has employed for the past 20 years at her Metropolitan Ballet Academy and Company in Jenkintown.

It's also largely what Peter Weil, 23, credits for his success. He was promoted to soloist at Pennsylvania Ballet when the company recently reorganized the ranks. He got his start at the Metropolitan at age 7 and sometimes teaches classes there.

Boys' full-scholarship programs have become increasingly common in the ballet world, which typically attracts more female than male aspiring dancers. Both Philly's Rock School for Dance Education and the elite School of American Ballet in New York offer full scholarships for the first few years of a boy's training. The financial assistance encourages parents who might not have thought of dance as an activity for their sons — or have the means to pay for it — to give it a try.

Such scholarships were nearly unheard of when Vidnovic started offering them at Metropolitan 20 years ago. What makes the Metropolitan's different from similar programs is that it includes boys in all phases of training, until about age 18.

Weil's was the typical ballet story of a boy following his sister into class. He tagged along for the ride, and soon his mother wanted him in the studio as well. It turned out to be an easy sell.



TOM GRALISH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Peter Weil, a soloist at the Pennsylvania Ballet, trained in the boys' scholarship program at the Metropolitan Ballet Academy

"She told me it would help me with soccer, and I loved that," Weil said. "I enrolled in the boys' program and it was one class on Fridays — only boys. It made it feel normal."

It was also helpful that his was a robust group, with at least 20 boys in his ballet classes. More than 300 boys have gone through the program.

"Peter has always been just incredibly charismatic. He's a natural performer," Vidnovic said. Qualities she noticed when he was a small child included "his athleticism, his musicality — he's smart, he's really hardworking. If you could just get him onstage and performing, you had him. It's so much fun to be onstage."

Other alumni from the boys' program can be found in Chicago's Joffrey Ballet, Florida's Harid Conservatory, and in the Broadway

show *Cats*. The next Metropolitan generation took their first steps on June 8, at the school's annual boys' scholarship audition. (Hopefuls who missed the date can arrange for a private audition any time of the year.)

"We are not expecting that children already know how to dance," Vidnovic said about auditions. "We are looking for interest, enthusiasm, curiosity, and that they are able and ready to follow basic classroom and group instructions" from beginning students.

Weil named a few other factors that kept him interested: He was "allowed to be a kid" but also got lots of performing opportunities.

"Soccer lasted through 8th grade," Weil said. Then he got kicked in the head and was knocked out on the field. That's when Vidnovic told him he had to make a choice. He chose ballet. But

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the fact that the school allowed him to decide for himself, “I think that’s what made it OK,” said Weil.

Another paradox: School hours are respected, but Vidnovic believes in treating her students like professionals.

“We keep a schedule,” she said. “The kids work really hard. We bring in choreographers. It really mirrors a professional company.”

She also tries to pique boys’ interest quickly.

“Classical training at the front end is not that exciting. You have so much of it that’s drill,” she said. “The sooner you can move children past that and onto the part that’s going to capture their imagination,” the more likely they’ll stay with it.

For Weil, that meant dancing as a little knight in King Arthur during his first year. Soon, he was performing in Pennsylvania Ballet’s Nutcracker, where he danced as a soldier and then as Fritz, one of the main children’s roles. And then, for four years, he danced the role of the Nutcracker Prince.

When the Pennsylvania Ballet performed The Nutcracker at the



DAVID SWANSON / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Peter Weil, at 10, practicing at the Metropolitan Ballet Academy.



YONG KIM / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Metropolitan Ballet Academy and Company founder and Artistic Director Lisa Collins Vidnovic arranges young boys with faculty member Daniel Mayo looking on during the annual boys’ ballet scholarship audition at the Metropolitan Ballet Academy and Company in Jenkintown.

Kennedy Center in Washington in 2009, 13-year-old Weil performed with them, and played basketball in the wings between rehearsals.

But his biggest childhood role came when choreographer Christopher Wheeldon was setting Carnival of the Animals on the Pennsylvania Ballet. Wheeldon’s version was based on actor John Lithgow’s children’s book of the same name, and Weil was selected to play the main character, Oliver Percy. He was onstage through the entire ballet, with Lithgow narrating live.

“I didn’t realize how amazing it was at that time,” Weil said. “I was really fortunate.” And not just because he was rubbing shoulders with a star. “I was exposed to the company. I really fell in love with the atmosphere.”

A career with his hometown company seemed out of reach, though, when Weil grew to only 5 feet, 8 inches, while the Pennsylvania Ballet traditionally hired taller dancers.

But then Angel Corella, a shorter dancer, was hired as artistic director in 2014. And things changed.

“When Angel took over, I was extremely excited,” said Weil, who has just finished his fourth year with the company.

Highlights include dancing George Balanchine’s Tarantella pas de deux. And, as Ali in Le Corsaire, he got to wear the pants that Corella had worn in the same role.

And while still an apprentice, he was Basilio in Don Quixote, a role he first attempted the year before when he was selected to participate in the prestigious Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland.

“It’s the classic ballet that every boy dancer goes onto YouTube to watch,” he said.

What Weil has done with the years of free training he received at Metropolitan has done the entire school proud, said Vidnovic.

“We live in a wonderful part of the country, where we have access to incredible male dancers and teachers,” she said. “Peter is definitely an inspiration to our students.”

[www.metropolitanballetcompany.org](http://www.metropolitanballetcompany.org)  
215.663.1665