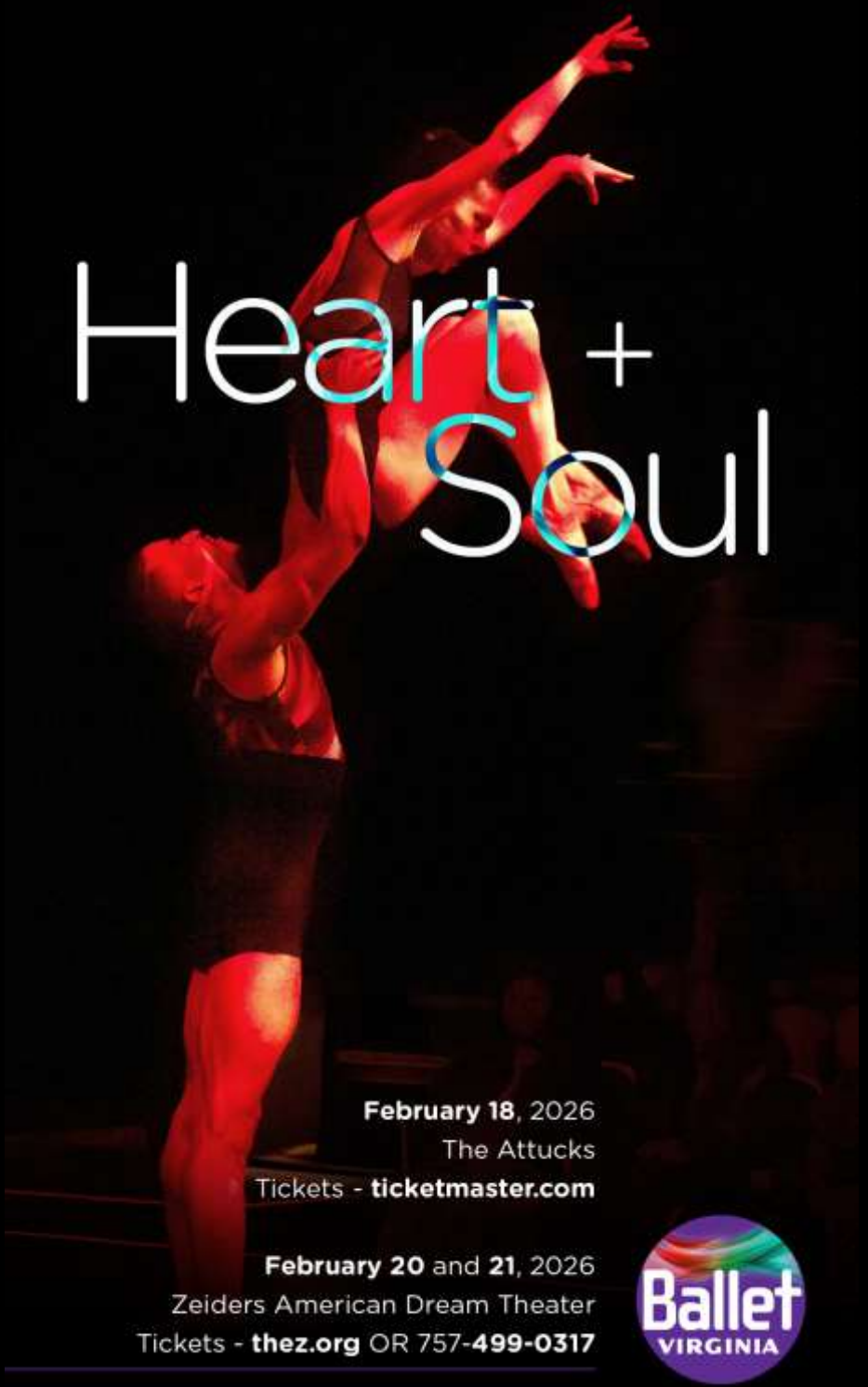
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Ballet VIRGINIA

BALLET VIRGINIA

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JARED ALLAN BRUNSON
Professional Company Associate
Choreographer

SUZANNE LOWNSBURY
Co-Artistic Director
Choreographer

JANINA MICHALSKI
Co-Artistic Director
Choreographer

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with BALLET VIRGINIA II members

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Lydia Roberts Coco—Professional Company Artistic Director & Choreographer

