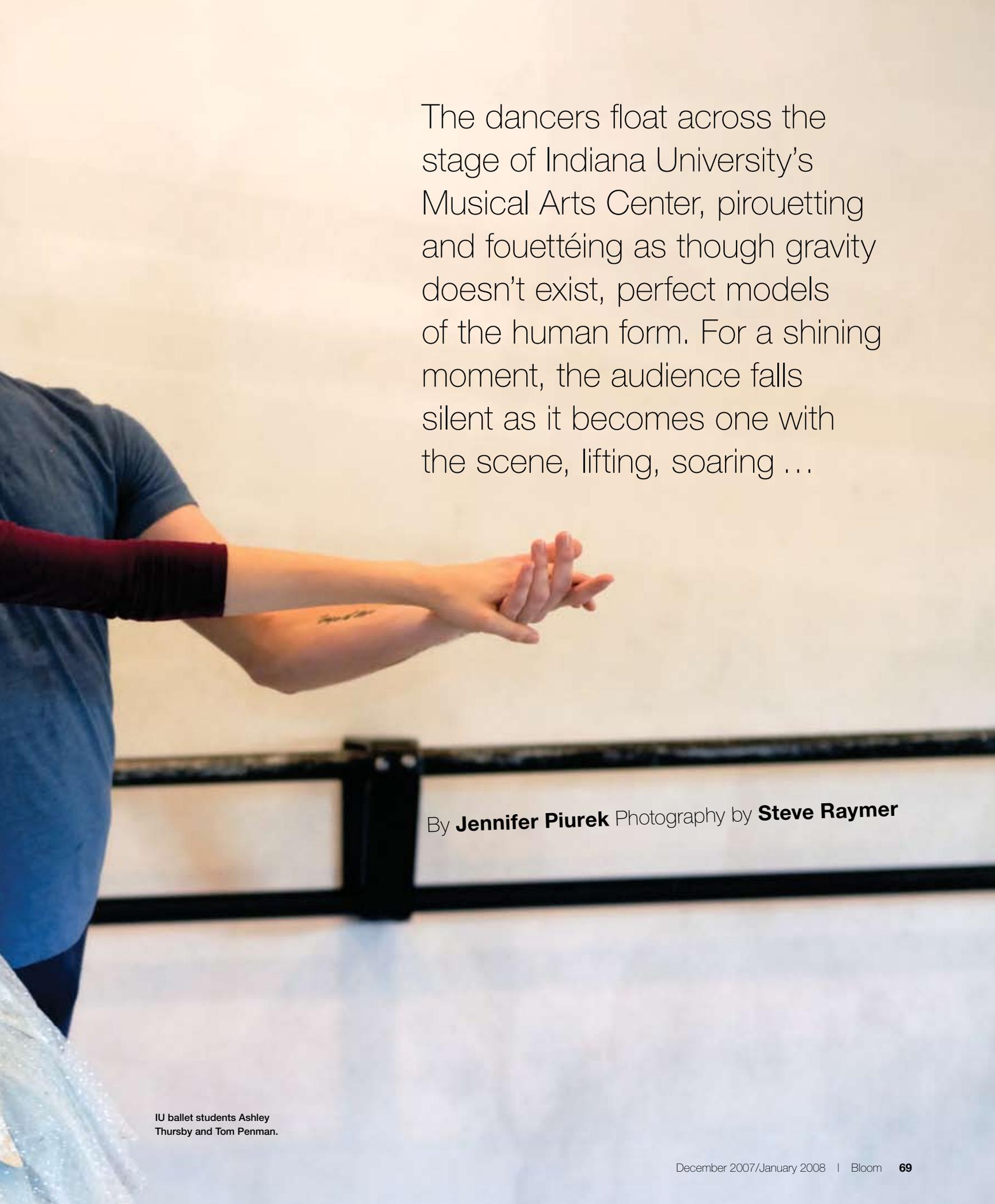




for  
the love  
of  
dance

The pain, sacrifices, and joy  
of being an IU ballet dancer.



