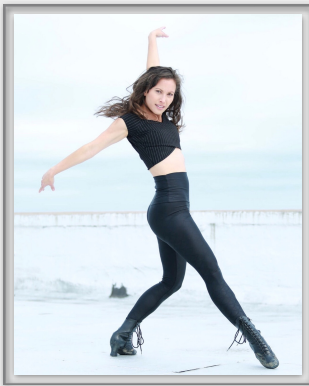


PASSING NEWS

Passdoor | www.pass-door.com

Written by Celia Mei Rubin



Celia is a dancer/actor/singer with numerous credits on Broadway, the West End, and national tours in the U.S. and U.K. Since March 2020, she has taught Broadway choreography on Passdoor, formed a small wedding planning LLC called UNICUS., worked as a tea consultant, a COVID-19 tester, and is thrilled to now be bringing newsletters out to Passdoor subscribers. She believes that a creative outlet can be found even in the least likely of places and looks forward to sharing her creative perspectives with you. You can keep up with her at @celia_mei for lots of dance and non dance content.

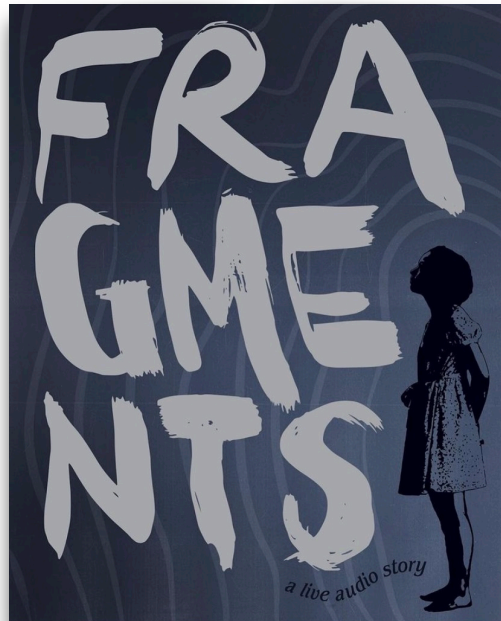


Director/choreographer, Mandie Rapoza, rehearsing Hannah Balagot for FRAGMENTS in November 2020. Photo by Olivia Palacios.

“When one door closes, another one opens.”

Hello, dancers, lovers of dance, and parents of lovers of dance! We are thrilled to be bringing you Passdoor’s first newsletter. A relationship with dance, especially under the circumstances of the past year, can be something challenging to navigate. One day you’re raring to throw yourself into a petite allegro, and the next day, you can’t find the motivation to get past plies at the barre. We hope that the contents of this newsletter will help you push past those plies; dance is work, but it is also joy.

As our first newsletter coincides with the year anniversary of the pandemic’s global lockdown, as well as Women’s History Month, we are featuring some journeys over the last year of some women in dance. We hope that you will be inspired by their stories.



Art work by Olivia Palacios for FRAGMENTS

FRAGMENTS is a physical narrative; a unique fusion of dance and theater centered on one fundamental question: “How much of ourselves must we give to the ones we love?” Its most recent iteration was billed as a live audio story and produced in November and December 2020 in a small gym by NYC’s Morningside Park with one performer and 6 chairs for spaced out audience members. The front door to the gym was left open for the duration of the show, and the solo performer and all audience members wore masks. Director and choreographer, Mandie Rapoza, says of the experience of creating work within the context of a global pandemic, “the message we have received from society this past year is not only that the arts aren’t essential, but that they might not be necessary. This really struck me at my core and I knew that I had to remind people how essential live art is. Connecting with other humans in a room is essential and I was determined to find a way to do it safely.”

The safety aspects will be something that performers will continue to navigate for some time. Dancers, specifically, perform physically to the level of expert athletes, and the practical reality of wearing a mask while doing so still feels daunting, even as we come to a year of mandated mask wearing indoors. Hannah Balagot, who carried the entire 70 minutes of Fragments literally in her legs as its one live performer, spoke to her experiences in wearing a mask while dancing. “The mask was not as constraining as I was expecting and certain fabrics proved to be easier to breathe in than others. I was able to adjust my breathing to be deeper-long breathes, almost like for singing, that actually helped with my stamina too. It wasn’t too difficult to communicate with the mask either. There wasn’t any live dialogue so a lot of the story was told through body language. The audience was intimate enough that as long as I stayed grounded in what I was doing and in the world we created, I could trust that they would see me.” Rapoza elaborates on the integral role that the audience played, due to Balagot being the only person onstage, saying, “each performance

became much more shaped by the integration of her relationship with the audience. Almost because she didn't have other live actors, the audience became that energy in a more cohesive way than when it is shared with other actors on a stage."

