



Dance to Your Own Pulse

Article Lauren Collinsworth Claflin
 Photos Courtesy of the Pulse Performing Arts Center



What do you get when you combine a dancer, a writer, a singer, a choreographer, a director, an artist and a business mogul?

If you're in Hollywood, you might have the recipe for an Oscar winner, like *Chicago* or *The Jazz Singer*.

If you are in Kansas City, however, you might have found The Pulse.

The Pulse Performing Arts Center is a dance studio created by Curtis Smith and Brandon Irwin. Located in the Red Bridge Shopping Center, The Pulse has experienced a meteoric rise since it opened in 2006. The studio has grown more than 500 percent in that time, and now teaches almost 300 dancers. In fact, it is currently expanding to double the size of its facility by this fall. The majority of its dancers hail from Leawood, including many on its 50-person competitive and performance team.



If you ask Pulse dancers and their families what distinguishes this young studio from its competitors, you might hear a wide assortment of bragging about the charismatic owners, the accomplished teachers and the happy atmosphere. However, one answer that everyone can agree on is the annual show.

Each year, The Pulse has performed an original show that punts the traditional recital format (and the agony that brings for many dance parents) in favor of a unique story brought to life by all of the students at The Pulse. Every dance class, from pre-school combos to high school jazz, plays a part in the show. The lead and featured roles are chosen from the studio's competition team. The result is a show so professionally produced that it has become an artistic treat not only for the families and friends of the dancers, but for the community as well.

Once you meet Smith and Irwin, you are not surprised that they would revolutionize the dance recital, exchanging it for something artistic and original. They have brought that same creative approach to everything about their studio. Before starting The Pulse, both men spent years working in Los

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Angeles in the arts. Between the two of them, Irwin and Smith comprise the aforementioned dancer, writer, singer, choreographer, director, artist and business mogul.

Irwin, who was born and raised in California, spent most of his childhood touring with a musical theatre company called Karousel Kids. He performed in hundreds of live shows as a singer and actor, and then attended the Los Angeles County High School of the Arts, where he continued to hone his skills. Irwin recorded children's albums and television soundtracks for Capital Records, wrote and directed successful shows and performed in many stage and television productions, both as an actor and a soloist.

For Smith, who was raised in Kansas City, it was love at first step after his first dance class, and he wore holes in the carpet of his bedroom by spending all of his available time practicing leaps and turns. His work ethic, combined with his natural ability, rapidly propelled him toward dance competitions and live performances. After continuing his dance training in college, Smith moved to Los Angeles, where he won a prestigious scholarship at Tremaine Dance Center. He signed with an agent, and then performed in television shows and stage productions throughout southern California.

Smith and Irwin became friends while working together in a show. They both longed to teach, as well as own their own business, and Smith was able to convince Irwin – the life-long Californian – that Kansas City was the perfect place to open their performing arts studio.

The Pulse's logo is comprised of three interlocking circles, which represent the eventual multi-dimensional focus of the studio: dance, voice and drama. The dance 'circle' took off so quickly that it has become The Pulse's sole focus. However, it is still Smith and Irwin's long-term goal to offer a complete performing arts education for their students. In the meantime, the dance studio and the show production keep both men very busy.

According to Irwin, "Producing this show is like throwing a wedding every year, with a 2,000-person guest list!"

The annual production requires an enormous amount of preparation, organization and talent. The Pulse's first show, in 2007, was *The River Flows*, a story told completely through dance about a beautiful town that was governed by a benevolent deity, until an evil force overtook it, turning everything dull and colorless. *The River Flows* was an artistic success, and it set a high standard for the shows that followed. Although every show is unique, they share common themes of love and family, of believing in yourself as you embark on your journey.

This year's story is called *The Wishes*. It follows six siblings who visit a seaside carnival. They find a broken-down wish machine, which transports them to a mysterious world.

Smith and Irwin each must wear a lot of hats to keep The Pulse running so smoothly. However, they consider it a gift to provide a comprehensive dance education to children, with a recital that is age-appropriate and artistic. They hope that magical feeling that comes from playing a part of live theatre will have a lasting effect on all of their students.

"Some of our dancers will grow up to become professional performers," said Smith. "But we hope to instill a true appreciation of the arts in all of these kids, so that even if they do not dance professionally, they will still become theatre-lovers." ♪

The *Wishes* will be performed June 4 and 5 at Shawnee Mission South High School Theatre. Call 816.941.2278 for ticket information, or go to PulsePAC.com.

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