The dancers float across the stage of Indiana University's Musical Arts Center, pirouetting and fouettéing as though gravity doesn't exist, perfect models of the human form. For a shining moment, the audience falls silent as it becomes one with the scene, lifting, soaring ...

By **Jennifer Piurek** Photography by **Steve Raymer**

IU ballet students Ashley Thursby and Tom Penman.

Just what goes into creating those moments of perfection on stage? How do student dancers manage to juggle their practices, teaching, rehearsals, auditions, and performances with classes, jobs, and friends? Finally, have these exquisite-looking specimens ever seen the inside of a box of Girl Scout cookies?

*Bloom* followed the lives of two IU ballet majors, seniors Thomas Brocke Penman and Ashley Thursby, in the weeks leading up to IU's annual production of *The Nutcracker*.

We heard about their first-ever performances as kids (both made their stage debuts in *The Nutcracker*), the importance dance has played in their lives, and what they hope to accomplish in the future.

**“This is the first time I’ve worked with so many dancers who really inspire me.”**



Artistic director Michael Vernon puts dancers Ashley Thursby and Tom Penman through their paces at a rehearsal for *The Nutcracker*.

This year, IU presented a traditional interpretation of *The Nutcracker* with new choreography under artistic director Michael Vernon. A former dancer and well-known choreographer, Vernon himself first performed in *The Nutcracker* as a teenager with the Royal Ballet School in the England.

Appointed to IU in the fall of 2006, Vernon says the caliber of dancers here opened up a world of possibilities. “This is the first time I’ve worked with so many dancers who really inspire me,” he says. “The level of talent in the ballet department is very large—I can do what I feel like with the choreography with no restrictions.”

Of Tom and Ashley, he says: “They’re both fast, they use their minds, they have excellent physical ability, and the right physical attributes. They both have a nice demeanor and are willing to learn and accept challenges. If they want, they can both have excellent careers as dancers.”



# Ashley's story

Her face would look at home in a Cover Girl ad and her body fat content is nonexistent. On stage, Ashley Thursby is the picture of exquisite beauty in motion.

To look at Ashley, in fact, you'd never know about ... her rather gross foot infection.

"I have bad corns on my feet. One festered into a hole in my toe and got infected," says Ashley, who has suffered stress fractures in one foot and has never had a pedicure. ("It shaves

formed with Ballet West's touring production of *Sleeping Beauty* and in the summers trained at the Jillana School in Taos, New Mexico; the San Francisco Ballet School; the School of American Ballet in New York; and Alonzo King's Lines Pre-Professional Program in San Francisco.

Her senior year of high school, Ashley was offered an apprenticeship at Kansas City Ballet. "It was an intense senior year. Then they moved our graduation date at the last minute, so it fell on the day of my senior ballet performance—and I was one of the valedictorians. I chose ballet."

During summers at Kansas City Ballet, Ashley worked with Violette Verdy, an internationally known dancer and distinguished professor at Indiana University. "I really loved the way she taught. She was inspirational. One day—I was probably 14 or 15—she talked to me about

**"I am generally an introvert, but on stage, all my inhibitions go away."**

off the calluses. Calluses are good, comfortable, in dance.")

Being on a first-name basis with her podiatrist is a small price to pay to be a dancer, her goal since childhood.

Ashley was just 3 when she saw her first ballet, a performance of *The Nutcracker* on PBS. "I was enthralled by the music and the movement. I remember asking my mom if I could do dance."

She started with a creative movement class in her hometown of Richmond, Missouri. Unlike many of the other kids in her class, Ashley was committed from the start, listening

carefully to the teacher and practicing movements until she got them right.

"I was always really into it. Some of the little kids in my class would stand around like 'huh?' or they were scared to be on stage. I am generally an introvert, but on stage, all my inhibitions go away."

By the time she was 8, Ashley and her mom were driving an hour every day after school so she could take classes at the Kansas City Ballet, which offered her a full scholarship after her first summer of training. She made her stage debut in *The Nutcracker* at age 9, as a soldier and Mother Ginger extra. Ashley later per-

going to college at IU. I didn't know what college meant! But it stuck in my head."

