

# Developing Local Talent

Ron Boucher and Sandra Balestracci

By Greg Lilly, Lifestyle Editor

School prepares students for the next stages in life: college, graduate school, careers. But how would a child learn to sing, to dance, to act? Fortunately, veteran performers of the world stage Ron Boucher and Sandra Balestracci discovered Williamsburg as a great place to raise their children and established the Eastern Virginia School for the Performing Arts.



Both Ron and Sandra had grown up in New Bedford, MA. Ron had made a name for himself performing while at the University of Massachusetts in Boston and Sandra performed ballet with the New York City Opera.

"I started off my career in New York," Ron explains. "I went to New York for Broadway. That was my goal to be a Broadway performer." He was scheduled to make his debut at Radio City Music Hall, but the Rockettes went on strike. His contract was rescinded.

"I found myself in New York with no gig," Ron says. "I decided I would stay. For the summer I took temporary jobs in offices. Sandra was already dancing with the New York City Opera Ballet. I complained that I was not performing."



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Back in Boston, Ron had worked constantly, singing in shows, performing in professional theater. "To be off stage was depressing," he says. "To be off stage and in New York was even more depressing."

Sandra pulled some strings and arranged an interview for him. "Believe it or not," Ron says, "I went to the wrong room and ended up singing and being given a lead role in my first opera, Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Saint of Bleeker Street*. Three years later, they brought it back and I was given a different role. The opera was televised and I was seen by the Metropolitan Opera House. I made my debut in 1979 in *Otello* with Placido Domingo which was broadcast on PBS."

Both he and Sandra found success early in their careers. However, for Ron the success had been too much. By 1985, he had to take a doctor's ordered leave of absence from opera because his voice was strained from "singing too much and too big." Sandra had been asked to come to Virginia to perform with a newly formed company and to teach ballet. She commuted between Williamsburg and New York City.

Ron and Sandra married and had a child.

"Once I was married," Ron says, "I knew the decisions I made had a big impact on my new family." With Sandra traveling back and forth and Ron searching for a more secure career, they decided to move to Williamsburg. "We wanted to live in a place conducive to raising children," Ron adds. "I did not like what I saw in New York with my friends who had children; the kids were growing up way too fast. I was uncomfortable with a ten-year-old taking the subway by himself."

The catalyst for the decision to come to Williamsburg was synchronicity: The late Jean Waltrip who owned the airport called Sandra saying that she had an empty studio at Williamsburg's airport; Sandra was expecting her next baby; Ron wanted to raise the children out of the city.

That empty studio eventually expanded and morphed into the Eastern Virginia School for the Performing Arts.

In the early 1990s, Ron worked with national associations on standards for teaching the performing arts. Sandra explained the methods she used for teaching ballet and why certain skills were taught at specific age levels. "I follow two teaching methods," Sandra explains,

"the English and Russian – the RAD (Royal Academy of Dance) and the Vaganova."

Ron adds that he analyzed those syllabuses of the two methods and asked Sandra a lot of questions. "Then working with early childhood development experts, I started to understand the development of children in the arts, what was going on psychologically, emotionally, physically, and I put together our curriculum."

Sandra and Ron use classical ballet and musical theater as tools to guide children through the skills and techniques they need to learn in order to perform on stage. "That coupled with the vocational perspectives we have," Ron adds, "make this school unique." Their curriculum aligns with childhood development to ensure the students receive instruction at the most beneficial time.

"For example," Ron says, "we noticed that it was important for the gross and fine motor skills, which is movement, to be developed from seven to fourteen. You introduce acting, you introduce vocal, this can be done a little bit before puberty, but you want to guide them."

This professional guidance helps to prevent the child from learning bad techniques in his or her attempts to imitate someone on the



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radio. "It became important to guide the kids through those puberty years so they're singing correctly and not damaging their voices," Ron adds. "I adapted the Seth Riggs method because it doesn't predetermine the genre of music someone will sing. Where a classical voice teacher predetermines a classical voice, the Seth Riggs method takes the speaking voice as the foundation and develops a voice. It will go where it will naturally go." The method supports all genres: classical, Broadway, pop, country, etc.

"It's the same as our ballet methods," Sandra explains. "We structure the curriculum where the student can go into professional classical ballet or into a college dance program or into an enrichment program."

Their methods have merit. "As with any of the art forms," Ron explains, "if you teach kids correctly at the appropriate time, at least they can have a chance at a career. Like any field, luck and opportunity play into being at the right place and the right time."

Sandra and Ron know that when they receive calls from casting agents in New York or D.C. looking for a ten-year-old for a role, they have prepared the student at that age for every-

thing expected of him. "By giving the children the information at the proper time in their development, the opportunities started opening up over and over," Ron says.

They created the school and geared it for the small percentage of students who will go professional, but as Sandra explains, every student benefits from the structure and method. "As a teacher, we're only as good as our students are," she adds. "When they go professional, great singers, great dancers, those are our accomplishments, through our students."



The school's productions are not recitals. Not all students are guaranteed to be performing. They must audition just as professional dancers and singers would, and perform at the professional level for the role. "It isn't watered down," Ron says. "The kids have to do the choreography and the vocals."

The school's reputation earned the participation of Jose Manuel Carreño, the biggest star in the world of ballet, in this past season's production of *The Nutcracker*. "To have one of our former students, who is now with the American Ballet Theatre, Melanie Hamrick," Ron describes, "dancing with Jose Manuel Carreño, is just... like a dream come true, a fairy tale. Mr.

Carreño is usually only seen on the major stages of the world, from the Metropolitan Opera House to the Paris Opera House. So having him here was unheard of. We were extremely honored."

"Our productions are the real world," Sandra says. "Hard work and talent rewards participation in a professionally produced performance. Our students are prepared for the next levels, the professional level. They have performed with the world's best." Sandra and Ron provide the students with a full artistic education, everything from developmental and performance skills to audition and production experience.

Viewing a performance proves the grace and athleticism required for dance, the vocal power and range required for singing. Television has popularized the performing arts with a wide range of dancing and singing competition shows. For young girls and boys wanting to prove their mettle in the performing arts, they are lucky to have found experience, guidance, talent, and knowledge with Ron Boucher and Sandra Balestracci right here in their community. NDN

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