Working within the boundaries of pandemic-specific health and safety meant not just shifting the process for the live, in-person performances, but also innovating the pre-production and rehearsal processes to be safe. As all dialogue of *Fragments* was either projected on film or through audio recording, Rapoza and her team would have to ensure that filming and voice recording were executed safely. Movement Associate for the piece, Olivia Palacios, says, "it stretched us to have to expand what we know about creating theatre. Hannah had to tell the story with minimal facial expression (due to mask-wearing) and no words spoken live. It was exciting that the work still made sense and people were able to follow along. I think *Fragments* now has a version that can work under any circumstance and condition, with one person or a whole cast; with a taped recording or with live dialogue and scenes, etc. And the story still remains!" Of the recording process, Rapoza says, "recording the audio was particularly 'pandemic specific.' Each actor was in the booth alone and would hear the pre-recorded scene from their scene partner, so they were reacting to a pre-record. This was fine when we had recorded a few people but the first people had to deal with purely remembering their experience of the scene from an online [virtual] rehearsal. I now find it fun to say that we have an entire audio drama where the actors were never in the room together!"

Fragments managed to sell out its limited run last year and garnered this response from reviewer Emily Cordes: "'Fragments' serves as a reminder to face our past with both unflinching honesty and a commitment to transcend it...and ultimately heal." As we continue to heal from the devastation of the past year, we continue to also need to look at our stories through a lense that the theatre reflects back to us, so that we may move forwards with more understanding. As our social context shifts, so does the process of story telling, and *Fragments* will be produced again this Spring. What will change and what will remain? "Not knowing is a scary place to be," Rapoza admits. "But we spent this past year not knowing what the world would be or become, so in the microcosm of making stories, I can sit in discomfort, because that's where the answers that are most true to me lie." Of the journey that *Fragments* specifically will take to its Spring 2021 iteration, Balagot reflects, "*Fragments* is a constantly developing piece and I'm sure that there are certain discoveries we will keep and others we miss from past iterations. I'm hoping as we move forward, that we can take the best from each process. More generally, I have been inspired by the resilience of artists and our ability to think creatively within constraints. As a performer, this pandemic has also made me think about what I need in terms of safety in any environment."

A tête-à-tête

Celia Mei Rubin and Tiffany Mellard worked together for a year on the North American tour of CHICAGO. When the theatre industry shut down, Tiffany was playing The Bullet in the San Francisco company of HAMILTON. A year later, Celia and Tiffany connect in a Q&A for Passdoor's first newsletter.



HAMILTON cast member, Tiffany Mellard, with her Harvard swag

CELIA: Can you tell us about what happened directly after HAMILTON shut down?

TIFFANY: When Hamilton announced that it was closing, it took me some time to process (and grieve the loss of the “normality” of life) because we were living in such unprecedented circumstances. Once the lockdown began in San Francisco – one of the first cities to mandate quarantine – I did not leave my apartment for weeks at a time. The once bustling city looked like the scene from an apocalyptic film. However, paying ridiculously high San Francisco rent prices pushed me to make a move in order to save my finances. I quickly applied for unemployment (my third week of phone calls was a charm), sold my furniture, packed up the rest of my belongings, and I moved back to the east coast to Florida.

CELIA: And then...you applied to Harvard!!! Was this something that had already been on your radar?

TIFFANY: Applying to Harvard was not on my radar initially, but I always knew that I wanted to pursue my masters in either arts in education or arts administration. In June of 2020, I was thinking about what I could do with my newfound time, so I explored options for graduate schools. The Harvard Graduate School of Education kept showing up in my Google search, and I immediately fell in love. Due to the pandemic

making all learning remote, they opened up a Summer application submission. I thought the timing was perfect, so I grew the courage to apply. I initially did not believe that I was the typical Harvard candidate: My undergraduate GPA from my public university was good, but not exemplary; I was involved on campus, but did not hold any level of distinction that I thought was "Harvard worthy." (Word of advice: Apply anyway, the worst answer you can hear is "no.") However, I believe what set me apart was the unique experiences which I had as a performer and the valuable perspective I could contribute to the sector as a working arts professional. That along with my passion for youth arts education made me a solid candidate for their program. I am now studying Arts in Education at the Graduate School of Education (HGSE). I graduate this upcoming May.

CELIA: Wow! Feel the fear and do it anyway; I can definitely relate to that and am also a life-long risk taker when it comes to feeling passionately about something. So, what do you foresee for yourself when theatre reopens?

TIFFANY: I cannot wait to hit the stage with Hamilton once we are able. I miss performing tremendously and I plan on dancing for many more years, but my time at Harvard has deepened my inquiries around dance, cultural institutions, and arts education as a whole. My time at Harvard has helped me to fully articulate my "why," and how I want to use the arts to make a difference in the lives of young people. My experience as a dancer makes me an easy collaborator: since I'm used to working in ensembles, duets, trios, etc., I know how to communicate both verbally and nonverbally. I also believe that being a dancer in the Ivy League environment allows me to offer a specific perspective to certain topics.

CELIA: Tiffany, thank you for sharing your experiences of moving forwards into something unexpected yet fulfilling and enlightening.

