Master of movement

Whether on Broadway or in Guelph, dancer and choreographer Sarah Jane Burton has all the right moves

BY BARBARA JAGER-KOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK IWANYSHYN

She danced on Broadway, taught actors how to move in outer space and learned how to make robots and other non-sentient beings move as though they had emotions.

Sarah Jane Burton, née Smith, has done just about everything you could imagine a gifted ballet dancer and choreographer might do.

But though she has danced across New York City stages and imagined the lives of robots and astronauts, Burton – SJ to many – speaks most proudly of her dancers in Guelph who meet with her weekly in a church gymnasium.

This is where Burton’s heart lifts as her dancers, people with Parkinson’s disease, follow her choreography to music they love.

Burton, who lives in Guelph, began Park’n Dance in 2016 after training with the founding organization, Dance for PD, in Toronto and New York City, as well as “apprenticing” with a similar group in Cambridge.

Dance for PD operates under the premise that professional dancers can help people with Parkinson’s with their knowledge of stretching and strengthening muscles, balance and rhythm.

The inspiring dance classes are the latest in Burton’s long list of accomplishments since she began her career as a professional ballet dancer in the United States in 1965.

Burton, an animated woman with a welcoming smile and a ready laugh, considers Park’n Dance to be more her dancers’ accomplishment than her own.

“They have so many challenges and they’re feisty and they’re game and they’re fun and they laugh,” she says.

Research shows the physical, mental and emotional benefits of dancing to music.

“Science is finally catching up to us in dancing and movement. We know how cathartic dancing with music is,” Burton says in an interview over coffee in Starbucks Café in Guelph.
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SARAH JANE BURTON

As Alison MacNeill, Harcourt Memorial United Church’s director of music ministries, plays piano, participants move and sing along to familiar tunes like “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”

In the gym, everyone is a dancer, including spouses (Burton calls them “spices”), helpers and university student volunteers who may take an arm or two. “No one sits and watches,” Burton says. “We always ask them, ‘May I dance with you?’” After an hour, they visit over coffee and cake.

“There are no mistakes,” she tells them. “There are only solos.”

Burton’s career reflects her passion for dance, a love of science and her insatiable curiosity.

As a young ballet dancer, she danced in musicals for summer stock companies in the U.S., in operas for the Chicago Opera Company and on Broadway stages with dance superstars, choreographed by greats like Agnes de Mille (niece of Cecil B.). Since then, Burton, 73, has studied real-life NASA space tapes to teach actors in a Canadian science fiction television series how to move as though they were weightless in outer space.

As a certified movement analyst – she also has a master’s in movement and dance – she has helped university researchers figure out how robots and “other near-living creatures” could be seen as expressing themselves in movement. She co-published and presented her scientific results.

Burton, born in Ithaca, N.Y., was heading for New York City when she met a “lovely Canadian man” at a dinner party.

John Burton, then a doctoral candidate at Cornell University, came to see her dance on Broadway where the young ballet dancer’s career was on the rise.

They married in 1969 and moved to Guelph to make a life together where John would become a professor.

“My husband always said, ‘I want you to dance,’” Burton says. But the young couple had no idea then that the opportunities for dance in her new country would be so limited compared to the United States.

There was also some anti-American sentiment at the time in Canada, which didn’t help.

“There were very few professional opportunities in the Guelph-Toronto area for continuing my career at that time, so I counted on my resiliency and curiosity,” she says.

Burton could be excused for feeling disappointed at first. In a short time in the U.S., the young dancer had accomplished so much.

She had known she would be a dancer when she was five years old. She was shy, she says, but you’d never know that when she was on stage.

She studied dance in her hometown of Chaperone” with Guelph Little Theatre.

You’ve seen dancers sail across the stage of River Run Centre in Guelph, assisted by the “sprung floor,” a shock-absorbent floor for which Burton stood firm, keeping it in construction plans when she was a member of the centre’s building committee.

As much as she has done – and there are many more examples – Burton feels most rewarded today when she’s leading her dance class in Harcourt church’s gymnasium. “Dance is so transformative,” Burton says.

