



DANCE REVIEW
A World Premiere of Pure
Dance to a Familiar Score



DANCE REVIEW
Androgynous Eccentrics,
All Moving on Their Own

DANCE REVIEW
Attuned in Rhythm, Whether Together
or Apart



ARTSBEAT
'Fifty Shades of Grey': Big
Draw in South and
Midwest

ARTSBEAT
Troubled Royal Ballet of Flanders
Names New Artistic Team

DANCE

Unbroken, Onstage, Trying a New Pace

By GIA KOURLAS DEC. 5, 2014



Kaitlyn Gilliland rehearsing with Pierre Guilbault at the New York University Tisch School of the Arts for "A Nutcracker: Part I," to be staged at the Knockdown Center in Flushing, Queens. She plays the ballet's character Clara in her 20s. Emon Hassan for The New York Times

✉️ Email

📱 Share

🐦 Tweet

📌 Pin

📁 Save

➔ More



The dancer Kaitlyn Gilliland took tentative steps along the perimeter of a City Center studio, where four others sat in folding chairs facing outward on a recent Friday night. In the dance, Miro Magloire's "Quartet," Ms. Gilliland moved center stage, where she filled the confined space with abrupt body contortions, pausing to bend an elbow near her face. Swatting it with sudden force, she promptly collapsed onto the floor.

Ms. Gilliland, 27, used to be that broken ballerina; now she's in the mood to explore. An incandescent member of New York City Ballet since 2006, she retired from the company three years ago after injuries — two of which were major — took their toll. "I physically couldn't dance," she said in a recent interview, "and I mentally couldn't handle the prospect of seeing another doctor and missing another season."

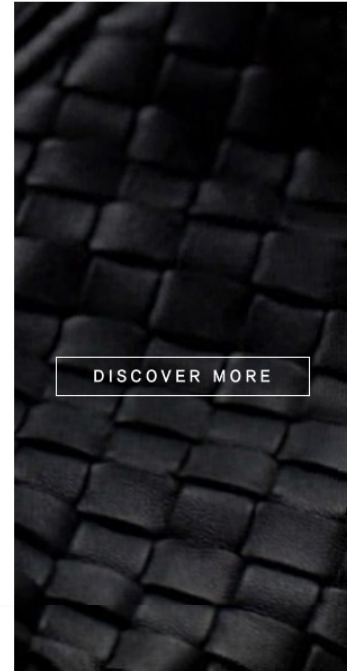
This is the story of how Ms. Gilliland found her way back to dance. "I feel like I'm a kid again," she said, flashing a grin.

Though not a member of a major company, Ms. Gilliland has redefined herself as an independent artist with control over what and how she dances. After performing with Mr. Magloire's New Chamber Ballet in November, she will appear at the Knockdown Center in Flushing, Queens, in "A Nutcracker: Part I," a dance-theater reimagining of the holiday classic exploring the loss of innocence, starting on Dec. 12. In it, four versions of Clara are revealed at different stages of her life; Ms. Gilliland plays Clara at 27, questioning whether she wants to continue in dance.

"It sounded a lot like my story line," she said. "I thought: I'm living this out, but can I play this? I am curious to find out. I also just like a good adventure."

Later in the month, she makes her debut as the Sugar Plum Fairy in "Loyce Houlton's Nutcracker Fantasy" at Minnesota Dance Theater in Minneapolis.

Ballet is in Ms. Gilliland's blood. The choreographer Loyce Houlton was her grandmother; Lise Houlton, who danced with American Ballet Theater and now leads the Minnesota company, is her mother. (Even so, it was her father, a lawyer, who encouraged her to begin dancing.)



DISCOVER MORE

In January, Ms. Gilliland performs with Craig Salstein's Intermezzo Dance Company at the Miller Theater at Columbia University. And, as part of Danspace Project's Platform 2015, "Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets," which begins in February, she will collaborate with the choreographer and dancer Will Rawls.

"Kaitlyn is a perfect example of someone who has a good idea of what and where she wants to go as a dancer," Mr. Salstein said. "She wants to create her own pace. It doesn't happen so easily for everybody, but she's definitely creating her own avenue."

All the while, Ms. Gilliland has a job that she treasures — [teaching](#) children's classes at the City Ballet-affiliated School of American Ballet — and is a student at Columbia, where in two semesters she will graduate with a degree in psychology. Racing from one rehearsal to the next, Ms. Gilliland finds that her life isn't so different from what she experienced at her family's ballet school back in Minneapolis.

"On Saturdays, we were always in the studio: point shoes on, point shoes off, always working with new movement and new choreographers," she said. "I remember taking Graham and Horton classes when I was young. The studio was always playtime, and that's what it feels like now."

The transition didn't happen overnight. When Ms. Gilliland left City Ballet, she was tormented by the idea that despite her early [promise](#) — her path to principal seemed like a foregone conclusion — she had failed. "No one ever made me feel I had failed," she said. "So much of it was in my own head."

Though she still had ties to the ballet world, Ms. Gilliland was intent on pursuing an academic path and became a pre-med student at Columbia. "I had this attachment to a routine," she said. "I wanted something where I could check boxes and excel, hopefully. I think the glamour of it was exciting. It was a different kind of adrenaline rush."

Gradually, she eased back into dance classes, finding, as many dancers do, that not being physically active made her body hurt more. [Columbia Ballet Collaborative](#), the student-run group featuring many former and current professional dancers, had much to do with her reawakening. Emery LeCrone, who has choreographed frequently for the group, worked with Ms. Gilliland.

"It was a new experience for me in that I allowed us to be collaborators instead of expecting something from her as a choreographer," Ms. Gilliland said. "I was open to that, and that was from going to school and realizing that I didn't know everything and couldn't know everything, and that was great, because then I could learn."

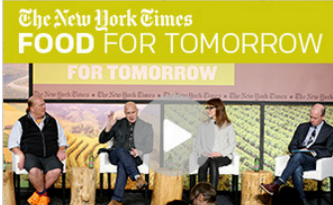
Saturday afternoons with Ms. LeCrone soon became the highlight of her week, but facing the truth about her relationship with dance took her by surprise during a meeting with her pre-med adviser. He encouraged her, during her senior year, to do something for herself, since her life would soon be overtaken by her studies.

"It was the first time that I realized I would have to give up something that I loved," she said. "I didn't realize that I had maybe fallen in love with it again until I was crying in his office."

When it was pointed out to her that the word she couldn't seem to say was "dance," she laughed and cited an [essay](#) by Jonathan Franzen, from a commencement speech he gave at Kenyon College.

"First, he talks about technology and how it's changing our relationships, but he also talks to the students about how he admitted to himself his love of nature, and how admitting that made it easier for him to embrace it and interact with it," Ms. Gilliland said. "I think I started to have a moment like that in the meeting with my adviser. I had to say a lot of: 'No, I don't want to do that. No, I don't want to do that.' And it all has led me to the same place, which is saying yes to a lot of things that I do want to do, and they all happen to be dance related. So there you go. I went to college, and I fell in love with dance again."

A version of this article appears in print on December 7, 2014, on page AR13 of the New York edition with the headline: Unbroken, Onstage, Trying a New Pace. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe



The New York Times
FOOD FOR TOMORROW
FOR TOMORROW

Watch "The Role of the Chef Outside the Kitchen"
Watch "Healthy Eating"



CLICK FOR TICKETS
CHURCHILL