Last August, Julie Blume, who graduated with a BFA degree in dance in 2004, was invited to join the Parsons Dance Company, a ten-member troupe based in New York City. When I caught up with her by phone, Julie was packing for a tour to Italy, starting in the north and scheduled to end with a two-week run at a theater in Milan, known for its packed houses. With almost six months as a company member behind her, the young dancer was tour-ready.

Julie Blume has always been a standout. Valedictorian of her high school class, Junior Miss for her home state of New Hampshire, Julie was admitted to Michigan as a Shipman Scholar, an honor reserved for a small handful of especially deserving incoming freshmen. During her four years as a student, she was named—and remained—an Angell Scholar, a recognition bestowed upon students maintaining a 4.0 GPA. She was among an elite group of eight invited to dance in Costa Rica in August 2003; she was asked to return the following year where she performed a solo, choreographed by her dance professor and personal mentor, Sandra Torijano, as an introduction to the Dalai Lama and as kickoff to the 2004 Conference for Peace. She was a featured dancer in all of the major concerts as a student and was selected by the dance faculty to receive the Earl V. Moore Award her senior year and was invited by Dean Karen Wolff to give the student commencement speech.

Andrew then there was her dancing. In almost every photo of Julie I found, it seems, she was in mid-air. Flying, leaping, soaring. “She has a special physicality,” says dance chair Bill DeYoung, “but also a ton of heart.”

So it wasn’t a surprise when the news filtered through that she’d been hired by Parsons Dance, chosen from some several hundred initial aspirants who showed up at the company’s open call.

The internationally acclaimed Parsons Dance Company was founded in 1987 by David Parsons, former principal dancer with Paul Taylor and widely considered one of the most exciting dancers of his generation. The company tours extensively while maintaining a loyal following at home. Of its two-week run at the Joyce Theater in New York last fall, Dance Magazine wrote, “They outdid themselves in a program of six pieces that included the new, rollicking DMB, a show-stopping finale set to the rock songs of the Dave Matthews Band.”

Parsons has now choreographed some 70 dances on his company. His signature work, Caught, uses lighting to create the illusion of a dancer perpetually in mid-air. Tom Strini of the Milwaukee Journal wrote, “Caught is one of the great pieces of recent times. The concept is so simple: jump, strobe light on; land, strobe light off. The result is a flabbergasting illusion of flight.”

The company has earned a reputation for the powerful athleticism of its dancers and the striking visual impact of its performances. So Julie was a natural choice. “I do consider myself an athletic dancer,” she says, “and now even more so, since joining Parsons. But I’ve always been a lyrical dancer as well. I started out with ballet and jazz and then moved into modern dance at Michigan. With David, I’ve had to learn how to attack and punch—something I’ve always had the physical strength for but didn’t gravitate to naturally.”

Since joining the company, Julie has been working hard, absorbing everything she can as she acclimates herself to her new life. “I wasn’t sure how I’d fit in with the established dancers,” she says, “but they’ve been wonderful, and very welcoming. Much to my delight, I’ve discovered that I enjoy their company and conversation as much as their dancing excellence. I’m still learning and picking up
the movement vocabulary, but I’m a lot further along than I was in August.”

Julie had made the short list in a number of auditions with major companies since arriving in New York after graduation. “There were some heartbreaks along the way,” she admits, “getting down to the last few dancers in auditions and knowing I was being seriously considered. But those close calls also reminded me that there was going to be a place for me, that I wasn’t crazy pursuing this. It required a lot of patience, and I had moments of doubt, but I had prepared myself for that. So it was hard, and a little lonely at times, even in this crazy big city [Julie’s sister has now joined her in New York]. But I’ve had challenges throughout my training career—set-backs and injuries that only served to remind me how much I wanted dance in my life, how much I needed dance in my life.”

At the Parsons audition, once again Julie found herself among a small group of finalists for one opening. The company struggled with a decision. “They invited us to come to their summer intensive, free of charge,” she says. “It was a little less nerve wracking than the auditions, even though we knew we were in the spotlight and had to prove ourselves. And I knew that even if I didn’t get into the company, having had the opportunity to take these classes, free, in New York City, was special.”

But by the end of the first week, Parsons had made a decision. He asked Julie to join the company.

And while she wouldn’t trade her new life for her previous one of waiting tables, taking dance classes, and showing up for auditions, there have been challenges. “The most difficult part, I think, has been getting used to the schedule and the stress on my body,” Julie says. “We start out the day with a two-hour class followed by five hours of rehearsal—barefoot. You just have to ignore what’s going on at the bottom of your feet, even if it’s painful, because that’s what you’re being paid to do.”

And while a routine day of rehearsals is an 8-hour affair, the day of a performance can stretch into 12. There’s a walk-through, checking the lights and cues and costumes. Then there’s a run-through of the whole concert, “not performance quality, but pretty full out,” she says. “But it’s almost easier, because you’re doing what you love. Waiting tables and taking classes was actually harder than just focusing on dance.”

While the existing repertoire is familiar to long-time members, it’s all new to Julie. “We just started on a piece of David’s, which was my first experience learning new repertoire and building a piece alongside him. With a new work, he’s looking to see what we can offer as well as how we respond to his direction. It’s exciting, but you have to be mentally on, just very present, as you try to help him figure out movement. So it’s both a matter of intuiting what he would like and trying to offer up something innovative and different.”

“And he has had some of his dancers set pieces on the group, which is exciting for us because it adds a whole new avenue to explore.” Some day Julie may be setting a work on her fellow dancers.

“Who knows?” she laughs. What isn’t in doubt is that we will be hearing about this young dancer for some time to come. We wish Julie the best of luck in her new career.