Ms. Roberts Coco began her training in Norfolk, Virginia. Her professional training started with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center on a full-merit scholarship. Ms. Roberts Coco then became a member of the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (the Ailey junior company) where she danced for three years. She then performed with the Jamison Project under the direction of Judith Jamison. After the passing of Alvin Ailey, Lydia was invited by Judith Jamison to become a member of the world-renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Lydia toured internationally as a principal dancer with the AAADT for seven years. Her credits include leading roles in Pas De Duke, Night Creature, Fix Me Jesus from Alvin Ailey's signature piece Revelations, Suite Otis and many others. Lydia has worked with many choreographers including Alvin Ailey, Lar Lubovitch, Tally Beatty, Elisa Monte, Jerome Robbins, George Faison and Ulysses Dove. She has performed at renowned theatres such as Lincoln Center, City Center, Kennedy Center and The Paris Opera House.

Lydia is honored to be the Company Artistic Director. She has choreographed new works as well as set some of her best works on the professional company. In this sixth season, she continues to work towards her artistic vision of making Ballet Virginia's company something that excites and inspires the Hampton Roads community. Lydia is passionate about making sure our community knows that we have an amazing group of ethnically as well as artistically diverse dancers. She wants to expand our audiences and tour.

Jared Allan Brunson—Professional Company Associate Director & Choreographer

Mr. Brunson, a Saint Petersburg, Florida native, received his initial training in West African song, music and dance from Jai Hinson and Baba Chuck Davis. After over ten years of traveling with DunDuDole Urban African Ballet, Jared began classical training with Suzanne Pomerantzeff, garnering scholarships to Boston Ballet, The Rock School, and Houston Ballet among others. At age 18, Jared joined Ballet X as one of its first full-time

members. He was a guest artist with the Pennsylvania Ballet and University of the Arts on multiple occasions, performing at the Kennedy Center, The Mann Center, and the Academy of Music.

Jared danced with the Oregon Ballet Theatre, performing works by Nacho Duato, George Balanchine, and Christopher Stowell. He went on to dance with Ballet Memphis where he performed as a soloist and principal. There, he acquired acclaim in Dance Magazine, The New York Times, and other national publications. Before coming to Ballet Virginia, he danced with Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Jared was a guest artist with Ballet Virginia in 2022, making his debut with the Company in Coco's premiere of "FIVE". After his impressive performance, he was offered a contract with the company and is now the Associate Artistic Director.

Suzanne Lownsbury – Co-Director & Choreographer

Suzanne began her training with Toledo Ballet and Charlotte Regional Ballet, continuing her studies with the Tidewater Ballet. Next stop on her adventure, NYC with a scholarship to Joffrey Ballet. Suzanne then joined the Cleveland/San Jose Ballet, progressing to soloist and principal roles.

Her many featured roles included Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Helena in *A Mid-Summers Night's Dream*, Maria and Tzarina in Dennis Nahat's renowned *Nutcracker*, Swanilda in C*oppelia*, and the title role in *Giselle*, among many other neo-classical works. She toured throughout the United States and Europe including a jaunt to Scotland to dance at the Edinburgh Festival. In 1994, Suzanne returned to Tidewater, dancing, teaching and choreographing for Virginia Ballet Theatre as well as Evelyn Ott School of Dance, and the Governor's School for the Arts.

Along with Janina Michalski, Suzanne established Ballet Virginia in 2008. Beginning the academy with several dozen students, Ballet Virginia today boasts over 400 students and a professional company. Ballet Virginia has proudly launched numerous students into the professional world of dance, including Houston Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Ballet Theatre of Maryland, Ballet West, North Carolina School of the Arts and others.

Janina Michalski – Co-Director & Choreographer

Originally from Southern California, Janina began her early training in the Los Angeles area. She trained as a scholarship student at the Joffrey Ballet with Meredith Bayliss, Dorothy Lister, Cho-San Goh, Basil Thompson and Glenn White. At age 16, she apprenticed with Los Angeles Ballet under the direction of John Clifford, where she studied extensively with Irena Kosmovska.

Ms. Michalski danced with such noted companies as Atlantic

Ms. Michalski danced with such noted companies as Atlantic City Ballet, Colorado Ballet and the Cleveland Ballet, where she performed as soloist and principal dancer. Janina is incredibly proud of the work Ballet Virginia has accomplished. This most special, knowledgeable and nurturing staff has worked together to produce professional dancers, teachers, choreographers, designers, photographers, doctors, scientists, community leaders, and other professionals. To ensure the growth and continuation of this incredible organization, Janina enjoys every aspect of teaching which includes passing on the knowledge to other dancers and teachers who show potential and desire to someday join the artistic staff.