While some dancers go straight to professional ballet companies from high school, Ashley chose to continue her ballet studies in an academic environment. She considers IU "the best school around" for classically trained dancers who also want a good education. "It's a smart decision to go to college because injuries are so prevalent among dancers. You never know when you'll step the wrong way on your foot."

Last year, Ashley—now a third-year senior majoring in ballet with an outside field major

in journalism—was coached by Verdy for the National Society of Arts and Letters Competition in Bloomington. She won second place and a scholarship for her performance of a variation from *Divertimento No. 15*.

As she worked her way through her penultimate semester at IU in late October, Ashley prepared for her prime role as the Sugarplum Fairy in IU's production of *The Nutcracker*. Somehow, she juggled *Nutcracker* rehearsals with 19 credit hours of classes, fulfilled her job as a resident assistant, taught ballet and Pilates, and even found time to spend with her boyfriend Mike Westberry, a bassoon student.





## a day in the life

**“Teaching 3-year-olds just brightens my life. It takes me back to when I first started ballet.”**

Ashley typically wakes at 8:30 am and heads to one of her journalism classes or electives, followed by a technique class from 11:30 am to 1 pm. After technique classes, it’s soon time for *Nutcracker* rehearsals, which last until nearly 6 pm. Evenings are taken up with a late class Monday, teaching pre-college ballet on Tuesday, and residence assistant duties from Wednesday through Saturday evening.

Despite her hectic schedule, waking up Saturday mornings is the highlight of Ashley’s week: That’s when she gets to teach ballet classes to children 3 to 6 years old.

“I started teaching kids spring semester of freshman year as a helper and worked my way up. Now I teach the class, and I love it,” she says. “Teaching 3-year-olds just brightens my life. It takes me back to when I first started ballet.”

Though she’s received numerous scholarships to summer intensives and to IU (she is the recipient of the Dean’s Award, an

undergraduate grant, and a Friends of Music scholarship), it took getting cast as Clara in director Jacques Cesbron’s production of *The Nutcracker* in 2006 to increase Ashley’s confidence. “I never got to be Clara when I was a kid—I grew really quickly when I was a child, so I was always too tall. This was the biggest role I had gotten since being at IU. I tend to doubt myself by nature, and to get this role really boosted my self-esteem.”

Although she plans to eventually attend graduate school for journalism or arts administration, Ashley’s hope is to continue dancing for as long as possible.

“Growing up, I had some bad classes, and one teacher gave me a hard time about different things, but I never reached a point where I wanted to quit,” she says. “I always wanted to dance, and I hope that I can perform professionally. I hope when I audition that I can present who I am and how much I love to dance.”

(left) Children get ready to jump over the “alligator pit,” which prepares them to do a passé later.

(below) Ashley gets the young dancers excited about the “alligator pit” so they can jump over a mat and not get “chomped.”



Ashley and her boyfriend Mike Westberry, a bassoon student, take a walk outside her dorm.



# Tom's story



It's a Friday morning in late October—the only day of the week he can sleep in—and Tom Penman has agreed to meet with *Bloom* at the Bloomington Bagel Company at 8 am to talk about what it's like to be a student dancer at Indiana University. He sips a yogurt smoothie and sets down a chocolate chip cookie that remains untouched throughout the interview (“It's for after rehearsal, for getting through the week”).

The cookie is well earned. When he graduates this spring, Tom wants to join a professional ballet company or teach diversity workshops. For now, though, he has to get through a weekly schedule that involves working two jobs at College Mall, teaching, ballet practice, rehearsals for *The Nutcracker*, classes in his outside field—and, somehow, a social life.

Growing up in St. Petersburg, Florida, Tom frequently sat on the sidelines with his mom, watching his older sister's ballet class. When the teacher needed a little boy to be on stage during the party scene in a production of *The Nutcracker*, he jumped at the chance.

“There I was at four, running around the stage—and I thought I was the best dancer ever,” he says.

