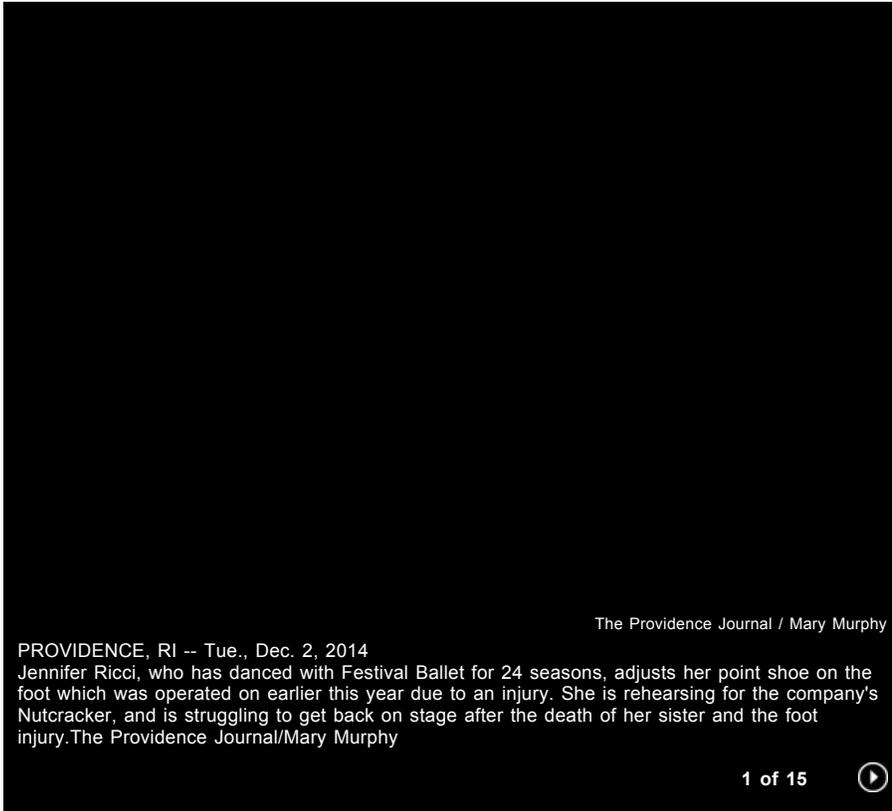


Amid pain, Festival Ballet's Jennifer Ricci finds the strength to soar / Gallery

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Jennifer Ricci, who has danced with Festival Ballet for 24 seasons, adjusts her point shoe on the foot which was operated on earlier this year due to an injury. She is rehearsing for the company's Nutcracker, and is struggling to get back on stage after the death of her sister and the foot injury. The Providence Journal/Mary Murphy

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BY CHANNING GRAY

Journal Arts Writer

cgray@providencejournal.com

This has not been a good year for dancer Jennifer Ricci, a favorite among the lineup at Festival Ballet Providence.

In January, Jaclyn, the younger sister she thought she'd grow old with, died at age 36 from a long illness.

[Gallery: Jennifer Ricci prepares for "The Nutcracker" with Festival Ballet](#)

Then an old dance partner died, as well as one of her former teachers. As if that weren't curse enough, Ricci developed foot problems that have kept her off the dance floor most of the season — until about a month ago, when she vowed that, no matter how painful, she would reprise her signature role of the Arabian Dancer in next weekend's "The Nutcracker" at the Providence Performing Arts Center.

For Ricci, who appeared in her first "Nutcracker" more than 30 years ago, when she was 8, dancing the popular ballet is like coming home, like finding her balance in a world that has been spinning out of control.

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Connecting with the company again has helped overcome her grief, she said. Besides, she doesn't want to let down her fans.

"It's been the worst year of my life," said Ricci, "the most physically and emotionally draining year of my life. There was a point where I didn't know what to do."

Ricci's foot troubles, which began the first of the year, are caused by a knotting of the nerves, a condition known as a neuroma. When she jumps or moves quickly, a sharp pain slices through her sole.

When she first complained of the pain, doctors put her in a boot for four months before they diagnosed the problem. And when she decided on surgery, her doctor was reluctant to remove the knot, instead cutting several nerves and a tendon.

Ricci tried getting back in shape by doing crunches and lifting weights while in rehab, but after three more months in another boot, she found her condition had gotten worse. She couldn't bend her foot, and her big toe wasn't behaving properly.

So she had to put her plans for this season on hold and sit out the opening Up Close on Hope series in September. Some days she felt like she was starting over.

Now Ricci, who refuses to take pain medication, is favoring the foot. She's stuffing bits of Styrofoam in her shoe, wearing sneakers at the barre, and sticking to roles like Arabian, which is all about fluid lines with little heavy lifting.

She plans to have a second surgery after the New Year, when the bundle of nerves will be removed. At the same time, she's dreading being laid up with another boot and going through more rounds of rehab. That will keep Ricci, who is 40, out of commission even longer, making it all the harder to bounce back.