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Music : Ezio Bosso and The London Cellos Ensemble

Leah Upchurch, Brian Bennett, Gianna Coco, Jared Allan Brunson, Maria Celeste Ristow, Darion Flores

Resolve—BVII
Choreographer: Janelle Jones
Music: Max Richter

Elizabeth Kim with Alie West, Bria Eggers, Brooke Christy, Gracie BrombAcher, Hayden Howard, Jordyn Espy, Lilly Davenport, Madeline Swets, Mariella Agno,

Valentine
Choreographer : Lydia Coco
Music: Seal

Jackson Kettell and Gianna Coco

Parker Shiels, Phoebe Wesseler, Rebecca Jacques, Tessa Winkle, Zoe Johnson

FIVE
Choreographer: Lydia Coco
Music: Mikhael Karlsson, Andrew John McNeil, Kris Bowers, Nicholas Britell

Jared Allan Brunson, Brian Bennett, Darion Flores, Malik Berry, Amir Baldwin, Leah Upchurch, Gianna Coco, Nile Ruff, Tianna Reed, Janelle Jones with Jennie Teller

INTERMISSION

Summer Nights
Choreographer: Lydia Coco
Music: Ahmad Jamal

Jackson Kettell with Nile Ruff, Jared Allan Brunson, Gianna Coco, Darion Flores, Gracie BrombAcher, Brian Bennett, Leah Upchurch, Maria Celeste Ristow, Jennie Teller

Emergence - BVII

Choreographer Lydia Coco

Music: Jeremy Zuckerman

Elizabeth Kim with Zoe Johnson, Jordyn Espy, Mariella Agno, Hayden Howard, Bria Eggers, Tessa Winkle, Brooke Christy, Phoebe Wesseler

Heat

Choreographer: Lydia Coco

Music: Woodkid

Jennie Teller and Jared Allan Brunson

What's Going On

Choreographer: Jared Allan Brunson

Music: Marvin Gaye

Amir Baldwin

A Seed of Faith

Music: Sunday Service Choir, Kirk Whalum, Dr. Charles G. Hayes & The Warriors featuring Dianne Williams

Ultralight Beam – Jackson Kettell, Elizabeth Kim, Leah Upchurch, Gianna Coco, Nile Ruff, Jennie Teller, Celeste Ristow

We Need You Right Now- Darion Flores, Malik Berry, Brian Bennett, Jackson Kettell

Jesus Can Work It Out- Janelle Jones with Jared Allan Brunson, Gianna Coco, Brian Bennett, Leah Upchurch, Jackson Kettell, Gracie BrombAcher, Darion Flores, Nile Ruff with guest dancers from Churchland High School: ATTUCKS: Alexis Dowe, D'Amoni Dunlap, Peyton Osborne, Taylor Weston, Layla Wright, and Jireh Womack ZEIDERS FRIDAY NIGHT: Alexis Dowe, Haidyn Henton, Jaslyn Norvell, Taylor Weston, Layla Wright, and Jireh Womac ZEIDERS SATURDAY NIGHT: D'Amoni Dunlap, Mia Moore, Sheilah Threadgill, Taylor Weston, Layla Wright, and Jireh Womack

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BALLET VIRGINIA COMPANY MEMBERS

Brian Bennett is from Lanham, Maryland. He began his dance training in tap, jazz, hip hop, contemporary, and Broadway. His ballet training at includes The Baltimore School of the Arts, San Francisco Ballet School, American Ballet Theatre, and George Mason University. Mr. Bennett attended Butler University earning a B.S. Arts Administration. He has danced with Oregon Ballet Theatre and The Joffrey Ballet. Brian has performed works by William Forsythe, August Bournonville, Gerald Arpino, Alvin Ailey, George Balanchine, John Neumier, Christopher Wheeldon, Nacho Duato, Twyla Tharp, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor among others.

Darion Flores began his dance training with the University of Hartford. Flores graduated from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in 2014 with a concentration in ballet.

He started his professional dance career with The Washington Ballet under the direction of Septime Webre and late director Julie Kent. Darion has since worked for companies, such as Orlando Ballet, United Ballet Theatre, and Royal Caribbean International.

