

# Dancing on the Razor's Edge

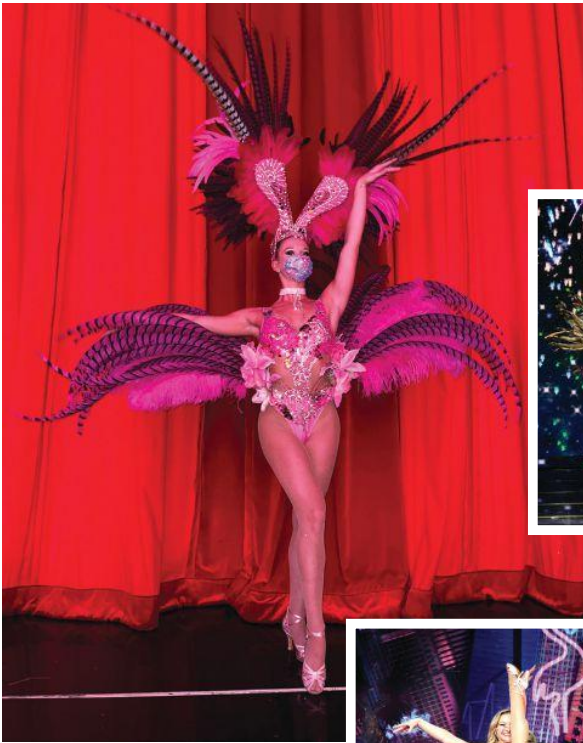
From a reality show to a Vegas production, at 20 years old, Southlake's Molly McKinnon is quickly twirling her way to the top of her field.

BY LAUREN SMART

**L**ast March, Molly McKinnon was packing to board a cruise ship for the next nine months. This high-kicking, Southlake-Carroll graduate had landed her first professional full-time dancing gig. She would perform in a nightly show while she traveled around the world. But, as you probably already guessed, her ship never left the port.

Instead, when the pandemic began to take hold, she moved from her new Las Vegas home back to North Texas to be with family. While the rest of the world stocked up on toilet paper and caught up on TV, she learned aerial silks, an acrobatic dance form popularized

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by the Canadian big-top troupe, Cirque du Soleil.

"I never stopped training during that time or sending out my materials to see what was out there, which at the time was not a lot," McKinnon says. "I figured I should make my talents more diverse, so that's why I started aerials."

It would be just a few months before the hard work of learning this new skill would pay off, but for McKinnon the work is part of what she enjoys about a dancer's life.

"I have always been a mover," McKinnon says. "[My parents] wanted me to try every sport imaginable. However, nothing gave me the joy I felt every time I stepped into the dance studio."

Her story checks a lot of the myth-making boxes of a prodigy: 1) Her parents say she was dancing before she was even walking. 2) Two knee surgeries as a child left doctors believing she'd never dance again. 3) She risked everything to pursue her dreams of becoming a dance star. OK, not everything, but she did turn down

a scholarship to Pace University.

In 2019, McKinnon moved west after graduation. By that time, she was already well on her way to stardom. Just two years earlier, she was featured as a company member on "Dancing Queen," a Netflix reality show that chronicled the Mesquite studio, Beyond Belief Dance, and its owner, Justin Johnson, aka drag superstar Alyssa Edwards.

She jumped from streaming to primetime when her high school dance troupe, The Emerald Belles, made it to the quarterfinals of "America's Got Talent" her senior year. As the captain, McKinnon stood face to face with the judges, including Simon Cowell, who told her as he voted her team into the next round, "I think Texas will root for you; America will root for you."

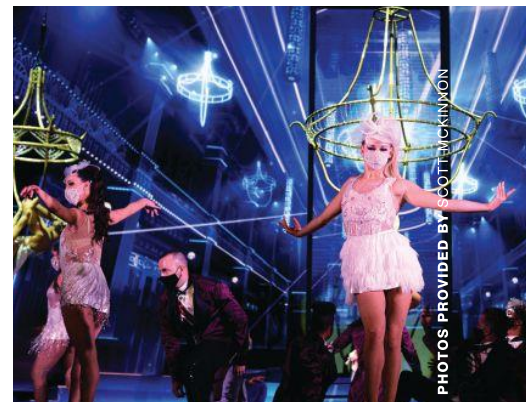
Maybe these superlatives gave her the courage to forgo a typical

college experience to pursue her dreams. Maybe. But it's more likely McKinnon is the driving force behind her own destiny. At 20 years old, she is 5 feet, 4 inches of muscle topped with a sparkling smile and long blonde locks. When she dances, she seems to light up. She's graceful and saucy and precise. All of that shines through on the demo reel she was sending to casting agents throughout the pandemic, but it was the newly acquired aerial silks skills that put her in an audition room in the fall.

Bally's Las Vegas Hotel & Casino was going to open the first show on the strip since the original shutdown — it is still one of the only live dance productions in the country. When "Extravaganza" opened in November, McKinnon was backstage in costume, glittery mask and all.

As the understudy for the female lead, she performs in the ensemble nightly but has already stepped into the main role several times. The dancers perform with strict adherence to mandatory masks and social distancing. It's a challenge, McKinnon says, but being able to dance on a major Vegas stage is what she moved there to do.

"It has always been a dream for me to be a dancer in a Vegas show, but I never thought it would happen at a time when no one is dancing, at a time when everyone in the city is looking for a job," McKinnon says. "I'm so lucky to be on stage right now." *fw*



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MOLLY MCKINNON