

Master of movement

Whether on Broadway or in Guelph,
dancer and choreographer
Sarah Jane Burton has all the right moves

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK IWANYSHYN

She danced on Broadway, taught actors how to move in outer space and learned how to make robots and other non-sentient beings move as though they had emotions.

Sarah Jane Burton, nee Smith, has done just about everything you could imagine a gifted ballet dancer and choreographer might do.

But though she has danced across New York City stages and imagined the lives of robots and astronauts, Burton – SJ to many – speaks most proudly of her dancers in Guelph who meet with her weekly in a church gymnasium.

This is where Burton's heart lifts as her dancers, people with Parkinson's disease, follow her choreography to music they love.

Burton, who lives in Guelph, began Park'n Dance in 2016 after training with the founding organization, Dance for PD, in Toronto and New York City, as well

as "apprenticing" with a similar group in Cambridge.

Dance for PD operates under the premise that professional dancers can help people with Parkinson's with their knowledge of stretching and strengthening muscles, balance and rhythm.

The inspiring dance classes are the latest in Burton's long list of accomplishments since she began her career as a professional ballet dancer in the United States in 1965.

Burton, an animated woman with a welcoming smile and a ready laugh, considers Park'n Dance to be more her dancers' accomplishment than her own.

"They have so many challenges and they're feisty and they're game and they're fun and they laugh," she says.

Research shows the physical, mental and emotional benefits of dancing to music.

"Science is finally catching up to us in dancing and movement. We know how cathartic dancing with music is," Burton says in an interview over coffee in Starberry Café in Guelph.

Sarah Jane Burton is photographed in the River Run Centre. She was a member of the building committee for the Guelph performing arts centre and made sure its shock-absorbent stage floor remained in the plans.





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As Alison MacNeill, Harcourt Memorial United Church’s director of music ministries, plays piano, participants move and sing along to familiar tunes like “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”

In the gym, everyone is a dancer, including spouses (Burton calls them “spices”), helpers and university student volunteers who may take an arm or two. “No one sits and watches,” Burton says. “We always ask them, ‘May I dance with you?’” After an hour, they visit over coffee and cake.

“There are no mistakes,” she tells them. “There are only solos.”

Burton’s career reflects her passion for dance, a love of science and her insatiable curiosity.

As a young ballet dancer, she danced in musicals for summer stock companies in



At Sarah Jane Burton’s Park’n Dance classes, for people with Parkinson’s disease, everyone is a dancer. She hopes to expand the program beyond the sessions in Guelph and is training apprentice instructors, such as Paula Skimin in the top photo, so the program will ‘go on forever.’

the U.S., in operas for the Chicago Opera Company and on Broadway stages with dance superstars, choreographed by greats like Agnes de Mille (niece of Cecil B.).

Since then, Burton, 73, has studied real-life NASA space tapes to teach actors in a Canadian science fiction television series how to move as though they were weightless in outer space.

As a certified movement analyst – she also has a master’s in movement and dance – she has helped university researchers figure out how robots and “other near-living creatures” could be seen as expressing themselves in movement. She co-published and presented her scientific results.

You might know the multi-faceted Burton as choreographer of opera and other productions in this area, including those with Black Walnut Ballet Company in Kitchener and most recently for “The Drowsy

Chaperone” with Guelph Little Theatre.

You’ve seen dancers sail across the stage of River Run Centre in Guelph, assisted by the “sprung floor,” a shock-absorbent floor for which Burton stood firm, keeping it in construction plans when she was a member of the centre’s building committee.

As much as she has done – and there are many more examples – Burton feels most rewarded today when she’s leading her dance class in Harcourt church’s gymnasium. “Dance is so transformative,” Burton says.

“In June, a man stood up and said, ‘Thank you for making us feel good about ourselves.’ That’s huge.”

Burton, born in Ithaca, N.Y., was heading for New York City when she met a “lovely Canadian man” at a dinner party.

John Burton, then a doctoral candidate at Cornell University, came to see her dance on Broadway where the young ballet dancer’s career was on the rise.

They married in 1969 and moved to Guelph to make a life together where John would become a professor.

“My husband always said, ‘I want you to dance,’” Burton says. But the young couple had no idea then that the opportunities for dance in her new country would be so limited compared to the United States.

There was also some anti-American sentiment at the time in Canada, which didn’t help.

“There were very few professional opportunities in the Guelph-Toronto area for continuing my career at that time, so I counted on my resiliency and curiosity,” she says.

Burton could be excused for feeling disappointed at first. In a short time in the U.S., the young dancer had accomplished so much.

