



Sara Webb

INTERVIEW BY ANNIE MANGELSON

Sara Webb (Bardo) is a principal dancer for the Houston Ballet company. She has danced with Houston Ballet for fourteen years, and has also served as a guest principal dancer for The Australian Ballet and Ballet West. During her career, Webb has performed throughout the world. She is also the proud mother of two beautiful children.



Why dance? Why ballet?

I grew up in Henderson, Nevada. When I was eight years old my parents took my sister and me to Nevada Dance Theater's production of *The Nutcracker*. I was mesmerized! I wanted to be Clara so badly. My mom enrolled both of us into ballet classes shortly after that. I quickly learned how hard ballet was, for me at least. I wasn't flexible at all and I was a bit uncoordinated. But I loved it! I was determined to be Clara someday. I spent the next few years dedicating myself to learning how to make my limbs move the way a ballerina should.

My first performance on stage was as a gingersnap in *The Nutcracker* (gingersnaps are the little ones that come out of the funny lady's skirt in the second act). Then I moved up to one of Clara's friends at the party in the first act. And finally, after being cast as Fritz's understudy (yes, Clara's brother), I was thankfully cast in the role of Clara. I had so much fun dancing the role and, while the process was a challenge for me, I knew that I wanted to keep going. I had set a new goal that night: to dance the Sugarplum Fairy. For that I knew a lot more work and training would be required. I was excited about the challenge, though, and I was hopeful that someday I would achieve my new goal.

On a side note, my older (by thirteen months) sister Andrea was a huge motivator for me in achieving my goal to become a ballerina. Unlike me, Andrea was a natural at ballet. It came very easily to her, and she moved up ballet class levels very quickly. I was very competitive with my sister, like most sisters are, and pushed myself even harder to try to catch up to her. She danced until she was about seventeen and then decided she didn't want to dance anymore. At that point, because I had followed her every move, I questioned whether or not I should continue dancing. Where would all of my motivation come from now? Did I still love ballet? At sixteen, I decided that this was what I really wanted to do, even if my sister didn't. I never

imagined myself becoming a principal dancer. That was a goal I didn't dare set, because I never thought it would happen. I was so happy to be the Sugarplum Fairy while I was at Harid, and then again three years after joining the Houston Ballet. I am grateful for all of the other roles since, too.

Tell us about your history as a dancer.

I started my ballet training at the Nevada Dance Theater Ballet Academy when I was eight years old. At fourteen, I moved away from home and went to a special dance school, the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida. I went there to receive better dance training as well as to receive my high school education.

While there, we attended a regular high school in the morning and then returned to our dorms and dance facility after lunch to take dance classes for the rest of the day. We also learned about art history, dance history, and music theory in the evening. When I was seventeen, I graduated from the Harid Conservatory and moved to Houston to train at the Houston Ballet Academy for one year. During this time, I finished my senior year of high school by correspondence. The following year, when I was eighteen, I was hired into the Houston Ballet Company as an apprentice. I was an apprentice for one year and then was promoted to the Corps de Ballet. After three years in the Corps, I was promoted to the rank of soloist. And after two and a half years as a soloist, I was promoted to the rank of principal dancer. I have been in the Houston Ballet for fourteen years now. I have also had the opportunity to guest as a principal dancer with the Australian Ballet in 2004 and with Ballet West for the last three seasons.

Which role has been your favorite?

That is definitely the hardest question people ask. I have so many favorites! I have always been fond of the classics—*Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Cinderella*, *Giselle*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. I enjoy the stories and the purity

of the dancing. I also enjoy some of the more contemporary ballets that allow me a chance to move in different ways without the restrictions of a tutu; *Ghost Dances*, *Falling Angels*, *Twilight*, and *Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* are just a few. I really can't pick just one favorite.

Of the experiences you've had dancing, which one meant the most to you and why?

There is a ballet called *Voluntaries* that is very special to me. Sometimes you can love a ballet, but the rehearsal process can make it a great experience or a terrible one. This particular ballet was an inspiring experience for me. The ballet was created by Glen Tetley, a very well known choreographer. I had the amazing opportunity to be coached by him in preparation for opening night. We worked well together and he truly inspired me with his knowledge and interpretation of dance. Shortly after I worked with him, he passed away. I will forever be grateful for the time I had to work with Mr. Tetley.

Voluntaries was created in 1973 as a memorial by Glen Tetley for another famous choreographer, John Cranko, who had passed away suddenly. I had not known Mr. Cranko personally, so for me the ballet was a memorial for something else. My husband had served two year-long tours in Iraq. There were so many soldiers that my husband knew and I had heard about who had given their lives during that time. I danced for them, for their families, and for the selfless sacrifice they had given.

The other experience that I have to mention is more recent. My family is very important to me. When my son was about two years old, I had a strong impression that there was another little spirit ready to join our family. Having a child in my profession is not an easy thing to do, because you have to take so much time off from dancing. Your body goes through a lot of changes and there is always that possibility that your body will not allow you





Photo courtesy Amitava Sarkar



Photo courtesy Jim Caldwell



Photo courtesy Amitava Sarkar

to return. They say for every week you take off from ballet it takes two to get back! Not that I took nine months off, but there was a period of time where taking ballet class was not possible. Before having my daughter, I made the decision to come back to work, and timed my pregnancy so I could make it back in time for *Sleeping Beauty*—one of my favorites!

