It started, in a way, with *Footloose*, the 1984 movie about teens in a town where dance was forbidden. The film put Utah on Hollywood’s radar as an untapped resource of hard-working, fresh-faced, fleet-footed dancers. Local youths filled out the chorus line as extras while the leads—foremost, a young Kevin Bacon—leapt across train cars with the Wasatch Mountains and the now-iconic Lehi Roller Mills as a backdrop.

Twenty-four years later, multitudes of Utahns have found their way onto screens large and small, as casting directors explore Utah’s pool of well-trained dancers. The trend spiked upward with the *High School Musical* films, which once again put Utah’s talented populace in the limelight.

And, along the way, Utah dancers began to excel on reality dance programs, several of them winning on shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing with the Stars*.

Though it may surprise those who view Utah as a straight-laced state—much like the fictional small town in *Footloose*—there is a tradition of dance here that goes back to our roots. And while dance in all its forms makes a comeback across the nation, it seems the rest of the country has finally caught up to Utah.

The Rest of the World Is Discovering Utah’s Talented Pool of Dancers and Choreographers. What Took Them So Long?

By Kathy Adams

**AS SEEN IN SALT LAKE MAGAZINE**

**Brandon Armstrong**

Winner, 2008 *Dancing with the Stars* Junior Championship

**Brittany Cherry**

Winner, 2008 *Dancing with the Stars* Junior Championship

**Brandon Armstrong**

Winner, 2008 *Dancing with the Stars* Junior Championship

**Chelsie Hightower**

Finalist, 2008 *So You Think You Can Dance*

**Julianne Hough**

Two-time winner of *Dancing with the Stars*

**Saundra Johnson**

Winner, 2008 *So You Think You Can Dance* Senior Division

**Sabra Johnson**

Winner, 2007 *So You Think You Can Dance* Raised in Roy

**Derek Hough**

Dancing with the Stars standout

**Derek Hough**

Dancing with the Stars standout

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“I think what you have here in Utah is an elevation of the art form, with children and young people embracing [it].”

— MARY ANN LEE
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN’S DANCE THEATER
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH CAMPUS

In Utah, dance’s roots go deep

What lies behind Utah’s dance success is hardly a secret, and certainly no accident. As she waited in line for SYTYCD auditions last winter, BYU student Jessica Wilcox put it this way: "[The LDS church] emphasizes the importance of the arts as a way to signify and glorify God and our message."

It’s a common thread in Utah’s history of encouraging children to become involved in the performing arts. When pioneers first settled in the valley and entertainment was hard to find, they established Mormon road shows; children and families performed for their wards, serving the dual purpose of entertainment and glorifying God. Though the road shows are gone, the dedication to dance remains. Not all of Utah’s talent are Latter-day Saints, and not all of those would express their beliefs as concretely as Wilcox. But her sentiments echo a common theme that runs through Utah’s dance community, which encourages the joy of performance and the honest investigation of the art form. "[Performing in Mormon road shows] wasn’t about competition; it was about fun, joy and carrying a message," explains Mary Ann Lee, a scion of another type of dance pioneer in Utah. Lee is the artistic director for Children’s Dance Theatre, a group founded by Virginia Tanner, the state’s patron saint of modern dance. Tanner, born in Salt Lake City in 1915, established the CDT in 1949, and her lifelong commitment to dance in Utah helped earn a grant in 1966 to seed another troupe, Repertory Dance Theatre. These two institutions have been instrumental in the education of the state’s dancers, as well as its audiences. Today, CDT remains a vital part of the Utah dance community, performing for more than 45,000 Utahns every year, and making dance accessible to families and children.

Think of CDT as an incubator, a part of Salt Lake’s healthy dance community, which feeds its talent into university dance programs, professional dance careers or, simply, a lifetime of enjoying and supporting the art. Lee believes that producers for reality dance shows have unintentionally fallen into something that is working, but they really don’t understand what it is. "In the Tanner program, we focus on the creative process and not competitive dance," says Lee. "But I think what you have here in Utah is an elevation of the art form, with children and young people embracing [it]."

"The gift we’re giving children is in their hearts," Lee says. "It is the confidence that comes from knowing themselves and feeling great about themselves."