When Isabella Boylston, now 29, was a little girl, she got out a library VHS tape and pushed it into the VCR in her living room in Sun Valley, Idaho. It was a taping of the ballet Swan Lake, and she watched, mesmerized, as the iconic Russian ballerina Natalia Makarova danced her way through beautiful, emotionally moving, physically exhausting number after number. Someday, Boylston thought, that will be me. "It was definitely one of my dream roles from an early age," she says.

Flash forward to 2007, when Boylston (then 19) joined the American Ballet Theatre in New York City and strapped on her pointe shoes for her first performance of Swan Lake. She was a swan in the Corps de Ballet, dancing just feet away from some of the best soloists in the world."I basically did every other role in Swan Lake starting at the bottom," she says: peasants, character dances, a pas de trois
soloist part. "I was so lucky to watch these amazing ballerinas dancing the lead up close, where I could see them sweating and breathing and trying to make it look effortless. I was so inspired but also intimidated by it. Like, I'd love to do that someday, but I don't know if I could!"

In October 2011, she finally got the chance to find out. The director called her into his office and let her know she'd be performing as Odette in Swan Lake in nine months at the Metropolitan Opera House. Boylston jumped for joy, called her parents — and then immediately got to work.

"The role requires a huge amount of physical stamina," she says. "It's really hard to get through because you're breathing so hard and your muscles are burning." Beyond technique, Boylston also wanted to bring to life the deep and complicated character she'd portray. "I wanted to use the steps to express something about Odette," she says. "That's what elevates ballet from being athletic to being artistic."

And so began a fall and winter of grueling training. Although every step of her journey from dancer to swan queen was beyond tough, Boylston never lost sight of how the experience would be #WorthTheWrinkle — rewarding and worth all the time, sweat, and stress. Boylston worked with a coach, Susan Jaffe, and together, they poured their nights and weekends — often until 9 p.m., after the studios were empty — into Boylston's technique. "There were things I'd have to do onstage that I'd never done before," Boylston recalls. One particularly difficult pas de deux ends with 32 fouettés: quick spins while whipping a leg. "By the end, you can't feel your calf and you just have to finish it," she says. At a showcase a few months before opening night, Boylston's strength gave out before the end of the dance, and she had to cut the spinning sequence short. "That made me even more determined," she adds. "I worked on those every day in the studio to make sure I'd be able to do them on stage."
Another difficult aspect of portraying Odette: learning the stylized arm movements known as port de bras. "At first, my arms and back would be so sore," Boylston says. "I could barely lift my arms at the end of the day." She finished days of dancing for nine hours straight with hot Epsom baths and found pockets of free time to hole up in the New York Performing Arts Library, watching as many archival performances of Swan Lake as she could. As opening night crept closer, Boylston went into "ballet mode," as she calls it: saying no to going out and instead putting in extra hours at the studio.

The day of her big debut performance, Boylston's nerves were shot: "I was so overwhelmed and felt so much pressure," she says. "I was crying so much I couldn't get my fake eyelashes to stay on!" Moments before she went on stage, her coach told her to be thankful for the nervous energy, which she could turn into energy for the performance. Then, waiting in the wings for her first entrance, she found another way
to channel her focus: She listened to the music. "The score for Swan Lake is absolutely amazing," she says. Her heart pounded and her adrenaline levels peaked right as the music swelled — and then she was onstage, and for 3,800 rapt audience members, Boylston was the iconic swan princess, Odette.

"The whole thing had such a feeling of ceremony to it," she recalls. "It flew by. I was trying to focus on the steps as well as what the character's thinking, but I was still able to take it in, like, Wow, this is happening." Afterward, the company got a standing ovation, not, she insists, because it was their most-perfect show, but because they'd pulled off their very first performance of Swan Lake. Boylston's dressing room area was covered in so many flowers, she couldn't even see the counter underneath.
Boylston has performed the same role through four seasons since then, and each year, she finds new emotional depths to plumb from the story and character. And while she continues striving to improve her technique, she insists her job isn’t about perfection (despite what the film *Black Swan* might have taught you). "Every show, something goes wrong, and there’s no such thing as a perfect performance," she says. "I'm most rewarded knowing I really went for it. To me, the feeling is much more gratifying than nailing all the technical stuff — when I'm able to be present and dancing with the music and interacting with other people onstage, being myself and being honest to the work." That's the kind of performance people remember — including, no doubt, a young ballerina in the audience who has watched Boylston and thought, *Someday, that'll be me.*