

Cultural Daily

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A House With Moves

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, December 2nd, 2020

An architect designs a toy house that, like a transformer, can morph into a boat, a theater, a space ship, an amusement park and dozens of other settings. A visual artist provides artwork for the toy house and collaborates with a writer on a related story book while the business manager massages the commercial launch of the endeavor.

Which of the four is a ballet dancer? Easy answer. All of them.



What began in 2017 as a challenge from Mattel Toys to design the next generation Barbie Dream House took a sharp turn in the imagination of Charlie Hodges, taking on a life of its own and a substantial part of the rest of Hodges' studies at the prestigious Pasadena Art Center of Design. Just as performers are called upon to find new interpretations of classic dance roles or to find the nuance in a choreographer's vision, Hodges took a similar approach to the Mattel assignment. Along the way, he drew in the three other dancers.



Janie Taylor. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Also, like a performance, the final Toy House reflects Hodge's over-arching vision and dogged persistence in the face of being told it could not be done. Now, as the curtain rises, the initial praise and positive reception are proof it can be done. Hodges is quick to point out this is a collaborative performance with artwork from Janie Taylor, writing from Jenifer Ringer and business acumen from Kaitlyn Gilliland, skills each developed during and after their professional careers with New York City Ballet ended and they migrated to L.A.



Jenifer Ringer. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Three years after the original challenge, the Toy House had a limited launch in July, sort of a dress rehearsal for production and distribution. This week the Toy House has its official debut, just in time for a shelter-in-place holiday season.



Kaitlyn Gilliland. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Hodges, who has given TED talks about moving beyond failure, rejection and disappointment, is a

poster child for persistence. A prize-winning dance student, Hodges recounts how he auditioned for and was turned down by more than 40 ballet companies for being, as he describes it, “too short, too fat, and too bald.” However, Sacramento Ballet saw his stunning abilities and he danced there as a soloist until Twyla Tharp also recognized and recruited this singular talent. Hodges went on to shine as a member of Tharp’s touring company as well as in her songbook musicals “Movin’ Out” (Billy Joel), “Times They Are A-Changing” (Bob Dylan), and “Come Fly With Me” (Frank Sinatra). He relocated from New York to LA when he joined LA Dance Project and then pursued his design and architecture studies at the Art Center.

“After watching children at play with the Barbie dream house, I saw the limitations of one physically located house and considered a small house that Barbie could hook-up to her Corvette for a trip,” Hodges recalls. Deconstructing the Barbie Dream House and calculating the environmental impact of all that plastic, led to a commitment to make the house of paper and sourced in the U.S.



The Toy House with four sets inside. Photo courtesy of the Archamelia.com.

“I kept finding people telling me what I wanted to do could not be done with paper, but then I found a packaging company here in L.A. willing to work with me until we found a way to make work and made it possible to construct the Toy House with the right balance of strength and flexibility.”

“I also thought a lot about the concept of home and what home means if you don’t have a home, someone like a refugee or someone in foster care,” Hodges explained. He worked with an organization resettling Syrian refugees and another organizations working with foster children to learn answers. “I heard from the refugee children that the smell of their mother’s cooking and laughter meant home. For foster children, a photo or a memento or a toy was often the response,” Hodges explained. Accessories in the final Toy House include some of the mementos mentioned in those sessions and a kitchen setting among the many choices.

While still an Art Center student, Hodges’ Toy House prototype was awarded two prestigious international design awards and a special sustainability award for his ground-breaking use of locally-sourced paper.



Hodges’ early Toy House prototype. Photo courtesy of the Archamelia.com.

The final result actually is more than a single toy. The Toy House arrives in a container, each side of which suggests a different setting for play. The container holds four separate sets, each of which can be assembled for different types of play and then folded up like origami for storage in the container. The sets can be folded, unfolded, and reassembled like a transformer into multiple environments with accessories that can be used alone or employed with a child’s own GI Joe, Barbie, Ninja Turtles or other toys.