Spending so much time on the sidelines has led people to wonder if Ricci, with two dozen seasons to her credit, might decide it's time to hang up her pointe shoes. She says her legs burn when she works out, an indication that she's no longer in top shape. But Ricci is no quitter.

"I don't have it inside me to quit," she said, as though that is not an option. "I love it so much. I still love performing. I'll do it until I fall apart."

Yes, her sister is gone and the company has changed in recent years. "But the passion is still there," she said.

Ricci's determined to dance "The Nutcracker" next weekend not just because it feels like an emotional homecoming, but because that's what her sister wanted. Soon after Jaclyn's death, Jennifer found in her sister's papers a note to her that said she was the best sister ever, to continue to dance for her, and that "I'll always be with you, watching over you."

Ricci took her first lessons at Festival Ballet when she was 4, and at 13 became the youngest dancer to join the professional company when it was under the direction of founder Christine Hennessey.

Jaclyn, who was three years younger, was also a dance prodigy, and performed alongside her sister at Festival Ballet. But Jaclyn had a very different temperament. She was the fiery one, the athletic one, while Jennifer is all about grace and drama, about telling a story with that expressive, exotic face of hers.

The sisters danced together often until Jaclyn abruptly left Festival Ballet in 2003, telling people she wanted to quit while she was on top. They shared the stage for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that season, an experience Jennifer recalls as "just magical."

But not long after leaving Festival Ballet, Jaclyn developed a mysterious illness that led to the removal of her colon.

Doctors told Jaclyn she was young and shouldn't have any problems. But from day one, she struggled, Jennifer said.

But last fall, four months before she died, Jaclyn returned to Festival Ballet to work out. "She did it for me," said Jennifer. "We had the best time together."

The two sisters used to talk about one day taking over Festival Ballet, or perhaps starting their own dance studio. Jaclyn, a former insurance auditor, would handle the books; Jen would teach and deal with artistic matters.

"We were closer than twins," said Jennifer. "I thought we'd grow old together. Now, I'm a little lost."

Jennifer Ricci grew up in Johnston and still lives there, in another house with a spiral staircase and crown molding that she's admired since she was a kid. Mornings she heads to Festival Ballet for warm-ups and rehearsal. Then at 4 in the afternoon, she drops in on her second life as a diamond consultant at Providence Place's Sydney Thomas Jewelers, the new name for the mall's Ross-Simons jewelry store.

Ricci, who has a degree in teaching English from Rhode Island College, spent a couple of years in the classroom in the late 1990s and soon found it wasn't for her. Her days were spent tossing troublemakers out of class and struggling to get the rest of the students to learn, which soon felt "pointless." That's when she turned to selling jewelry, a job she loves.

"Everyone calls me the bling lady," she said, "I wear so many rings and pins."

Ricci works at the mall until 10 six nights a week, often heading over to the dance studio on her night off to put in more hours. The jewelry company also allows her flexible hours so she can work around performances. After work, she might stop in to see her parents.

Ricci seems content with life, and just shook her head when asked if she weren't interested in finding a partner and raising a couple of kids. She does spend time with her older brother's two children, though, and they can "turn around a bad day."

Her only free time is on Monday morning, when she usually gets a massage or goes to physical therapy.

"I feel my role in life at this point is to look after the family and keep us together," said Ricci, who has been making Christmas ornaments with pictures of her sister. "My parents have been through so much. I feel I have to be there for them."

Even with her injury, Ricci was still beguiling, still sensuous when rehearsing the other day. She and partner Alan Alberto were a study in control, as they joined together for a soaring lift that swept them across the studio.

Petite with her glistening black hair pulled back, Ricci is more flexible than women half her age, arching her back and lifting her foot far above her head in one move, then sliding across the floor in a split.

"Her biggest strength is her vulnerability," said Festival Ballet's Mihailo Djuric, who's worked with Ricci for the past 17 seasons. "She's very genuine, very sincere."

Ricci has cut away a portion of her pointe shoe and stuffed the area with paper towel before rehearsal to ease the pain. And now, going through the moves with Alberto, she seems in her own world.

"I love the stage," Ricci confessed. "It makes me feel like a movie star under the lights with thousands of people watching me. Each time, I try to do my best, and the end result is the best feeling."

Four performances of "The Nutcracker" are slated at the Providence Performing Arts Center, 220 Weybosset St., between Friday night and Sunday afternoon, complete with a "growing" Christmas tree and falling snow. More than 100 children, ages 6-17, from dance schools around the state are taking part. Vilia Putrius and Ruth Whitney share honors as the Sugar Plum Fairy, and Lan Pricolo, of Barrington, dances the lead of Clara for the second year, along with Olivia Lucianno, who's from Somerset and new to the role. Performances are Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 and 7 p.m. and Sunday at 1:30 p.m. Tickets range from \$23-\$85. Call (401) 421-2787, or visit ppacri.org.

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