

An Interview with Reno Dance Studio Owner Amanda Coulson Dancin! Performing Arts Center

by Stephenie Lawton — May 1, 2005

I met Mandy in 1983 during rehearsals for the show "Hello Hollywood, Hello!" Originally from Australia, her training was outstanding. She had a style and exactness to her work unlike any of the other dancers. I would work on several other projects with Mandy over the years. Possessing remarkable choreographic capabilities, she was constantly putting together shows that we would perform in conventions and local nightclubs. It was always exciting to rehearse with her. She worked patiently and calmly... her deep artistry and complete dedication quite evident. She had converted her garage into a small dance studio. I remember chatting together in her kitchen over a cup of thick, strong coffee diluted with lots of milk, and then rehearsing together for a few hours. Because of her diverse background and theatrical eye, Mandy came up with tap pieces that were like story ballets. She understood line, shadow, texture, lighting...everything. Beauty is in the details, and Mandy has a lovely feel for the nuances. The final product was always superb and professional. I would have to say that Mandy is one of the finest teachers I know. She is keenly musical, and highly intuitive...a pure, gifted and dedicated artist. Years later, while performing in "Sugar Babies", we sat side by side in the dressing room at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas. Before each show we would talk about our lives, while applying our stage make-up and gluing on our false eyelashes. We discussed what we'd learned that day in tap class with Henry Le Tang, our men, our dreams, and our challenges. My interview with her follows:

What led you to opening Dancin!?

I first realized during a tour with "Sugar Babies" in Las Vegas that I would need to make a change from touring so that I could be closer to my son. As time progressed, the obvious answer was to eventually retire from traveling and performing. Even though I felt that was not the ideal solution, I thought perhaps opening a performing arts center possibly would be. I'm definitely not a stranger to teaching. I began to realize that I have so much to give. With such a diverse and passionate performing experience I began to see the value of 'passing this on' to the upcoming generations. I never realized how much more I would learn about life.

How did you build such a successful business?

First of all, reality. I put together the business plan, schedule, projections, accounting, billing and creative marketing and ever changing budgets. I selected my supporting teachers, and began working with these very important independent contractors. That's the business side, and it's very important. The artistic side, as people call it...well, if it's not with you already the passion should be. One learns to be creative and artistic through passion, drive, and the need to express and create. It also encompasses the importance of the various techniques of teaching. It's important to understand the learning process and how different individuals learn. It's very interesting. I love that stuff. Lastly, there's the challenge of keeping on top of it all and learning to delegate. I take advantage of parent committees, etc.

What were your struggles?

I looked at many locations and had actually settled on one that shared a studio lobby with a well-established classical ballet academy. This particular space had been vacant for many years, but alas, the real estate broker could not offer any "start off" incentive on the lease... even though I was to build all the improvements: mirrors, floors, dressing rooms, etc...I also had to cover 100% of these costs myself. Fortunately, as fate would have it, another studio space became available almost immediately. The proprietor's manager offered a good move in deal. The studio was and still is beautiful...3,000 square feet in the super Southwest area of town. We have two wonderful studios with hardwood sprung floors and a fabulous viewing area, and two large bathroom /changing areas. I also have embellished the studio with a great room/office for the students'/dancers' quiet time and homework area. We have a front retail space, and a snack bar that provides proceeds for the scholarship fund.

What are any secrets that you might share?

There are three prominent aspects...

1 is Patience. I think I am the most patient person I know. Also, you cannot do it all. Having a life outside the studio is very important to me now, but at the same time very hard to juggle. Finally realizing the enormity of this, I have found the answer. It all comes down to time management and of course organization. So, bring in the right people.

#2 is total Professionalism. Sammy Davis once said that one of the most important things to do for success was to surround yourself with the right people. Think about it. These people represent you! They're at the front desk, greeting everyone who enters... they're the voice on the phone. They're selling your products, and teaching your students while you are busy in the other room. They need to be representing you! If there is any one major area that I have learned from over all other areas, it's this one. I cannot stress the importance here. Be careful! Choose wisely, for the experience you require, and have up to date meetings.

#3 is Perseverance... and knowing how to ride through the diverse situations that any business can present in all climates

What do you look at when hiring teachers?

Firstly, their training, in detail. Next, their performing experience, in detail. Then, teaching experience and training for teaching, in detail. Finally, I look at their choreography experience, in detail. I ask for a photo and resume first, and then immediately set up an appointment if I'm interested in this person. Then, you know...how do they relate with people? Try them out first before making stringent plans. I have found that scheduling seems to be the biggest challenge for teachers. If they are good teachers, they are usually in demand. This is one of the down sides of independent contractors.

Is yours a full-service studio?

As a Performing Arts Center, we teach in the following performance arenas: Classical Ballet (RAD syllabus and standard), Tap, Irish, Irish Ceili, Jazz, Funk Jazz, Hip Hop, Belly Dance, Swing Dance, Argentine Tango, Salsa, Ballroom Smooth and Latin, and Country Line Dance. We have Fit2Dance classes, workouts, Zumba, Kick Boxing, Stretch & Tone – Conditioning Flex classes, and a Pilates style workout series. We offer vocal classes for over all technique and harmony study. Acting: We recently added 'Delivery of Acting Scenes'.

Do you teach everything or specialize?

I personally prepare to teach all classes. I do have teachers however, who specialize in certain classes, which enables me to offer these various classes back to back.

Are you active in the community?

Most definitely. This has been a way of life for us. I personally began with volunteer performances of the highly successful "CityKids" television program in the 90's. We are currently working on a leadership program for our senior students who are teachers. It's a unique community program using the "CityKids" format. We also volunteer for different community programs.

Do you enter competitions and conventions?

Yes, after a temporary hold on competition schedules, we are resuming participation. In the past we have been dedicated and immersed in the competitions in our area as well as in Southern California. We were forced to lessen our involvement over the past years due to our performing schedule with the "Reno Irish Dance Company". RIDCo rehearses at Dancin! studios and is officially a non-profit performing, educational

production company which performs three major events throughout the year, as well as many local performances to benefit the community and other nonprofit organizations in their fundraising efforts.

Dancin! our main studio and school of Performing Arts, is happily back in the competition arena as well as performing a variety of musical theater and dance presentations in and around the local community.

Talking with Mandy on the phone, I realize that two hours has passed. This is how it is with her. The spark of creativity and recognition between us makes us both more animated and alive. She describes a scene from her latest show to me, asking me if I remember the lighting in a scene from the musical "Oliver." I know the music from "Oliver", but not the show, yet I am eager to hear her impressions. She describes the lighting to me, and how it leads perfectly into the next scene. I can feel her enthusiasm and passion over the phone. Her excitement is contagious. She sings me a few bars of the main character's song, which Mandy has written herself. It's for a little girl who plays the lead in the show. It's an inspiring, uplifting and innocent melody. I inwardly marvel at the freedom and spontaneity that she has given to her talent. It spreads generously outward, like rays of sunlight. Mandy brings the same level of excellence and creativity to each facet of her art. Seeing the time, she rushes off the phone, promising to send me a video of a flamenco number that she has choreographed and would like to have me perform. "Listen, we'll fly you in, and we'll work it out here," she calls out in her cheerful Australian accent... and she's off to the studio. For more information: 775.825.3687. E-mail: amanda_dancin@hotmail.com •