



ATs Keep Broadway Star On His Feet



Text **Ruth Riggan**

When George Hamilton, the star of the Broadway show *La Cage aux Folles*, tore his Achilles tendon during a rehearsal, his dresser and assistant, Jo-Ann Bethell Pantuso, was determined that the show would go on. She knew she needed to find health care professionals who were trained to deal with this kind of injury. Internet research led her to athletic trainers, and now she is a huge fan.

“It was really amazing to unearth this other world that I knew nothing about,” said Bethell Pantuso. “They became an integral part of the pre-show. We used them in every performance and depended on them to keep us going.”

To help maintain Hamilton’s level of performance, Bethell Pantuso found athletic trainers in every city the show visited through referrals and eventually through NATA’s network. In addition to taping, icing, stretching and monitoring Hamilton’s ankle to protect it and restore functionality, the ATs also kept tabs on other performers, and arranged for referrals to doctors, PTs and massage therapists. With their help, Hamilton has gotten through more than 300 performances on his injured tendon—all the more impressive when one considers that he is 73 years old.

“I knew that an injury like this usually only heals if you have time to stay off it,” said Bethell Pantuso. “It didn’t get any better, but they kept it from getting worse.”

Performing arts is one of the emerging settings in the athletic training profession. So far it remains a small market, but many athletic trainers are discovering it is an ideal setting for their unique skills. The Clinical and Emerging Practices Athletic Trainers’ Committee is working to create more job opportunities and spread

awareness of this important area of medicine. Treating and preventing the injuries of performers like dancers and acrobats requires the same type of care athletic trainers have been providing to professional, collegiate and high school sports teams for decades.

All of the athletic training domains are used to care for performing artists. “On-site acute care is a must,” said Jacqui Haas, ATC, a member of CEPAT. “Athletic trainers are there when the injury occurs, develop trusting relationships with the performing artists, take them through the rehabilitation process, get them back on stage and educate them on injury prevention.”

“Performing athletes require the same demands on their bodies as professional athletes, and it’s important that as a profession we do not overlook any athlete that is competing and putting extreme demands on their bodies,” said Meg Schneider, MS, ATC, another CEPAT member. “Athletes come in all shapes and sizes, and athletic trainers, as an allied health care professionals, have the unique ability to reach all these athletes on a personal level.”

Ken Locker, MA, ATC, who worked with *La Cage* in Dallas, agreed. “It’s the same as working with the industrial athlete or the high school athlete,” he said. “They want to get well and perform well – the motivation is the same.” Locker’s day job is Marketing Director for Texas Health Ben Hogan Sports Medicine in Dallas.

With eight shows a week for *La Cage*, the performer’s schedule can be just as grueling as that of any professional sports team, but performing arts has its advantages. “Generally you’re inside, not in the rain or the heat,” said Locker. He added that performing artists are generally very appreciative because they don’t have the day-to-day access to ATs that professional athletes do.

Sally Alway, ATC, a graduate student at CSU Fullerton who worked with *La Cage*, especially appreciated experiencing the unique demands of the performing arts setting. “Because of my short interactions with cast members, it pushed me to be completely thorough in my evaluation and communication,” she said. “My time with *La Cage* also pushed me to be creative in the resources I had to

work with. A good experience, as athletic trainers will not always have a fully-stocked athletic training facility to work out of.”

For Kevin Bastin, ATC, LAT, CES, *La Cage* was his first exposure to the performing arts setting. “You’re working with people who really want to get back to doing what they want to do. They’re competitive and passionate about what they do; you always want to work with that kind of person. When someone’s excited about it, it makes the occupation more enjoyable,” said Bastin, who is Director of Athletic Training Services for Memorial Hermann Hospital in Sugarland, TX.

“George Hamilton was a complete pleasure to work with,” said Jordan DeGracia, ATC, another graduate student at CSU Fullerton who enjoyed his introduction to the performing arts sector. “I experienced working with high-caliber performers in a very structured environment. The performers showed up early to their time slots and took their therapy seriously.”

Of course, the performers reap huge benefits from the presence and support of an athletic trainer. Because ATs are present during the

shows, they are able to observe problems that the performers might not notice or think are significant. Elizabeth Swann, PhD, ATC, ATEP director at Nova Southwestern University, described a performer who stumbled during a dance number. Although the performer recovered, Swann noted the mechanism of injury. “The next day when I came into studio, I was able to complete an ankle evaluation and provide much needed treatment so they could return to the performance,” she said.

ATs are also able to teach the performers how to handle injuries in the future. “The cast members were comfortable enough to ask questions about the injury process, so I felt it was my responsibility to help educate them,” said DeGracia.

“We were really, really lucky to come across these athletic trainers who helped us to maintain a level of performance,” said Bethell Pantuso. Would she work with athletic trainers again? “If I was in a position with this kind of injury again, absolutely. It was the only thing to do – just like with athletes, we had to find someone who could support us and keep us in the game.”