

PHOTOS BY LISA K. CHO
WORDS BY KYLE ELLISON

Dancing through the Dark

Honolulu Classical Ballet's pandemic journey



Lisa K. Cho got far more than she signed up for. What began as an interesting creative project in the months before the pandemic became a three-year journey documenting resilience—of the arts, of the human spirit. Equipped with a fifty-year-old Yashica camera, the self-taught Honolulu photographer set out in search of a project—and found it in the teachers and students of Honolulu Classical Ballet. Was she a ballerina? No, but she admired their artistry and wanted to capture it using film rather than digital photography. “There’s just so much depth and soulfulness with film,” Cho says. “Digital images might come out tack-sharp, but film helps me transmit a feeling.” Those feelings would change over time as Cho created *Ballet on Film*—from grace and hope to longing and loss and eventually to triumph. “We’ve all jumped, twirled and pirouetted our way through the pandemic,” says Cho. “It’s a story we’ve all gone through.”



“Dancing in front of an audience,” says HCB alum Caroline Haruki (seen on the cover at Leeward Community College Theatre in 2020), “combines all of your emotions. All the fear, sadness and elation make for an amazing performance. I dance for the audience, my friends, family and teachers, but most of all I’m there to dance for myself.” Above, Maddie Austin backstage before a pre-pandemic performance of *The Nutcracker* at Honolulu’s Mamiya Theatre in 2019, where Cho first photographed HCB. On the opening spread, left: A dancer puts on her slippers before the same performance. Opening spread, right: Dancers wait “backstage” (i.e., outside) of Holy Nativity School’s gym for a mid-pandemic performance in 2021.



One of the intangibles of performance is the camaraderie that artists develop offstage. “Backstage at a show is when we really bond, and that’s the closest we get to each other,” says HCB student Tiffany Nagano (pictured above in pink, backstage before the performance of *The Nutcracker* at the Mamiya Theatre in 2019). “We’re all separate in our own ways, but dance brings us all together, and those shared moments just sitting backstage—that’s where we all get to support one another.”





“When someone imagines a ballerina,” says Haruki, “they picture a girl in a pink leotard, fluffy tutu and ballet slippers. Oftentimes they don’t imagine a girl with unbelievable strength, perseverance, discipline and pain tolerance.” And perhaps they also do not imagine a girl wearing a mask, as these dancers did once studio classes resumed in 2021 after months of lockdown. “The strength these girls showed was amazing,” says HCB’s artistic director and instructor, Romi Beppu. “Throughout the pandemic they thrived, and their perseverance will carry them throughout their lives.” Previous spread, left: Dancers waiting in the wings during a performance of *The Nutcracker* at Bishop Museum in 2021.



Above, Haruki and Austin prepare for a performance at the Leeward Theatre in early 2020, just before the pandemic hit. Previous spread, right: Cho shot the award-winning photo “Mirror Mirror” at the same Leeward Theatre performance. Over the course of the three-year project, Cho snapped only three rolls of film—about seventy-two photos. For Cho it was an apt metaphor for one of the effects of the pandemic. “We prioritized what was important,” she says. “It forced us to slow down and think—and film photography also really slows you down.”





With restrictions against indoor gathering in place, HCB practiced wherever they could, like the Holy Nativity gymnasium (seen above in 2021). “We’d be there in tutus,” says Nagano, “and then basketball teams would come in and be like, ‘What are ballerinas doing on the court?’” Previous spread, left: Beppu achieves lift during an outdoor practice at Wai’alae Iki Park, the first time the dancers had come together since the pandemic began. Cho titled this photo “Joy”—the feeling permeating the tennis court that day. Previous spread, right: Beppu teaches a virtual class from HCB’s studio in 2020.



The dancers’ pandemic journey came to an end in 2022, with HCB’s return to stage for its tenth-anniversary show at Mamiya Theatre (seen above), just after restrictions were dropped and students could perform unmasked. “The show felt triumphant,” Cho says. “There was so much joy and gratitude, and the feeling that the sacrifice and work was all worth it.” “It’s like the stars were aligned,” Beppu adds. “Alumni came back and took to the stage. There was so much emotion, it was like a huge party, and in that moment it felt like we made it.”