She had known she would be a dancer when she was five years old. She was shy, she says, but you’d never know that when she was on stage.

She studied dance in her hometown of



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Ithaca, as well as in New York City with famous dancers, including ex-dancers from Russia. "I had to work very, very hard."

It was years later that she learned her New York City teachers had wanted her to attend Juilliard, but her parents were reluctant to send their 14-year-old daughter away from home. She and her brother, now a forensic chemist, had a loving home with lively dinner-time conversation, she says. Their professor father was a world potato expert and their mother had a PhD in nutrition.

"Since I was a kid, if there was salt in the recipe, it was called NaCl (the chemical formula for sodium chloride)," she says, laughing.

Immediately after graduating with a dance degree from Butler University in Indiana, Burton performed in musicals for summer stock companies, including "West Side Story," directed by Michael Bennett; "Camelot" and "Showboat." She was on stage with dance superstars Erik Bruhn and Carla Fracci and others in operas for the Chicago Opera Company where she rehearsed for eight hours a day for \$50 a week.

She toured across the U.S. with the Chicago Opera Ballet Company and Ruth Page's International Ballet Company.

In New York, she had principal roles as Jeannie in "Brigadoon," Liat in "South Pacific" and Dancing Laurey in "Oklahoma!"

She was only 23 when the indomitable Agnes de Mille chose her as Jeannie. "I was brand-new; nobody knew who I was."

Burton was represented in New York by Gus Schirmer Jr., known for promoting Shirley Jones, Lee Remick and Sandy Duncan and for managing Carol Channing and Ethel Merman.

Burton had talent; she was confident; she didn't feel the vicious competitiveness about which non-dancers sometimes asked her. She definitely didn't encounter the nightmarish, cutthroat world shown in "Black Swan," a movie she disliked, she says. "I have no memory of anything like that," she says. "There was respect. If you crossed

a room, you were only competing with yourself.

"You're good at it and you love it and you please people; why else do you do anything?"

In Guelph, she was never far from a stage, and she choreographed and coached plays at the university where her husband was a faculty member until his retirement.

In 1971, the couple went off to Ghana, West Africa, for about three years as the universities shared an exchange program.

It was a chance for Burton to study African dance in a master's program. It was more rhythmic and a looser kind of dancing; much different from her ballet training.

"It was a challenge, but I always like a challenge," she says. "I took that back and when I started teaching ballet, I used that."

She performed and taught dance and they travelled in West Africa. Burton flew back to Ithaca in 1972 to give birth to their first child, Alana, now a filmmaker and life coach in California.

When they returned to Guelph, dance was still Burton's passion, though she expressed it in new and interesting ways.

She became guest choreographer and later artistic director of the semi-professional Black Walnut Ballet Company based in Kitchener. The couple had a son, Cole, now an ecology and conservation professor at the University of British Columbia.

It was a busy time.

"I used to choreograph in the car in my head," she says. "I'd play the music and it would come."

She loved working with the Black Walnut Company. "Bernd Juche was artistic director and he was wonderful," she says. "He said to the young dancers, 'You must inspire SJ (Sarah Jane). You must inspire your choreographer.'"

Throughout the years, she also taught, coached and choreographed at George Brown College, University of Toronto and Sheridan College, from which she

retired in 2014.

She spoke up for dancers living outside Toronto while she was on the board of Dance Ontario.

Meanwhile, she directed and choreographed musicals for community theatres throughout Ontario where her professionalism is well-known.

"She's so professional and so committed. Her approach to dance is very clever and clear," says Trevor Smith Diggins, who directed "The Drowsy Chaperone" last spring for Guelph Little Theatre. "She's very organic in presenting. She evokes feeling and emotions."

In 1982, when Burton choreographed the opera, "The Merry Widow," a Canadian Opera Company/Oktobfest co-production, she had to search for dancers because there was no trade publication then in which to advertise. She had to telephone one dancer who would lead her to another. "It was all who you knew at that time. In New York, it was all who you were."

She was artistic director and choreographer of her own professional ensemble for more than a decade.

Her choreography ingenuity was called into play when she worked on Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer's music drama, "The Princess of the Stars," in 1997, which took place on the lake at Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve.

Imagine the challenge of choreographing six dancers in large bird costumes (the Dawn Birds), each standing in a canoe on the water, with a spotlight and hidden paddler in the stern. The canoes were also choreographed. Musicians and singers, (one of whom kept a hatchet nearby as a safeguard against bears), were hidden around the lake, Burton says.

