

Joseph Watson II and Seia Rassenti are expecting their first child in July.

# Next STEPS

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet dancers prepare for another performance: parenting.

By Avichai Scher

**A**spen Santa Fe Ballet is a 10-member company that tours nearly half the year. That makes it attractive to young emerging dancers, many of whom join the company and stay for over a decade. But the touring and intimate group can be a challenge for those wanting to start a family; the company has never had a female dancer rejoin after becoming a mother. Many alumnae, however, have retired and gone on to have families. "I knew it wouldn't work to be touring and have a kid," says Katie Dehler, 41, who retired when she had her son, Noah. "I couldn't give enough to performing and a family. It was one or the other."

Companies with large rosters and minimal touring routinely make accommodations for dancers with children. But for ASFB, having a family requires creative career planning, which, for some, includes coming back to dance in new ways.

Dehler danced for 13 seasons and her husband, Sam Chittenden, danced for 15 before retiring in 2013. It was time to start trying for a child and consider their next career move. But they didn't have as much time to plan as they thought. "Everyone said it would take a few years," says Dehler. "We had just started trying, and then it just happened."

Chittenden had already been working on posters, the website and promotional videos for the ballet on a freelance basis and transitioned full time as a graphic designer with ASFB after he retired. After Dehler gave birth, ASFB directors invited her to teach for the ASFB school. She taught classes in the late afternoon and evening, and Chittenden finished his office work at the ballet by 3PM. That way, one of them could always be home with Noah.

But with Noah starting kindergarten in the fall, Dehler didn't want to teach all evening and miss being home with him during the week. For now, she's leaving teaching behind and beginning a new job at Two Leaves and a Bud. "The job is good for our family right now," Dehler says. But, she'll stay connected by moonlighting as a stager for works she danced at ASFB. In February, she'll travel to Oklahoma City Ballet to teach the dancers the ballet *Red Sweet* for two weeks.

"We are proud of our dancers' artistic achievements, and watching them develop



as artists is always rewarding," says Tom Mossbrucker, ASFB artistic director. "However, equally satisfying is seeing our artists transition into their second act—life after dance. We place a strong emphasis on healthy transitions and often discuss the subject several years before a dancer retires."

Seia Rassenti and Joseph Watson II have both been with ASFB for 10 years. They're expecting their first child this month. Rassenti wasted no time in preparing for a second career. As soon as she began maternity leave in January, she certified to teach the fitness method Gyrotonic and currently teaches at the Art of Fitness.

While she has her next career lined up, Rassenti is not done performing. She hopes to be the first ASFB dancer to return to the company as a regular performer after giving birth. She's not exactly sure how it will work, but says she's talking with the company directors about a plan for her to perform in some capacity, even if not as a full-time company member.

"I definitely plan to come back at least for a final bow," she says. "Even though there is so much unknown happening right now, I trust that moving forward dance will be a part of my life."

She says Watson, her husband, plans to stay with the company for now. It could be easier as a mother for her to stay also and tour together. Otherwise, she'd be on her own much of the year. "He's nearing the end of his career as well, so maybe we can make this last stretch work," she says. Watson is a group fitness trainer and is working on becoming a certified personal trainer.

Rassenti is optimistic about coming back, partially because her own pregnancy created an opportunity for one of her former colleagues.

Samantha Klanac Campanile retired from ASFB in September 2016 after 14 years so she and her husband, who is not a dancer, could start a family. They moved back to their hometown of Orchard Park, N.Y., and Campanile became a certified coach with The Bloom Method + Studio Bloom, a pre- and postnatal fitness program.

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—TOM MOSSBRUCKER, ASFB  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR »



From top: Samantha Klanac Campanile and her daughter, Anja, outside of the Joyce Theater in New York before her March performance; Katie Dehler, Sam Chittenden and their son, Noah.

When Rassenti announced her pregnancy midseason, ASFB directors reached out to Campanile to see if she'd be up for filling in for Rassenti in performances in Scottsdale and New York City—even though she hadn't performed in over two years and had an 18-month-old daughter. Campanile was up for the challenge and made a triumphant, if brief, return. "We believe that if a dancer has a fulfilling career, they will be able to move gracefully into their next chapter. Some of our proudest moments have been seeing the children of our former dancers now enrolled in The School of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet performing in *The Nutcracker* while their parents help out backstage. To us, this is success; the circle is complete," says Mossbrucker.

Rassenti hopes Campanile's success made space for a mother in the company. "It felt really great seeing her perform after having a child looking as strong as she did," Rassenti says. "It gave me hope. Who knows what's possible?" ■