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Keeping Dancers Dancing:

The Inside Story on Working with Performing Artists

Dancers are finely tuned athletes – jumping, sprinting, lifting and performing incredible movements at near-impossible angles with artistic ease. It's no wonder that over the course of a show's run, ankles are sprained, shoulders inflamed and toes... well, let's just say they need attention. Dance companies like the Joffrey Ballet have found athletic trainers to be a vital part of the medical team. ATs help keep their top performers healthy, not only between performances but during the performances themselves. It's not uncommon for an injury to occur and for an AT to have minutes to assess and treat it before a dancer heads back out to perform. After all, the show must go on.

Athletico Physical Therapy has medical professionals who provide onsite rehearsal and performance coverage to many elite performing arts companies. Katie Lemmon, MS, ATC, co-facility manager at their Gold Coast facility, works as an athletic trainer with the Joffrey Ballet, River North Chicago Dance Company, Danceworks Chicago, Broadway in Chicago and Chicago Bulls Entertainment, which includes the Luvabulls dance team. She received both her undergraduate and

graduate athletic training degrees at Indiana University, where she worked as the graduate assistant AT with Indiana University Ballet Theater. She has worked at Athletico Physical Therapy in Chicago for the past 14 years. "Katie plays a vital role on Athletico's performing arts medicine team in the assessment, management and rehabilitation of dancers and performing artists," said Julie O'Connell, ATC, DPT, OCS, director of performing arts medicine at Athletico.

DESCRIBE YOUR WORK WITH LOCAL DANCERS AND PERFORMING ARTISTS.

KATIE: My work as an athletic trainer includes onsite care with the Joffrey Ballet 2-3 times per week for three hours each. I also cover Joffrey performances for two hours prior to a performance and during the performance, along with two physical therapists. One member of our medical team travels with the company when they are on tour. Touring requires about seven hours per day of coverage for the dancers of the company during rehearsals and performances. I also do a weekly/bi-weekly coverage at River North Chicago Dance Company and Danceworks Chicago. With each of the companies, I do preseason screenings to assist with prevention

of injuries. Over the summer I present lectures to many summer intensive dance programs on injury prevention. I also see professional and student dancers at Athletico's location for complimentary injury screenings.

WHAT DOES A TYPICAL DAY LOOK LIKE WHEN YOU ARE WORKING WITH A DANCE COMPANY?

KATIE: At Joffrey, we have a signup sheet where the dancers sign up to see us for 10 minutes. I work with each dancer on either an injury they are dealing with, prevention of an injury or updating their injury program. I get to know the dancers very well and work with them to continue dancing or return to dancing as efficiently yet safely as possible. I often assess their dance technique to get to the bottom of what may be causing their injury rather than just "putting a Band-Aid" on the injury or treating the symptoms. If a dancer is injured during a performance, I get called backstage. I assess the injury in the "wings" and make a quick decision, hopefully helping them return to the stage. If it is not safe for the dancer to return, I work with the artistic staff to determine if another dancer will take over. I communicate with the stage manager and the artistic staff regarding the dancer's medical status during backstage care.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT TREATING A DANCER WHO MAY HAVE AN INJURY THAT AFFECTS HIS/HER PERFORMANCE ON THE JOB?

KATIE: I will assess the injury by taking the dancer through a technique and functional assessment when able to determine the etiology. I look at how the body is working together and if it is working most efficiently to perform movements necessary for performance. I often look at muscle imbalances and work with a dancer to use his/her muscles in a biomechanically efficient way.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT YOUR ROLE WITH PERFORMING ARTISTS?

KATIE: The dancers are very knowledgeable about their bodies. Their bodies are tools that need to work efficiently. I enjoy the challenge of working with a dancer to get to the bottom of an injury. It is beautiful to watch the dancers whom I have gotten to know very well perform and do what they love.

Learn more about the performing arts setting by visiting nata.org/CEPAT.