Gianna Coco began her ballet training with Ballet Virginia at an early age. Her first big role was as Clara in Ballet Virginia's *The Nutcracker*. During her training, Gianna competed in YAGP and placed in the top twelve. She also attended summer intensives at Houston Ballet and Pacific Northwest Ballet.

She is a former Ballet Virginia company member. Her roles at BV included the Sugar Plum Fairy and Snow Queen in *The Nutcracker*, Lilac Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty,* and many featured roles in contemporary works also performed by the company. She was a member of South Carolina Ballet for their 23/24 season. Gianna is also a graduate of Old Dominion University.

Hayley-Ann Vasco was raised in Norfolk, Virginia and began her ballet training under Suzanne Lownsbury, Janina Michalski and the other faculty of Ballet Virginia. Upon graduating high school, she joined Lexington Ballet. There, she performed such roles as Snow Queen in *The Nutcracker*, Hermia in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* and the title roles in *Giselle* and *Snow White*. While in Lexington, she also attended the University of Kentucky, and earned a Bachelor of Science in Anthropology. Ms. Vasco joined Ballet Theatre of Maryland. She rose to the rank of Demi-Soloist and performed such roles as Pas de Trois and Little Swans in *Swan Lake* as well as Clara/Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker.* Hayley-Ann joined Ballet

in 2020 and has performed leading roles such as Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, Clara in *The Nutcracker*, Juliet in Denis Nahat's *Romeo and Juliet Pas de Deux*, and a featured role in Lydia Roberts Coco's *Into the Sunshine*.

Janelle Jones is originally from Virginia Beach. She began her training at Virginia Ballet Theater which later in her training, merged to Ballet Virginia. She also attended the Virginia Governor's School for the Arts. After high school, she attended the Fordham University/Alvin Ailey American Dance School Program, where she received a Bachelors of Fine Arts in Dance. Upon graduation, she has performed globally. Janelle is now the Director of Churchland High School's Dance program, and teaches throughout the Hampton Roads area. Janelle also teaches at Ballet Virginia's Academy and frequently sets her works on our second company, BVII.

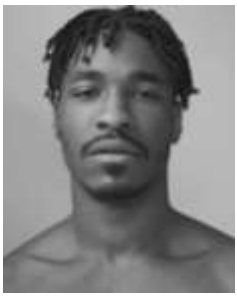
Jennifer Teller was born in Manila, Philippines and later moved to Colorado where she began her ballet training at Metropolitan Academy of Dance and then later at the International Ballet School. At age 16 she received her first professional roles in David Taylor Dance Theatre's Nutcracker where she danced eight different roles. Jennie was a featured dancer on the hit television show *So You Think You Can Dance* and then made her move to New York City when she received a contract with the world-renowned Complexions Contemporary Ballet.

She danced on some of the most popular stages around the world including Russia, Latvia, Israel and many more. With the company, she was part of music videos including Niall Rodgers and Jill Scott. During her second season with Complexions, she went to South Africa as a guest artist at the Artscape Opera House in Cape Town and was also invited to teach and coach students all over South Africa.

Leah Upchurch, a Virginia Beach native, began her classical training at Ballet Virginia from the ages of five to seventeen. She furthered her dance education at The Colburn School in Los Angeles. While there, she performed leading roles in Jerome Robbins' Antique Epigraphs and original works by Benjamin Millipied. She then became a trainee at the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago where she performed in excerpts of Bournonville's Napoli, company performances of Jerome Robbins'Glass Pieces, and Swan Lake. Ms. Upchurch then joined Kansas City Ballet's second company in 2018.

As a second company member, she performed in Septime Webre's world premiere of Wizard of Oz, Devon Carney's The Nutcracker, and Val Caniparoli's Lady of the Camellias. She also discovered her love for teaching. By nineteen years old, Ms. Upchurch was leading classes and assisting with choreography for the students of the academy. She then returned to Virginia and joined Ballet Virginia as a company and faculty member. After five seasons with Ballet Virginia, she moved to

company and faculty member. After five seasons with Ballet Virginia, she moved to dance, teach, and perform with The Mongol Khan Theatre and the Nomadic Ballet Production Company in Mongolia. During her time there, she was featured in the major production of the Mongol Khan portraying the role of the Fox.