The video at the Archamelia (ever changing architecture) website archamelia.com demonstrates better than words the possibilities of Hodges’ final Toy House as well as a related storybook anticipated to be the first in a series of related stories:

Play testing the prototypes provided insight into the ways children could take the individual settings like the rocket ship, put it on a rock and have their dolls exploring the moon or set up under the sink and use the plumbing pipes as the setting for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle dolls. In one play test, a girl used the microphone on the theater set to sing songs from Pixar movies for 45 minutes. Her stunned mother shared that was the longest the child had ever played with anything.



Part of the theater set, complete with microphone. Photo courtesy of the Archamelia.com.

During the Toy House development, Hodges' sought input from Taylor with her extensive artistic abilities and off-kilter sense of humor. Looking at the theatre setting, Taylor quickly announced that instead of a coat check room, the lobby needed a goat check room and provided the whimsical artwork of a welcoming goat. A former principal dancer with New York City Ballet now with LA Dance Project, Taylor's artistic talents have included costume design as well as visual art. Taylor also worked on a second element of the Toy House, the related storybook with the project's next recruit, another former NYCB principal dancer Jenifer Ringer who now heads the Colburn School dance program where Hodges teaches.



Janie Taylor. Photo courtesy of the LA Dance Project.

Ringer's involvement grew out of one of those play testing sessions.

"I have always admired Charlie's creativity and imagination, and was so impressed with his Toy House. I saw it immediately capture my children's attention," Ringer recalled. "My son even wanted to sleep with the little characters Charlie had made to go with the house."



Jenifer Ringer. Photo courtesy of the Colburn School.

When Hodges mentioned that he wanted a book to go along with the house, Ringer immediately volunteered. "I have always loved to write, loved children's books, and always had a secret dream to be a children's book author." Hodges did not regard himself as a writer and quickly turned the project over to Ringer with Taylor agreeing to provide the art work.

Another NYCB alumna, Kaitlyn Gilliland's path to the project took more of a scenic route as Hodge's tells it.

"Kaitlyn had just graduated from Yale business school when we finally met. After New York City Ballet, she also had danced with Twyla Tharp and LA Dance Project, but after I had left," Hodges explained. "During the pandemic, Twyla was working on a project for PBS' *American Masters* series and she paired me with Kaitlyn. We talked about our experience redeveloping a relationship with dance after going back to school, still feeling connected with dance, but in a different way. At some point it hit me that the Toy House needed business expertise and she had just come out of Yale."



Kaitlyn Gilliland. Photo courtesy of the Yale School of Business.

Initially, Gilliland declined an active role, but wanted to sit in on meetings Hodges was having about planning the production, calculating costs and other elements of becoming an entrepreneur.

What began as an educational “sitting in,” soon became taking on assignments, and eventually evolved into Gilliland as business manager for the Toy House.

Hodges and the others point to their experience as dancers informing their work on the project.

As Ringer described it: “So much of dancing is teamwork and collaborating. My favorite part of being a dancer was the relationships I made with my colleagues, working on roles together, and then seeing the fruition of our hard work come together in a performance.” Ringer found a similar experience with the Toy House. “It was really exciting to be inspired by Charlie’s toy and then be able to bring my own creativity to the project. I have always loved Janie’s drawings, so it has been a joy to see her unique view on the world come to life on the page and to create a new world of imagination where anything was possible. It was a blast working with Charlie on the book. It felt like we were getting together for a play date to play pretend.”



Charlie Hodges. Photo courtesy of the Colburn School.

“Dancers are scrappy and know how to make things work,” Hodges summed up. “You still have to perform even if you are hurt. Having a whole bunch of dancers on board means we are more likely to push through adversity, because we know how to make things work.”

The Toy House and the story book launch in December 2020. Ages 6 and up. Information and to purchase at www.archamelia.com

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