“In June, a man stood up and said, ‘Thank you for making us feel good about ourselves.’ That’s huge.”

As Sarah Jane Burton’s Park’n Dance classes, for people with Parkinson’s disease, everyone is a dancer. She hopes to expand the program beyond the sessions in Guelph and is training apprentice instructors, such as Paula Skimin in the top photo, so the program will “go on forever.”
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Gus Schirmer Jr., known for promoting Agnes de Mille chose her as Jeannie. “I was “Oklahoma!” Page’s International Ballet Company.

eight hours a day for $50 a week. Opera Company where she rehearsed for Fracci and others in operas for the Chicago with dance superstars Erik Bruhn and Carla

She was only 23 when the indomitable Burton was represented in New York by She performed and taught dance and they travelled in West Africa. Burton flew back to Ithaca in 1972 to give birth to their first child, Alana, now a filmmaker and life coach in California. When they returned to Guélphe, dance was still Burton’s passion, though she expressed much different from her ballet training.

She became guest choreographer and later artistic director of the semi-professional Black Walnut Ballet Company based in Kitchener. The couple had a son, Cole, now an ecology and conservation professor at the University of British Columbia.

It was a busy time. “I used to choreograph in the car in my head,” she says. “I’d play the music and it would come.” She loved working with the Black Walnut Company. “Brenda Juchte was artistic director and he was wonderful,” she says. “He said to the young dancers, ‘You must inspire your choreographer.’” Throughout many years, she also taught, coached and choreographed at George Brown College, University of Toronto and Sheridan College, from which she retired in 2014.

She spoke up for dancers living outside Toronto while she was on the board of Dance Ontario. Meanwhile, she directed and choreographed musicals for community theatres throughout Ontario where her professionalism is well-known.

She’s so professional and so committed. Her approach to dance is very clever and clear,” says Trevor Smith Diggins, a member of “The Drowsy Chaperone” ensemble last spring at Guélphe Little Theatre. “She’s very organic in presenting. She evokes feeling and emotions.”

In 1982, when Burton choreographed the opera “The Merry Widow,” a Canadian Opera Company/Oktoberfest co-produc-

she had to search for dancers because there was no trade publication then in which to advertise. She had to telephone one dancer who would lead her to another.

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“You're good at it and you love it and you please people, why else do you do anything?”

Ithaca, as well as in New York City with famous dancers, including ex-dancers fromussia. “I had to work very, very hard.” It was years later that she learned her New York City teachers had wanted her to attend Juilliard, but her parents were reluctant to send their 14-year-old daughter away from home. “She and her brother, now a forensic chemist, had a loving home with lively dinner-time conversation, she says. Their professor father was a world potato expert and their mother had a PhD in nutrition. "Since I was a kid, if there was sah in the recipe, it was called NaCl (the chemical formula for sodium chloride),” she says, laughing.

Immediately after graduating with a dance degree from Butler University in Indiana, Burton performed in musicals for summer stock companies, including “West Side Story,” directed by Michael Bennett, “Camelot” and “Showboat.” She was on stage with dance superstars Erik Bruhn and Carla Fracci and others in operas for the Chicago Opera Company where she rehearsed for eight hours a day for $50 a week.

She toured across the U.S. with the Chicago Opera Ballet Company and Ruth Page’s International Ballet Company. In New York, she had principal roles as Jeanette in “Brigadoon,” Lain in “South Pacific” and Dancing Launty in “Old Homestead.”

She was only 23 when the indomitable Agnes de Mille chose her as Jeannie. “I was brand-new, nobody knew who I was.” She moved to New York in 1959 with Burton’s talent, she was confident, she didn’t feel the vicious competitive-ness about which non-dancers sometimes asked her. She definitely didn’t encounter the “nightmarish, cutthroat world” shown in her. She definitely didn’t encounter the about which non-dancers sometimes asked she didn’t feel the vicious competitiveness and Ethel Merman.