Malik Berry started his formal dance training at the age of 15 at Fort Hayes Metropolitan High School and Columbus Dance Theatre . After graduating high school he joined Columbus Dance Theatre as a company member. Malik has been awarded full scholarships to study at The American Ballet Theatre, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, and The Dance Theatre of Harlem summer intensives. Malik's additional formal training include studying at The Ailey School while on scholarship and also the professional training program at The Dance Theatre of Harlem. Based in New York City, Malik performed with The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre company in Alvin Ailey's Ballet 'Memoria', during the company's season at City Center in New York City. Malik has worked as a company member and guest artist with companies such as Complexions Contemporary Ballet and The Dance Theatre of Harlem. He has had the honor to work with Misty Copeland, Dwight Rhoden, Desmond Richardson, Arthur Mitchel, Virginia Johnson, Robert Garland, Carmen De Lavallade, Matthew Rushin and many more. He also has had the opportunity to perform works from choreographers such as Alvin Ailey, Dwight Rhoden, Desmond Richardson, Arthur Mitchell, Geoffrey Holder. Malik has spent the past few years giving back and teaching dance for The Boys and Girls Club, The Misty Copeland Foundation and throughout the Tri-state area. Malik has also been featured in Vogue Magazine with Billy Porter, has walked in New York Fashion week and has been on Lifetime television. He is also apart of the Ballroom scene, where he loves to express himself through Voguing.

María Celeste Ristow hails from the beautiful country of Peru. She began her ballet training at the age of eleven at the Peruvian National Ballet School in Lima, Peru. At 13 Celeste was selected to represent her country in an international ballet competition in Venezuela; where she was chosen for a full-ride, two year, scholarship to the prestigious Valentina Kozlova Dance Conservatory in Manhattan, New York. Upon completion of her studies under Ms. Kozlova, Celeste furthered her formation as a dancer at the Joffrey Ballet School.

In June 2017, María Celeste returned to Peru to join the National Ballet Company, where she rose to the rank of soloist. During her six year tenure she performed leading roles in Don Quixote, Coppélia, Le Corsaire, The Pharaoh's Daughter, Spartacus and Sleeping Beauty among others. She has worked under the direction of acclaimed

choreographers such as Jimmy Gamonet de los Heros, Mark Godden ,Monique Meunier and Cristina Munro. In 2024, María Celeste joined the Corpus Christi Ballet as a Principal Dancer for their rendition of The Nutcracker, choreographed and directed by Ms. Cristina Munro and Alexandra Emory. Off the stage , Mrs. Ristow is also a professional Ballroom Dancer and Instructor. She spent the latter half of 2023 competing in professional dance championships in Peru and later in the United States. She placed 5th in the Compulsory division of the largest national professional ballroom competition in the States. But, above all else, Celeste believes her crowning achievement in life is as a mother and wife.

Nile Ruff is a life force in movement and language arts. Born and raised in Chocolate City, Washington DC, Nile studied with teachers at Kankouran West African Dance Company, Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, Coyaba Dance Theater and Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Nile earned a BFA from Point Park University and a year long scholarship to The Ailey School. Nile has worked professionally with Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, Attack Theater, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Spectrum Dance Theater+Donald Byrd, Akoiya Harris, Dance Iquail, Jade Solomon's Solo Magic, The Dayton Dance Initiative and Dallas Black Dance Theatre.

Amir Baldwin is originally from Trenton, NJ, received his BFA in Dance from Montclair State University with a minor in American Sign Language. His dance training consists of an eclectic mix which includes Ballet, Modern, Horton, Jazz, Contemporary, Musical Theatre and Capoeira. He has trained in educational facilities such as Ballet Hispánico, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and Complexions Contemporary Ballet among others. Amir is currently in his fourth season with Ballet Hispánico.

