

Pam Rosenblatt

Bagel Bard Nina Rubinstein Alonso: teaching and loving Ballet

For over one decade, a group of poets, writers, artists, and small press publishers have gotten together on Saturday mornings at Au Bon Pain restaurant in Davis Square, Somerville, Massachusetts to relax after a hectic week of work, writing, poetry readings, and absorbing everyday events. Men and women alike gather at the designated



All photos by Stan Segawa

tables with drinks and perhaps bagels or pastries in their hands and chat.

The name of this group of eclectics is Bagel Bards, and its concept originated in 2003 by poets Doug Holder and Harris Gardener while the two men sat drinking coffee and eating bagels at Finagle – A – Bagel restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Nina Rubinstein Alonso, the owner and dance instructor of Fresh Pond Ballet School, Cambridge, has been a member of the Bagel Bards for years. She learned of the Bagel Bards from Kathleen Spivack, an established poet in the Boston area, and Wendell Smith, a retired physician and a poet.

“I heard of the Bagel Bards from Kathleen and Wendell. He meditates in my meditation group, Heartfulness.org. He’d say, ‘Nina, you’ve got to go to Bards.’ And I’d say, ‘Oh yeah, I’ll get there.’ There have been a lot of sweet people, Bert Stern and Tomas O’Leary, so many more nice people. So I’m grateful for the help that people have given me with my own writing and publishing my journal.”

In a *Wilderness House Literary Review* interview on June 22, 2016 at the Bourbon Coffee restaurant, Cambridge, Alonso, poet and editor of the annual literary magazine *Constellations a Journal of poetry and Fiction*, added, “Some are mystified that I teach ballet and write. I don’t know why.”

But after speaking with Alonso, *Wilderness House Literary Review* understood that Alonso’s passion for ballet has been a part of her life since childhood.

“I was four years old when my mother took me to a little dancing school out in the suburbs, and I was shy, wouldn’t dance. I held onto her skirt and would not do anything. So she took me home. I came back when I was seven or eight, a little local school where we did some ballet, we did a little tap, etc.” Alonso said. “Then I continued for years and also played classical piano. I didn’t have the best formal ballet training when I was

little, but came back to dancing later, at college age. I had to stop earlier because I broke my foot and had to relearn everything. I had a British teacher who came to Boston – David Shields, from the Royal Ballet, temperamental to say the least. He'd

occasionally fly into a rage and throw everyone out of the room. But he was enormously helpful as I had to relearn ballet after a long break."

"In a way it was good because you learn steps when you're little and have to relearn later anyhow because you do not know what you are doing. You're not ready intellectually or physically.

Re-training in ballet seems to have worked well for Alonso as she taught at Boston Ballet's school for eleven years and performed in their Boston Ballet's "Nutcracker" shows before opening up her Fresh Pond Ballet School.

She just held the 28th annual ballet performance at her school. "That's a lot of shows, a lot of work. But that's my life. Part of me is very verbal, and part is non-verbal. The dancer person's approach is: do not bother me with words. I have always had this double track nature.



And it took me a while to figure it out," she said.

A Bostonian since birth, Alonso grew up in Dedham, Massachusetts. She attended Brandeis University Graduate School in English and American Literature. "I was in gradu-

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

ate school at Brandeis because I got scholarships, fellowships. I did not know how else to support myself. And I love literature, so that was fine, but graduate school is nothing like undergraduate. We dig into the history and traditional material, learning Anglo-Saxon, Chaucer, what lead to modern English. It's scholarly, and some of it is interesting, though some is boring."

While in graduate school, Alonso returned to dancing. "I had to stop dancing for a while due to injuries, and I went back slowly. I was also writing, mostly poetry then." she said.

Alonso continued with her academic studies to support herself and because she enjoyed it. "I liked Anglo Saxon. I actually cried at the end of *Beowulf*, really sad," she admitted.