"Great dancers are great because of their passion." — Martha Graham

The author thanks all artists who shared their experiences for Passdoor's first newsletter. We'd like to leave you with their social media information if you'd like to learn more about them, as well as their answers to the question, **"are you still dancing under lockdown? If so, how?"**

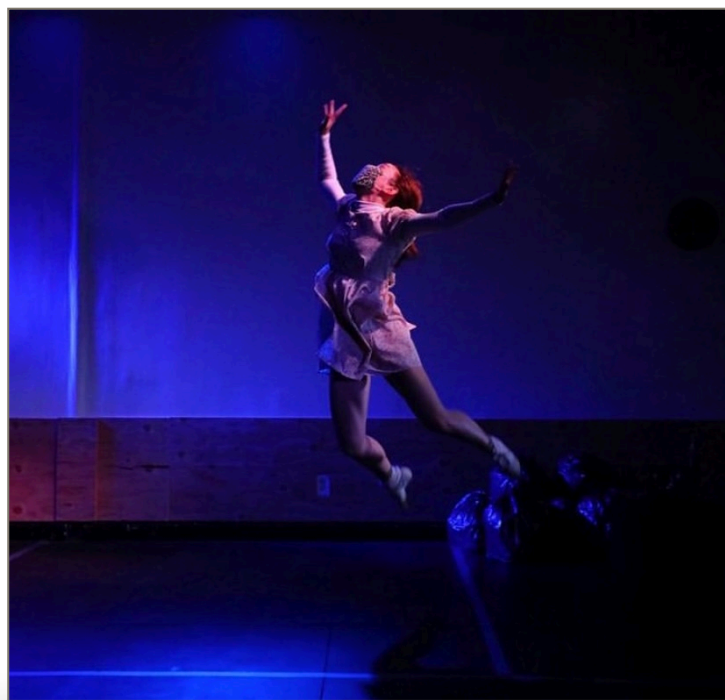
Mandie Rapoza: Dancing under lockdown has been challenging. I would be hard on myself for not engaging in online classes in the early days. It made me too sad. Now I'm at a point where I've accepted that that's just not for me and that's ok. I take ballet barre with Dutch National Ballet online classes, and do lots of pilates. For the month of March I am in residence at New Dance Alliance working on a new project, so will be lucky enough to spend lots of time dancing in a studio. www.mandierapoza.com // [@mandierapoza](https://twitter.com/mandierapoza)

Hannah Balagot: My space is not ideal for dancing but I have been able to do more ballet barres and technique concentration because I can keep it confined. And ballet is always a challenge. Occasionally I will

try a virtual jazz theatre or contemporary class but will have to modify for my space and floor. Maybe when the weather gets nice again I can try an outdoor space. www.hannahbalagot.com

Olivia Palacios: Yes! I've actually been dancing more over this past year than I was before. Didn't have time before and didn't prioritize it as I was focusing on my work as a choreographer primarily. I've enjoyed doing lots of IG live classes, my favorite being Ryan Heffington's classes. And I've really enjoyed improvising in whatever space I have in my apartment. I have loved dancing outdoors (when the weather is acceptable) and just improvising to music or taking an IG live class outdoors to dance. I do home dance parties with roommates. I also have learned many a tik tok dance. OliviaPalacios.com // [@choreobyliv_pal](https://www.instagram.com/choreobyliv_pal)

Tiffany Mellard: Dancing under lockdown has been my saving grace. Sitting behind a desk on Zoom for hours at a time is physically and mentally exhausting. All of the stress from being in grad school, quarantine, etc. has accumulated in my neck, shoulders, and back. Thankfully, my parents have a huge backyard that I use as my "nature" studio, but I also found a local dance studio where I teach occasional master classes to young students. www.tiffanymellard.com // [@tiffanymellard](https://www.instagram.com/tiffanymellard)



Hannah Balagot as "Young Herta" in FRAGMENTS. Photo by Kathryn Butler.

Are you inspired to dance? Read on to find out how you can on Passdoor!

A Passdoor instructor highlight...



Darren Lee teaches Beg/Int Contemporary Dance on Passdoor, Tuesdays at 5pm ET. Here he is on the right with his childhood dance teacher, Terre Marriot, when she saw him as the King of Siam in the National Tour of Lincoln Center's, **THE KING AND I**.

Photo on the left by Vibecke Dahl.

Our Passdoor instructor highlight this week is Darren Lee, who talks about a woman in dance who inspired him, in honor of Women's History Month:

I was 9 when I started taking Jazz from Miss Terre and I was immediately hooked. The studio was about half a mile from my house through mostly a residential area. I used to literally dance my way through the streets on my way to the studio. Neighbors reported watching me in amusement as I passed by, oblivious to their judging stares. Terre gave me a love and passion for dance and a tool for expressing my juvenile emotions and creativity strong enough to ignore and combat any teasing or bullying for being a male dancer, that came my way. Terre choreographed the duet that won me the title of Grand Champion Dance Jr. Star Search, which launched my career as a professional dancer and SAG member at age 11.

We hope that you enjoyed this edition of Passing News! See you in class!