Duncan and for managing Carol Channing. Shortly after, she received a contract to teach dance and coach at the University of British Columbia. “She’s very organic in presenting. She evokes feeling and emotions.”

It was a chance for Burton to study African dance in a master’s program. It was more rhythmic and a looser kind of dance very different from her ballet training.

They sent me actual tapes of NASA,” Burton says. “I loved it. It was so different and I had to figure how to make them look like they were in space and totally weightless.”

Her experimental work on non-sentient movement began when a doctoral student at the University of Waterloo learned she had trained at the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in New York City. Certified movement analysts research human movement and its expressive qualities. The student was working with Philip Bresley, artist, architect and UWO professor whose “Hylozoic Ground” contemporary architectural piece was representing Canada at the 2010 Venice Biennale in Architecture. The futuristic piece involved lightweight white foam that was represented in a donut-like environment designed to reach out or draw back from visitors. “Canadian Architect” magazine later called the piece “extraordinarily beautiful and reverent.”

“We wanted to figure out how to make the mounds have expression, to be read to have self-expression,” Burton says. “I gave it a go. I’ll design movement. I get an actor familiar with a donut-like environment and we did a whole night’s work and we did motion of an arm. I had to choreograph six moves to convey emotions such as anger, sadness, happiness and fear, she says.

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“Odyssey 5.” The series, which ran for 19 episodes from 2002 to 2004, was filmed in Oakville and Toronto.

IMDb, the Internet movie database, describes the plot like this: “After witnessing the sudden implosion of Earth from orbit, a group of five Odyssey astronauts is sent five years back in time by an alien force to find the cause and prevent the disaster. A vast conspiracy stands in their way.”

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She co-wrote a chapter in a scientific book about the Laban analysis and “affective movement generation for robots and other near-living creatures” and they presented the research in France. It was gratifying.

“Here I was a dancer. They highly valued my knowledge in dance.”

Burton is looking ahead.

She’s training apprentice teachers so Park’n Dance will “go on forever.” She wants to expand the classes to other locations.

She returns to her old family home in Ithaca to perform and choreograph dance and music productions at the CRS Barn Studio, located on an organic vegetable farm overlooking Cayuga Lake.

“We do it now for ourselves just for fun,” she says. “Part of that is that my joy comes now from choreography.”

At the same time, she’s making a return to acting at the end of January in Guelph Little Theatre’s production of “Gloria’s Guy” in which she plays an irascible but endearing old busybody.

Those who know her believe Burton can do anything, but mostly they like how this talented, unpretentious woman relates to people she’s teaching.

“She is warm and kind and she’s extremely knowledgeable about movement and the body,” says Leslie Fisher, a dancer whose first ballet teacher was Burton. Later, Fisher was dance captain for a production of “Annie” that Burton choreographed.

Fisher, now a Park’n Dance assistant, says the class is her “bucket-filling” moment of the week.

“One of the most lovely things is watching her teach the class. She’s very real and down-to-earth. She can find the humour in anything. It makes it accessible and not scary for a group of non-dancers trying dancing for the first time.

“We see amazing things,” Fisher says. Some participants struggle with freezing when they move. “Then you put the music on and ask them to move across the room with the rhythm. All of a sudden, they’re moving freely across the floor.”

Burton is a quick study. She consented to choreograph “The Drowsy Chaperone” after another choreographer had to drop out at the last minute.

“We were in a panic, a jam because rehearsals started in two weeks and there was no choreographer,” says Smith Diggins, Burton’s friend and colleague for many years. There was flapper-style dancing, jazz and other moves and the performers were actors, not regular dancers.

“She’s easygoing and very empathetic to people’s challenges,” says Smith Diggins, an accomplished actor, director and writer.

“She taught them tap dance and the Charleston and she brought the show to life.

“She has the experiences that many people in community theatre can only dream about,” Smith Diggins says. “We’re fortunate to have someone with her level of experience in the community.”

There’s sure to be more to come, he says. “You can feel all the ideas bubbling up behind her eyes.”
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