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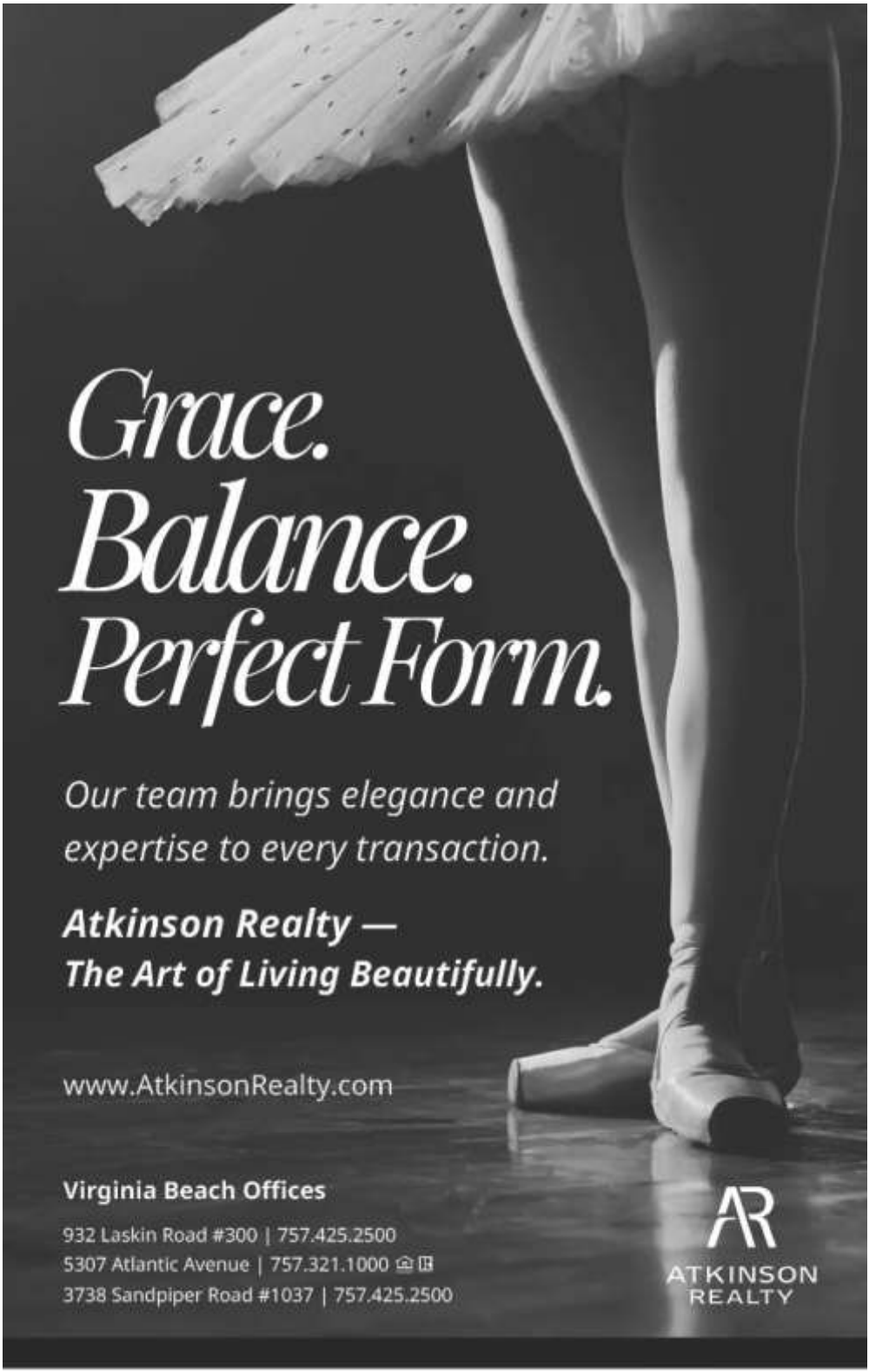
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BVII dancers listed from left to right starting with back row:

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Phoebe Wesseler: First Colonial School
Rebecca Jacques: Old Donation School
Lillian Acevedo (intern)**:** Catholic High School
Bria Eggers: Kellam High School
Tessa Winkle: Princess Anne Middle School
Seranade Barber (intern)**:** Landstown High School
Madeline Swets: Blair Middle School
Gracie BrombAcher: Tidewater Community College
Lillian Davenport: Greenbrier Christian Academy
Parker Shiels: Norfolk Collegiate
Shelby Nguyen: Maury High School
Elizabeth Kim: Tabb High School
Zoe Johnson: George Washington University Online High School
Hayden Howard: Granby High School
Brooke Christy: Nansemond Suffolk Academy
Mariella Agno: homeschooled
Alie West (not pictured)**:** Great Bridge High School
Arabella Rossiter (intern, not pictured)**:** St. Matthew's Catholic School

Our BVII dancers range in age from 12 to 20. They train over 20 hours per week. Each year, several receive scholarship offers to nationally acclaimed training programs. The extensive education they receive both in the studio and on stage prepares them for a potential professional dance career. Other BVII alumni go on to become teachers, doctors, lawyers, scientists and a host of other challenging and meaningful life pursuits.

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APR 12	**AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL**

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