

Optometrist Susan Cowling performed in musical theatre for 10 years, dancing her way to Mexico and back before finding a calling in optics

Today Susan Cowling is an optometrist in private practice as well coordinator of the pre-registration course and private tuition at The Institute of Optometry. However, this is a far cry from her previous career as dancer, which took her from Mexico to the West End with fun and drama along the way.

'I first got involved in dancing during my teens – when I was at school I took up ballet and my interest and activity grew from there,' comments Cowling.

Through talent and application, Cowling gained a place on a three-year course at the London School of Contemporary Dance.

Circus opportunity

'Going there was a great education and after I completed the course I began to teach dance myself. I wasn't entirely happy with this because I really got into dancing because I wanted to perform. So when a fellow dancer told me of a job dancing for a circus in Mexico I decided to go – essentially I



'I had 10 years of a wonderful, fun career and it was all very interesting to be a part of,' says Cowling. 'As long as I was dancing I was happy.'

The life of a dancer can be gruelling and Cowling has had her share of injuries. 'I've had knee surgery as a result of all the dancing. The surgeon said it was a case of wear and tear. I remember in Mexico we did a routine that involved 11 jump splits and we performed up to four shows in a day that would be up to 44 jump splits in a day – which simply can't be good for you in the long term.'

Lloyd-Webber musicals

Later on in her career, Cowling passed the dancing and singing auditions for *Starlight Express*, the Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical in which the actors wear rollerskates. 'After passing the auditions I learnt to skate and how to do all the tricks. Then during the last training session, we were asked to do a kick on one leg. This meant you stood on the toe stop and kicked off the other leg. At that point the wheels collapsed and my full body weight went down on my ankle and broke it. The first thing they said was are you OK? To which I replied yes, but I think I've broken my ankle. Then the next thing they said we have to remind you that we have a disclaimer and are not responsible for any injury you may have incurred!

Today, while Cowling takes occasional dance classes at the gym, she has left her dancing career behind in favour of optometry.

Starlight memories

ran away and joined the circus!'

Cowling notes that a big factor in deciding to take this job was that it came with an Equity contract (Equity being the trade union for stage actors). This meant at the end of the tour Cowling was given an Equity card. 'These were like gold dust to performers,' she notes.

'It was a big top touring circus with panthers, tigers and high wire acts – everything you would expect. There were 20 of us dancers and we went all over the country – Mexico City, Oaxaca, Baja. Although we [the dancers] stayed in hotels rather than in caravans with the rest of the crew and performers, it was quite an experience. An added bonus was that

I became fluent in Spanish over the nine months.'

When Cowling eventually returned to the UK, she was hooked up with an agent and started picking up a variety of stage work.

'My first job when I came back was as a dancer for a production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. After that I did the musical *42nd Street*, which I was in for a year and an half. That was a big West End show at Drury Lane and was probably the highlight of my career.'

Cowling went on to perform in other shows including *Guys and Dolls*, which starred Barbara Windsor, as well as taking on bits of acting and doing pantomimes at Christmas.

Although the leap from theatre to optometry has baffled some people, Cowling had in fact done science A levels and after leaving school worked for a time at St Guy's Hospital as a medical laboratory scientific officer.

'In a way it was a case of going back to my roots. I realised that dancing is not something you can do for life because you will always reach a certain age where you cannot dance any more. So I was looking for a different path to take and was interested in doing something medical. I actually happened to go for an eye test and the optometrist was able to guess my prescription spot on by doing retinopathy. And that was it – I decided that I would do it.' ●