Now an IU senior, Tom maintains a schedule that few could manage.

On a typical day, he's up by 7:15 am to teach an 8 am ballet class for non-majors. After teaching, it's off to one of his human resources classes, then a trip back across campus to ballet, which starts at 11:30. He has physical therapy for an injured ankle and more ballet class, followed by hours of rehearsal for *Nutcracker*. If he's lucky, there's time to shower and change to be at one of his two jobs at the mall (at the shoe store Journeys and the clothing store Hollister) by 6 pm. He works until 9:30 at the earliest or 11 at the latest, goes home for a late dinner, and watches a show on the DVR (*Grey's Anatomy* and *The Hills* are favorites).

Studying takes place during breaks, between classes, or on the weekends. But even the weekends aren't days off. Tom has to be at work at the mall by 8 am on Saturdays and 9 am on Sundays and remains on call for both jobs. Sometimes, when he gets out of work

early, he goes swimming or works out at the gym—that is, when he doesn't fall asleep on the couch in a pool of utter exhaustion.

Although he went to a series of performing arts schools in high school, being a male ballet dancer wasn't always easy. "I tried to do what everyone else was doing at school. I was a boy scout, a cub scout—I tried to play sports, but that just wasn't going to happen." After getting

he needed a training ground that could produce professional dancers. "I wanted to become a dancer, and I knew I couldn't do it at home anymore." He transferred to Harid Conservatory for his junior year, then continued his training at Juilliard (summer intensive), and Walnut Hill in Boston.

At Walnut Hill he heard about the ballet program at IU. "My advisor had been an



hit in the head while playing T-ball ("the helmet weighed more than my head," he jokes), Tom dropped his halfhearted sports aspirations to focus on dance.

Then came the most exciting moment of his dance career so far: In 2001, Tom was accepted to a summer intensive program with the San Francisco Ballet. (His other summer intensives were at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York; Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida, where he later attended high school; and Juilliard in New York).

In San Francisco, Tom came into his own as a dancer. He loved the city, loved the dancing, and loved working with the talented instructors and other students at the company. There, he met several other dancers who eventually matriculated at IU, including Ashley Thursby, his partner in this year's production of *The Nutcracker*.

After the best summer of his life, Tom returned home to school and to dance in Florida. Life at home seemed bleak in comparison with his experience in San Francisco.

Tom had sprained his ankle over the summer—the first in a series of ankle injuries—and struggled to recover while dealing with the cold shoulder he got from the other male dancers, who resented his frequent castings. Unhappy and uninspired, Tom realized that

advisor in the Jacobs School of Music. He said, "You would love IU."

Since coming to Bloomington, Tom has enhanced his skills as a dancer. Working with teacher Guoping Wang has been one of the best parts of Tom's college experience. "Guoping is someone I've really enjoyed taking classes from, whom I've enjoyed talking to—he has become almost like a mentor to me in what I plan on doing."

During his time at IU, Tom has been featured as a soloist in *Napoli Divertissements* and *Fire of Life*; as well as performing Fritz, the Prince, and a Chinese dancer in *The Nutcracker*; and as the Dragonfly in *Cinderella*. This year, he had the plum role of Cavalier to Ashley Thursby's Sugarplum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*.

Auditions for professional ballet companies begin in January. Whether he joins a company immediately or chooses to first start a graduate program to reach his other dream job as a diversity trainer, it's certain that dance will always be part of who Tom is.

"Dance has always been something I've enjoyed. Dance is freedom of expression, even with the codified technique. If you're sad, you can dance like that. If you're happy, you can dance like that. I hope I always have dance in my life."

**"There I was at 4, running around the stage—and I thought I was the best dancer ever."**



(above) Tom on duty at Journeys shoe store in College Mall.

(left) Taking instruction from artistic director Michael Vernon.



For a shining moment,  
the audience falls silent ...



Tom and Ashley with dancers (from left) Samantha Benoit, Kimberly Williams, Demetria Schiofager, and Jennifer Sherry.