As the Sugar Plum Fairy in George Balanchine's The Nutcracker. Photo credit: Alexander Izilaev.

My path at Penn was fairly conventional. I transferred in as a sophomore and finished my undergraduate degree within three years. My path leading up to Penn, however, was pretty unconventional. I danced with San Francisco Ballet for eleven years and took some college
courses here and there, trying to pursue my higher education despite a heavy schedule at the theater and on international tours. Then I moved to Philadelphia to join Pennsylvania Ballet and discovered Penn's LPS program. It was love at first seminar.

Dr. Deborah Burnham's "Creative Non-Fiction" class was a highlight for me as an English major. It inspired me to write about what I know - dance - and I now contribute to various publications such as Playbill, Dance and Pointe magazines. Here is an excerpt of a piece I wrote in Dr. Burnham's class, which appeared in the Fall 2007 issue of Penn's own The F-Word: A Collection of Feminist Voices. I hope it gives you a sense of what it's like in my other world.

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I love being in the theater before anyone else gets there, when the dressing room doors are still locked and the security guard has to fish through his massive collection of keys to find the one that fits my door. Before the stagehands arrive at their dark dungeon of a room, littering foul smells and foul language throughout the backstage area, yelling at each other, cheering for some game on television. The house is lit and the work lights cast comforting shadows over the empty red velvet seats. Nothing moves; everything is silent. The enormous space, at once welcoming and daunting, swallows me.

Onstage, the floor harbors frightening obstacles, like ridges, bumps, and bubbles in the marley. Pieces of loose tape peeling at the edges seem to cringe with age. One or two variable slick spots can bring me down in a second without warning, like sheets of black ice. Some floors have too many panels with too much tape; some have too few panels with no center, eighth, or quarter markings. Floors can dye my new shoes, leaving streaks of black or dark gray across the fresh pink satin.

Aprons are always comforting—although if they’re too big, I have a false sense of security. If they’re nonexistent, I’m terrified of falling into the pit. Rakes, the steep inclined floors of older theaters, are only manageable if I’m used to them, otherwise they feel like a nasty trick. Sometimes designers will scrap the scrim or backdrop normally used to disguise the backstage area. Without this gentle drape, there is no place to hide for a last minute costume adjustment or a superstitious gesture.

Waiting in the wings, watching from the wings, exiting into the wings, getting stuck in the wings, crashing into the wings. Wings because they fly in and out, depending on what sets or arrangements are necessary. Wings because they can hide, shield and cover. Wings cloak lighting booms—the best of these structures are bolted to the ground so you can use it as a barre or as an anchor for some violent but necessary stretch.

Sometimes the wings are so narrow and dark that I can’t see beyond the boom and I just have to run, or turn, or be thrown, off into the black unknown. More often than not I end up crashing into a speaker or tripping over some loose wires. Blinding spots follow my every move. Glaring, glowing orbs shoot at me from the sides, and footlights along the apron scream, "Stop!"

If the house lights are dim, I hope that no one in the front row falls asleep. Little do they know how visible they are: the dancers are watching them, in our extended moments of
repose, as much as they're watching us. And someone should let them know that sitting in row A with a pair of binoculars is completely unacceptable. I start asking myself, "Can they see that pimple on my chin?"

The major difference between dancing onstage and working in the rehearsal studio: no mirrors. What a relief, after weeks or months of constant self-criticism, to be free of my own image! I can simply walk out onto the stage and gaze into a sea of red velvet darkness rather than being forced to stare at my omnipresent reflection. Onstage, I am not consumed with my fluctuating weight or unchangeable proportions. I immerse myself in the artistry of the movement and react to inner impulses. I become a less inhibited woman.

This reaction seems strange, given that on average there are 2,500 sets of eyes watching from the audience. But something inexplicable happens when the house lights go down and the sound of the orchestra fills the space. My heart beats a little faster and my mind battles itself to stay calm. My legs feel weighted and weak, threatening to buckle. My stomach turns in spite of the two or three Tums I just chewed in the dressing room. I convince myself that I am ready. I jab the toe of each shoe into the ground in an effort to reassure myself that the floor is still there. Delicious anticipation.

With the curtain down, I feel secure and warm, as if I'm being covered with a heavy blanket. A soft hum of voices seeps through from the other side to remind me that I'm not alone. Jumbled sounds from the orchestra pit blare through the speakers and drown out any last minute anxieties while other dancers jump up and down to stay warm. Latecomers, dressed in street clothes, blow their last kisses before they rush out to the front of the house. The stage manager calls, "Places!"

The performance comes... and goes, with only one chance to get it right. A steady red light peers out from the standing room section, a clear indication that the company is videotaping. Suddenly my movements are self-conscious and I feel tremendous pressure to make everything perfect. This might be the show that I will show my children.

At the end of a long season, I look and feel like a vampire: my skin is deathly pale, my eyes are a bit sunken, and my toes are bloody. I crawl out of the dusty theater long after the sun has set, light enough to fly and desperate for a meal.

But, for now, the world outside must wait. I walk toward the stage door and notice a single, naked light bulb positioned like a beacon at the foot of the stage. It shines against the black void of house lights, commanding my attention and beckoning my return. The space that was flooded with the sound of music and applause just minutes before is now quiet and abandoned. It too needs some rest. I listen to the sound of my New Balance sneakers squeaking against the marley and relish the few moments of solitude. Not often can I experience the stage without some other presence in the wings, in the house, or in the lighting booth.

I take a deep breath and smile. I'm already home.