

# Natural Gift

*Dance student finds his rhythm, lands part in major production*



*Denny Lafleur sits on the stage in the auditorium at St. Thomas of Villanova Catholic High School where he has participated in dozens of performances.*

(LaSalle, Ontario, Wednesday, March 16, 2016) – For a young man who didn't really start to take his craft too seriously until the last year or so, some pretty serious people are starting to take notice of Denny Lafleur.

An 18-year-old Grade 12 student at St. Thomas of Villanova Catholic High School, Lafleur is a dancer who recently landed two roles in an upcoming American Ballet Company production of *Sleeping Beauty*, which will be staged at the Detroit Opera House starting at the end of this month.

Lafleur will play the role of an ogre, and of a guard.

"It's a minor role, but it's a role," he said. "For me, it's huge that it's with this company."

Perhaps what's most incredible about his story is that unlike most professional dancers, Lafleur has never taken any formal instruction. He started taking dance class as an optional course in Grade 9, and just this year began instruction outside of the school's program.

"It was just a thing I wanted to try because my sister and my cousins did it," said the Sacred Heart Catholic Elementary School graduate.

A former hockey player, Lafleur discovered that he was pretty good at dance too, so he decided to join the team in Grade 10. Since then, he's had lead roles in numerous school productions, and was named captain of the dance team this year.

Last year he got a call from the Edmunds Towers School of Dance in Windsor, asking if he would like to be in its production of *The Nutcracker* at the Capitol Theatre. A friend of his mother who attended the production told him she had seen an advertisement for auditions for male dancers in Detroit and suggested he check it out.

Not knowing what to expect, he went to the auditions at the end of January on something of a lark, and made it through three cuts with 175 other area dancers. Only 15 dancers were given roles in the production, which is being choreographed by the Russian Alexei Ratamansky, a former director of the Bolshoi Ballet and current artist in residence at the New York-based American Ballet Theatre.

"I'm not sure what they saw, but they want to work with me, which I'm eternally grateful for," Lafleur said.

Since being accepted, Lafleur's schedule has intensified. One of the show's choreographers suggested he take additional classes to improve his skills, so now he's in formal instruction every Saturday at the Edmunds Towers School, on top of the three to eight hour rehearsals he attends every weekend for *Sleeping Beauty*.

Since landing his parts, Lafleur has allowed himself to consider the possibility of a career in dance. This summer he'll travel to New York with his mother with the goal of trying some auditions. While he acknowledges that it's a long shot, he thinks gender may improve his chances.

"It's about a billion to one if you're a girl, but only about a million to one if you're a guy," he chuckled.

Whether he makes it or not, the fact that he's made it this far speaks volumes about the quality of the instruction he's received in high school. Most of the credit, he says, belongs to dance teachers Cathy Harris and Melissa Chiandussi.

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**- Denny  
Lafleur**

“I don’t know what I would have done without those two,” he said. “In a way, dance has saved my life.”

The performances of *Sleeping Beauty* are scheduled for March 31 - April 4. Lafleur will perform in the matinee shows on April 2 and 3 at 2 p.m.