"They (canoes) started about a mile away and came out of the misty pre-dawn towards the spectators, who were seated on benches at the shore," she says.

People in Toronto boarded buses at night and arrived with only candles to light their way to their seats. All the audience

could hear was the lapping of water on the shoreline until "one and a half miles away, a beautiful soprano would start to sing," Burton says.

It was beautiful. "I'm getting goosebumps talking about it."

That experience was "up there" with coaching actors on the TV drama series, "Odyssey 5." The series, which ran for 19 episodes from 2002 to 2004, was filmed in Oakville and Toronto.

IMDb, the Internet movie database, describes the plot like this: "After witnessing the sudden implosion of Earth from orbit, a group of five Odyssey astronauts is sent five years back in time by an alien force to find the cause and prevent the disaster. A vast conspiracy stands in their way."

"They sent me actual tapes of NASA," Burton says. "I loved it. It was so different and I had to figure how to make them look like they were in space and totally weightless."

Her experimental work on non-sentient movement began when a doctoral student in electrical and computer engineering at the University of Waterloo learned she had trained at the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in New York City. Certified movement analysts research human movement and its expressive qualities.

The student was working with Philip Beesley, artist, architect and UW professor whose "Hylozoic Ground" contemporary architecture piece was representing Canada at the 2010 Venice Biennale in Architecture. The futuristic piece involved lightweight white fronds in a forest-like environment designed to reach out or draw back from visitors. "Canadian Architect" magazine later called the piece "extraordinarily beautiful and reverent."

"They wanted to figure out how to make the fronds have expression; to be read to have self-expression," Burton says. "I gave it a go. I'll design movement. I got an actor familiar with Laban work and we did motion of an arm. I had to choreograph six moves" to convey emotions such as anger, sadness, happiness and fear, she says.

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FAR LEFT: Sarah Jane Smith strikes a dancer's pose while still in high school in Ithaca, N.Y.
PHOTO BY JACK GRANT

LEFT: Playing the role of mute Susan Mahoney, Sarah Jane Smith performs with LaRue Watts in 'Finian's Rainbow' at Meadowbrook Dinner Theatre in New Jersey in February 1968.
PHOTO BY BEAUMONT, NEW YORK CITY

ABOVE: Promotional photo used by her agent in mid-1960s.
PHOTO BY KENN DUNCAN

She co-wrote a chapter in a scientific book about the Laban analysis and "affective movement generation for robots and other near-living creatures" and they presented the research in France. It was gratifying. "Here I was a dancer. They highly valued my knowledge in dance."

Burton is looking ahead. She's training apprentice teachers so Park'n Dance will "go on forever." She wants to expand the classes to other locations.

She returns to her old family home in Ithaca to perform and choreograph dance and music productions at the CRS Barn Studio, located on an organic vegetable farm overlooking Cayuga Lake.

"We do it now for ourselves just for fun," she says. "Part of that is that my joy comes now from choreography."

At the same time, she's making a return to acting at the end of January in Guelph Little Theatre's production of "Gloria's Guy" in which she plays an irascible but endearing

old busybody.

Those who know her believe Burton can do anything, but mostly they like how this talented, unpretentious woman relates to people she's teaching.

"She is warm and kind and she's extremely knowledgeable about movement and the body," says Leslie Fisher, a dancer whose first ballet teacher was Burton. Later, Fisher was dance captain for a production of "Annie" that Burton choreographed.

Fisher, now a Park'n Dance assistant, says the class is her "bucket-filling" moment of the week.

"One of the most lovely things is watching her teach the class. She's very real and down-to-earth. She can find the humour in anything. It makes it accessible and not scary for a group of non-dancers trying dancing for the first time.

"We see amazing things," Fisher says. Some participants struggle with freezing when they move. "Then you put the music on and ask them to move across the room with the rhythm. All of a sudden, they're

moving freely across the floor."


Burton is a quick study. She consented to choreograph "The Drowsy Chaperone" after another choreographer had to drop out at the last minute.

"We were in a panic, a jam because rehearsals started in two weeks and there was no choreographer," says Smith Diggins, Burton's friend and colleague for many years. There was flapper-style dancing, jazz and other moves and the performers were actors, not regular dancers.

"She's easygoing and very empathetic to people's challenges," says Smith Diggins, an accomplished actor, director and writer.

"She taught them tap dance and the Charleston and she brought the show to life.


"She has the experiences that many people in community theatre can only dream about," Smith Diggins says. "We're fortunate to have someone with her level of experience in the community."


There's sure to be more to come, he says. "You can feel all the ideas bubbling up behind her eyes." 

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