But her passion for ballet was strong, too. "The creative side on me was going back to dance, finding more modern classes, finding more ballet classes, relearning ballet, and writing poetry," said Alonso.

While at Brandeis, she met Allen Grossman, Howard Nemerov, and Louise Bogan. "I was blessed to work with wonderful people who were



not narrow or conventional," she said. "Allen was like: 'Fine, if you want to go dance, go dance.' He helped me. Instead of writing an academic thesis, I wrote my book of poetry, and Howard Nemerov introduced me to David Godine at Godine Press and

helped me get my first book published."

Upon receiving her PhD, Alonso taught English at Brandeis and then at University of Massachusetts – Boston, when it was at Copley Square. She often would take time away from academic meetings to go to ballet classes, she said.

At University of Massachusetts – Boston, she started the first Women's Studies course. "The level of misogyny and sexism in curriculum, in management, and the whole thing was really very difficult for me as a woman. I originated the first Women's Studies course and had to defend it in faculty meetings because they could not see justification for the course with no writer in it but women," said Alonso.

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

Bagel Bard Martha Collins worked at University of Massachusetts – Boston then, too, and took over the Women’s Studies course once Alonso left.

After leaving University of Massachusetts – Boston, Alonso taught at the Boston Ballet and then opened up the Fresh Pond Ballet School.

The Fresh Pond Ballet School has a non-competitive philosophy. Alonso teaches classical ballet to students from the ages of 4 and up. “I am a more open school where if you want to dance, I will help you. I will do my best by you. We help you dance your best”

Alonso enjoys assisting people who are “capable and want to learn. I do the best that I can with any student I have. Now and then there are people who aren’t able to listen to a teacher and follow instruction, possibly hyperactive or ADD or cause disruption in a class. Then there are times when I have to say, ‘Look, this isn’t working out. And physically if the child has physical issues with muscles or bones, and cannot physically turn out their legs. Then I say, ‘You know this could cause harm to your child.’”

Alonso has had many memorable experiences with her students. One of the most exciting one was the young girl who eventually went on to be a professional dancer.



“When children are seven or eight years old, I start teaching them pirouettes – spinning. And usually the children have a very hard time balancing and turning, which involves staying up on their foot. The first day of teaching [pirouettes], [this girl] started turning and she looked so happy. I said, ‘Try again.’ She spun around four times. So I was thinking, ‘Okay, this child is rare!’ I have never before or since seen this kind of child who picked it up so quickly. It usually takes years. She was the kind of child who was so gifted in balance and strength. She went on to be a professional dancer. But it was fun for her, the right attitude to have towards these things – that it’s fun!”

Several people have visited Fresh Pond Ballet School as guest dancers, including her daughter, Lara, who is a gifted dancer, and Paul Craig, currently a soloist with the Boston Ballet.

Alonso has taught young men who are interested in learning ballet. While they may be learning from the same ballet music as young women,

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

"[the men] have a different vocabulary of jumps particularly and are physically different. Of course it's individual, but in terms of the classical repertoire, boys do a range of large jumps. With girls, you have to train them to dance on their pointes. I teach upper level girls to dance on their toes, and boys only now and then, usually to improve their feet, and don't usually perform except maybe as the King Mouse in Nutcracker." Her site is www.freshpondballet.com.

Alonso also writes poetry, short stories, and works on her literary magazine, *Constellation a Journal of Poetry and Fiction*, site: constellations-lit.com. She has been published in many magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker* with her poem titled "Crosby Pond"; *Wilderness House Literary Review* with "Orchids"; and *Muddy River Poetry Review* with a poem called "Whatever it takes". *Ibbetson Street*, *Ploughshares*, *Sumac*, and *Ploughshares*, *U. Mass. Review*, *New Boston Review*, etc., are some of the other places that her work has been published.

"It was natural for me to write poetry. Fiction came a bit later. Writing is so much work that you don't do it unless you need to. There are so many rejections and the difficulty of the task of writing itself. I do not think you become a writer unless you it adds a dimension, is a necessity."