

# DANCE

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THEN LAND IT

# Bella

ABT's Isabella Boylston  
Unfiltered and Unafraid

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Boylston's fans love her natural spontaneity onstage.

# CIAO BELLA

Drool-worthy facility. Gutsy spirit. Old-fashioned approach. American Ballet Theatre principal **Isabella Boylston** dances with a boldness that's all her own.

BY MARINA HARSS

**It takes pluck** to grow up with a name like Hildur. For Isabella Boylston, born Hildur Isabella, it was just a part of her unconventional, free-spirited upbringing. Her parents met on a ski lift in Sun Valley, Idaho. Her father, Mike, was a country/blues drummer and “ski bum”; her mother, Cornelia, a Swedish electrical engineer. They fell in love and got married, raising two kids in a trailer in Sun Valley, with frequent road-trips to her dad’s shows in “crappy towns,” as Boylston, now 30, puts it. “It was totally Wild West,” she adds, with an easy laugh. She was named after an Icelandic great-grandmother (“a cool lady”) and had never thought of changing her name until a company director planted the seed. *Isabella Boylston*—it does roll off the tongue. “I think growing up with an unusual name shaped my personality in a way,” she reflected

just days before the start of American Ballet Theatre’s fall season.

She may be right. Isabella Boylston—or Bella, as just about everyone now seems to call her—is one of the most strikingly individual dancers in the company, or anywhere. She’s musical, she has great facility and strong technique, but, really, what one notices most is the boldness and joy of her dancing.

Three key moments come to mind: first, her debut in Alexei Ratmansky’s *The Bright Stream*, in 2011 when she was still in the corps. In this spoof of Soviet-style ballets, she played a haughty Moscow ballerina who visits a collective farm during a harvest festival. In the midst of a raucous ensemble, Boylston rocketed onstage with the propulsion and elevation of a torpedo. *Who is that?* everyone wondered, scrambling for the program. ▶

"Her jump is remarkable, and it comes out of nowhere."

—DAMIAN WOETZEL



Boylston in *La Bayadère*

she could just be herself. Boylston is someone who needs to believe in a character in order to fully embody it. "Classical works of character weren't organic to her," says Kevin McKenzie, ABT's artistic director. "She had to work hard to grasp certain behaviors." A few years ago, she enlisted the help of an acting coach, Byam Stevens. The two of them read the scenarios and talk about the stories, analyzing the particulars of her character, moment by moment, scene by scene.

Another important experience has been working with Ratmansky. In addition to *The Bright Stream*, she has danced lead roles in his *Firebird*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Chamber Symphony*. He pushed her to dance bigger—"Just, jump!" he told her in *Bright Stream* rehearsals—but also to find more nuance in the characters. "He directed me almost like a film director directing an actress," she says. "For every step or facial movement he has about 15 notes."

When approaching a new role, she goes to the New York Public Library to seek out archival recordings, if possible with original casts. When she was preparing for her debut as Princess Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*, she watched tapes of Margot Fonteyn. Before Ashton's *La Fille mal gardée*, a friend bought her a DVD starring Nadia Nerina, the original

Lise. "With Fonteyn, it was her dynamics that impress me. The way she emphasized each step with such clarity. With Nerina, it was the vivacity of her jumps and energy. Ballerinas today have a more homogenous look."

But she knows that in the end, it's up to her. She has to shape her own interpretations. "At a certain point you realize you can never please everyone." She's like that offstage, as well. Her friends speak affectionately of her independence of spirit. "One of the first things that struck me about Bella was her incredible sense of who she was, and her wonderful ability to laugh at herself," says ABT corps member Lauren Post, who's known Boylston since the two were students at Harid Conservatory. (Post is the person responsible for her unevenly pierced ears; she pierced them with a sterilized needle and some ice cubes in the Harid dorm.)

One thing Boylston has lacked so far is a strong onstage partnership. That may soon change. Last fall, she performed in Twyla Tharp's *Brahms-Haydn Variations* with the company's newest Danish import, Alban Lendorf. This spring, they're scheduled to dance together in *Swan Lake* (on opening night), Ratmansky's new *Whipped Cream* and "Aurora's Wedding" (the third act of *Sleeping Beauty*). The pairing seems promising; he's strong, with

a solid Danish technique and an appealing stage presence. "He is a dream!" gushes Boylston.

This summer, Boylston is planning a show of her own, back home in Sun Valley. She has commissioned a new evening-length work from her colleague, the budding choreographer Gemma Bond. The score, too, is a commission, from the Brooklyn composer Judd Greenstein, whom she discovered on Spotify. Kate Duhamel will contribute video designs. Plans are still in the initial stages, but she's hoping to use a story or theme that relates to Sun Valley.

In 2015, she and fellow ABT principal James Whiteside collaborated with the filmmaker Yoonha Park and choreographer Justin Peck on a short film, *Early Sunday Morning*, shown at the Tribeca Film Festival. She's currently working on a Hollywood film project, also with Peck, the details of which aren't yet public. She's branching out. "When I was a kid, I was always directing and making things," she says, "and I feel like now I'm ready to spend a little more of my creative energy. I want to do something creative. I want to make things." ■

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Another was her debut in *Giselle*, in 2014, as a soloist. She was high-spirited in the first act, emphasizing the character's love of dance. "I don't think she should be half-dead already," Boylston explains. Her mad scene was understated. But in the second act, she did something extraordinary. It was that moment when Giselle—now transformed into a Wili—raises her leg slowly to the side, then shifts her torso into an arabesque: She did it with such deliberateness and control that the movement became disembodied, like that of a ghost.

Finally, there was her Juliet, a role she debuted last spring season (along with Sir Frederick Ashton's *La Fille mal gardée* and *Sylvia*). Her dancing was impetuous. But there was this one detail: the way she rested her chin on her forearm in the balcony scene, as she dreamed of Romeo. It was totally natural, slightly gawky, exactly what a teenager might do in an unguarded moment.

This freshness is what Damian Woetzel, who made her artist in residence at his Vail International Dance Festival last summer, loves about her dancing: "She's alive in a way that is totally in the moment." The effect is a combination of her personality—open and relaxed—and her very real physical abilities. "The jump is remarkable," says Woetzel, "and it comes out of nowhere."

"She is very alive person," echoes Irina Kolpakova, the great Soviet ballerina of the 1960s who is now Boylston's coach at ABT. "And her body is very talented. She can do everything: jump, turn, stretch, extensions. She is free onstage, and that's not boring."

Still, she's had to work hard. Because of her facility, and, especially, her loose joints, it has taken her some time to achieve a more composed, classical form. She was a late bloomer, she says: "From the time I joined the studio company to when I was 21 or 22, I grew three inches. I have gangly arms and long, hyperextended legs, so it took me a little longer to get the whole package to gel." She and Kolpakova, and Boylston's previous coach, Susan Jaffe, have spent endless hours on her arabesque line in *Swan Lake*. "A lot of it is holding my torso strong, keeping my body together and not ricocheting around." Boylston and Kolpakova often use video of her rehearsals to pinpoint exact details that can be improved.

When it came to acting, she initially lacked confidence. She was self-conscious, in part because she hadn't yet found her way into the stories. As she explains, "a lot of the ballets we do"—especially the 19th-century classics—"the stories are pretty far out." She was more comfortable in new pieces by Christopher Wheeldon and works by Balanchine, where

Boylston, here as Juliet, works with an acting coach to analyze her characters, moment by moment.