Lily was born in October and I went back to work at the end of November. I wasn't sure if I would be ready to perform the role of Aurora in February. It seemed like such an uphill battle for me. *Sleeping Beauty* is one of the hardest classical ballets to take on. Also, when I was going back to work after having my son, my husband was still in school and had a lot more free time, allowing me the chance to go to the gym and get back in shape. This time, I had two little ones at home to tend to, and my husband was working full-time. Many times I thought I was crazy for setting what seemed like such an unachievable goal. However, I danced Aurora with Ballet West in February of this year, and then again in March with Houston Ballet. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done, but also one of the most gratifying. I will always remember what those performances felt like. I loved the freedom of being on stage again—the way the steps felt, the moments of expressing thoughts through an arm movement, receiving an encouraging glance from a partner. I remember the sound of the applause and the final bow. I remember when the curtain came down and the performance was over I became “Mommy” again—the best role of all.

Tell us about your experiences with Houston Ballet.

I have been fortunate to work with some amazing choreographers and people during the last fourteen years of my career at Houston Ballet. I have had ballets created on me—always an honor for a dancer because it is like leaving your mark on the ballet world. Three of my favorites are Wendy in

Trey McIntyre's *Peter Pan*, a special pas de deux called *Twilight* by Ben Stevenson, and the leading role in Stanton Welch's *La Bayadère*.

I have had the chance to work with two artistic directors of Houston Ballet. I worked for Ben Stevenson for the first six years of my career and then Stanton Welch for the last eight years. Each has given me wonderful opportunities to grow and has inspired me in different ways. I have travelled across the world and performed on many stages—in Hong Kong, London, Australia, Moscow, Spain, Canada, and the United States. I have made some wonderful friendships that continue to help me grow as a dancer and as a person.

What are your goals for the future?

People always ask me how long I plan to dance, and I don't know the answer to that question yet. I think I will wake up one day and know that I am done. I love ballet. It has been my life, or at least a big part of it, since I was eight years old. It defines a part of who I am. I think I worry that my bag of talents is limited to just dance, but I know I need to cultivate the determination that helped me become a professional ballerina and use it to look in that bag again. I look forward to having more children and being more of a full-time mom. I would like to go back to college and earn my degree in special education. A part of me contemplates teaching ballet and passing on my knowledge to the next generation of dancers. My husband and I love to take trips as a family. It would be nice to have more time to do that, someday.

What is your artistic and creative approach to dancing?

I try to make each step and each role my own. The beauty of ballet to me is that everyone is unique in their own special way because of their individual interpretations of movement. I like to use the music as a guide for the feeling of each piece being danced. If it is light and happy, one cannot help but exude happiness. If the music

resonates somber notes, the soul bleeds a little more angst. I use my life experiences to help add a piece of myself to each ballet I dance.

What advice do you have for aspiring dancers?

Don't give up just because you are having a bad day, week, or year. Use your disappointments as motivation to work harder. Remember why you love to dance, because one day you will question why you are doing it. The ballet world has room for lots of beautiful dancers. There doesn't have to be one *best*. Gain perspective on life, because ballet isn't everything.

What has been the most challenging thing about getting to where you are today?

I think one of the most challenging things for me in this profession has been working with instructors and coaches who have told me that I can't. Unfortunately, I have made the mistake of believing a few of them, and so I have had to learn how to overcome my own self-doubts.

How have you balanced family time and your life as a dancer?

It is definitely a juggling act! I think sleep has been sacrificed the most, as most parents find. Being a principal dancer helps, because there is a little more flexibility in my schedule.

I maximize my time with my children and husband as best I can. I always have Mondays off from work, so that is always Mom's day with the kids. My husband has Saturdays off from work, so that is Dad's day with the kids. And, being the wonderful husband that he is, he usually brings the kids to work on my lunch break. Sundays, unless I have a performance, which isn't very often, we have the whole day as a family—my favorite day of the week! My husband and I try to have a date night once a week, even if it is just staying home and watching a favorite show on TV.

During late night rehearsals at the theater, I will sometimes bring one of

my kids with me to have a "date," or the whole family will come and visit for a bit until I have to dance. Sometimes my husband and I will drive over an hour to spend only thirty minutes as a family. But those thirty minutes are always worth it.

How does the gospel affect you as an artist?

The gospel gives me perspective, brings balance into my life, and keeps me grounded. My profession is a very hypercritical profession. The focus is always on the things that need to be corrected—the mistakes you make. Having the gospel in my life reminds me that perfection is a process and allows me to look beyond the criticism and keep a positive mindset.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

There are currently two other LDS dancers out of the fifty-four dancers in the Houston Ballet, and one of our pianists is also LDS (and frequently plays Primary songs and hymns in our daily warm-up class). However, there are not a lot of LDS people in the dance world. I have had many opportunities to be a missionary. I have been able to share my beliefs with many people who might otherwise never have been exposed to the Church. Some experiences have been memorable. Once I had a conversation about tithing with another dancer. He couldn't believe that on my little salary I paid ten percent to the Church. A few days later, I slipped and fell while practicing a step. That same friend commented that it was a good thing I paid my tithing, because, thankfully, I didn't get injured!

I have found that there are a lot of misunderstandings about what Mormons are like. I hope that I have helped in some way to show that we are a loving and accepting people. And normal! I also hope that, through my art form, I have been able to bring people joy and exemplify seeking after "anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy." ❧