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Ballet premiere at Jan Serr Studio this weekend seeks revolution in arts business model



Image: Courtesy of Dawn Springer

Rehearsal for the ballet show "Sylph."

COURTESY OF DAWN SPRINGER



By **Drew Dawson** – Reporter, Milwaukee Business Journal

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A local artist looking to bolster Milwaukee's dance scene is hoping her show this weekend will help propel changes in the market.

Dawn Springer, a faculty dance teacher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts and a local choreographer, grew up in Lake Geneva. A ballet dancer by trade, she made a career on East Coast stages before returning to Milwaukee.

Back home, opportunities were more limited than expected. While Milwaukee boasts a professional ballet company, the freelance market for dancers was scarce, especially for dancers over 30, she said.

In an effort to showcase more local work and highlight the issues facing Milwaukee artists, Springer is putting on a show called "Sylph" in collaboration with other dancers who have had careers all over the world but now call Milwaukee home.

The contemporary ballet premieres at Jan Serr Studio at 2155 N. Prospect Ave. in Milwaukee at 7:30 p.m. tonight, with shows at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

Springer has had the idea for "Sylph" since 2020 after a local composer, Jon Mueller, shared an arrangement with her, and she imagined a show for it.

Springer estimated the cost to put on "Sylph" is \$23,000. This includes paying dancers for rehearsals and the show, room rentals, costumes, sets and other parts of the program.

Funding the project has taken as much creativity as the show. Springer received \$800 from a Peck Faculty Research grant, while much of the rest of the funding has come from individual donations gathered throughout the year.

Ticket sales will not fully cover the expenses of the show. As the show approached, Springer said she still faced a \$6,000 deficit.

Despite the struggle, Springer said she considers herself lucky. With her teaching and connections to the dance community, she has developed relationships to earn deals on

practice spaces or find ways to pay dancers. Some of her contracts include payments made after the show runs.

Younger, less-established choreographers don't have the same opportunities. This is why many dancers and choreographers leave for other cities, Springer said.

"You're going to live where there's more funding, and without it, you have a smaller pool of dancers and a smaller pool of artists staying local or coming in," Springer said. "We already invest so much in our younger dancers through education, but they won't stay unless we give them reason to. By doing what I'm doing, I'm trying to keep these dancers, who are my friends, here, so we can keep making projects together."

The end goal for Springer, in addition to a quality performance, is that a freelance market comes to the forefront of arts conversations in Milwaukee. An ideal part-time, freelance model she sees includes more funding from a range of sources so that dancers can have a balance of teaching and performing.

She notices this when she tries to arrange rehearsals for her own show. Sometimes she has all five dancers. Sometimes, it's just one. For those practices, she wonders how much more time she could have if she were able to pay more.

She hopes "Sylph" is able to showcase this. While the show has its first run date this weekend, the hope is that interest in the show builds and she is able to attract other producers and venues to consider hosting it.

She said two showings of the work in progress spurred two organizations to express interest in producing her work.

"This show is about our common experiences as women in ballet," Springer said. "Right now, you have to do that without any certainty. The more we build though, then perhaps the more we can access other streams of funding and give more artists a reason to stay in Milwaukee."