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# DANCE<sup>®</sup>

magazine

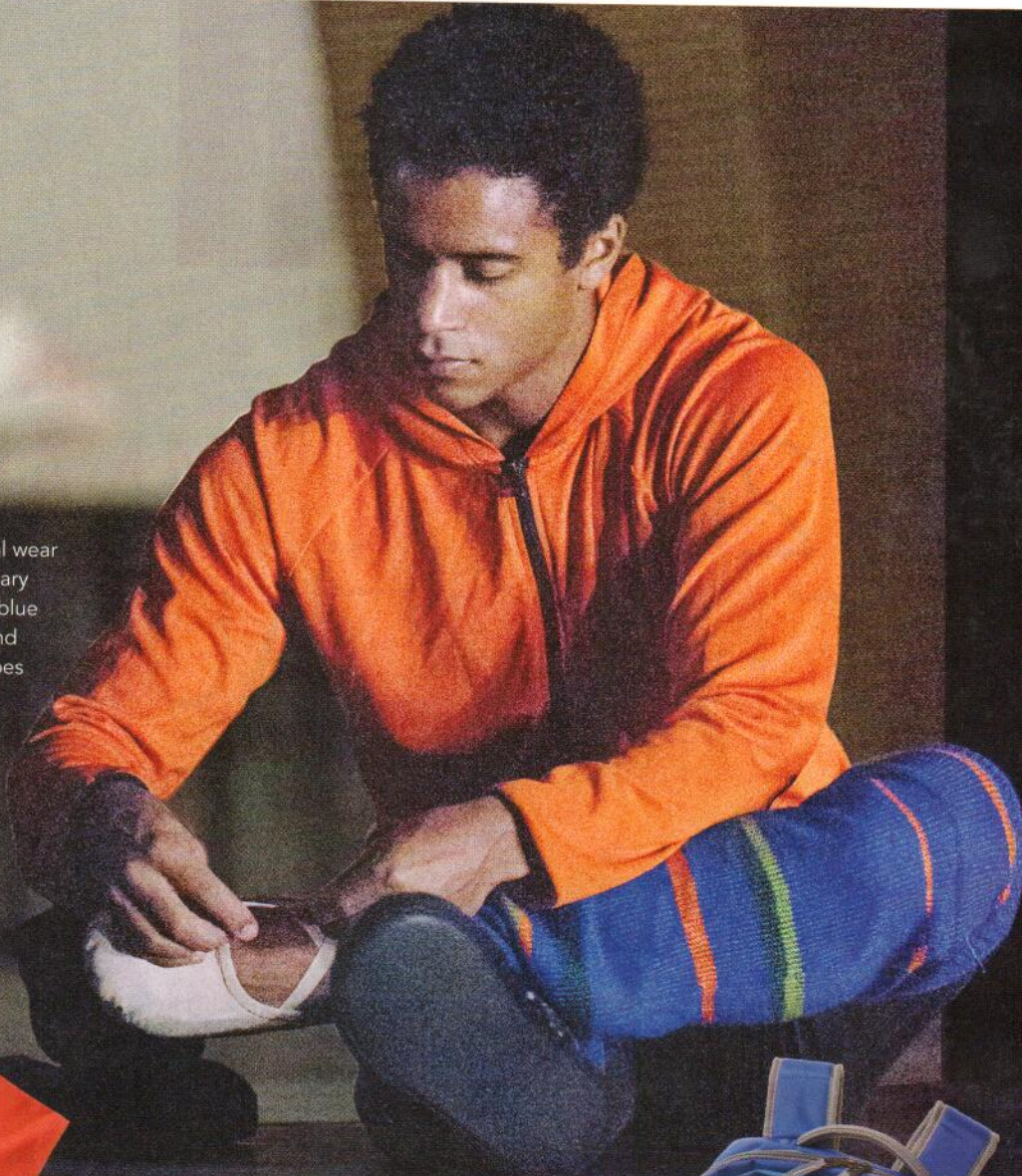


to  
watch

Unity Phelan of New York City Ballet

SUMMER  
STUDY  
GUIDE

Soloist Marcelino Sambé's rehearsal wear is practical and daring all at once. Bold primary colors—the fiery red of his zip-up, the royal blue of his legwarmers—accentuate the power and strength of his movement, while narrow stripes give the look a playful touch.



1



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## SARA MEARNS: ODETTE/ODILE

Tchaikovsky composed his music as if his life depended on it, and Sara Mearns dances Tchaikovsky with the same sense of urgency. "With Tchaikovsky it's very emotional and dramatic," says Mearns. "It's not small in any way, even in a quiet moment. Every moment means something. Tchaikovsky has a way of tapping into those really deep parts that enable you to let yourself go and let it all out."

That connection to Tchaikovsky, along with Mearns' obsession with a VHS tape of Natalia Makarova's *Swan Lake* performance with ABT in 1975, prepared her for a shot-out-of-a-cannon debut in New York City Ballet's *Swan Lake* in 2006. Even though the 19-year-old Mearns had never danced a soloist role with the company, Peter Martins wanted her to learn Odette/Odile three weeks before her scheduled matinee. Adding to the intensity, Mearns contracted a stomach flu the day before. "It was surreal, it was shocking," says Mearns. "I didn't really have any time to get nervous or freak out about it. Or even think about it."

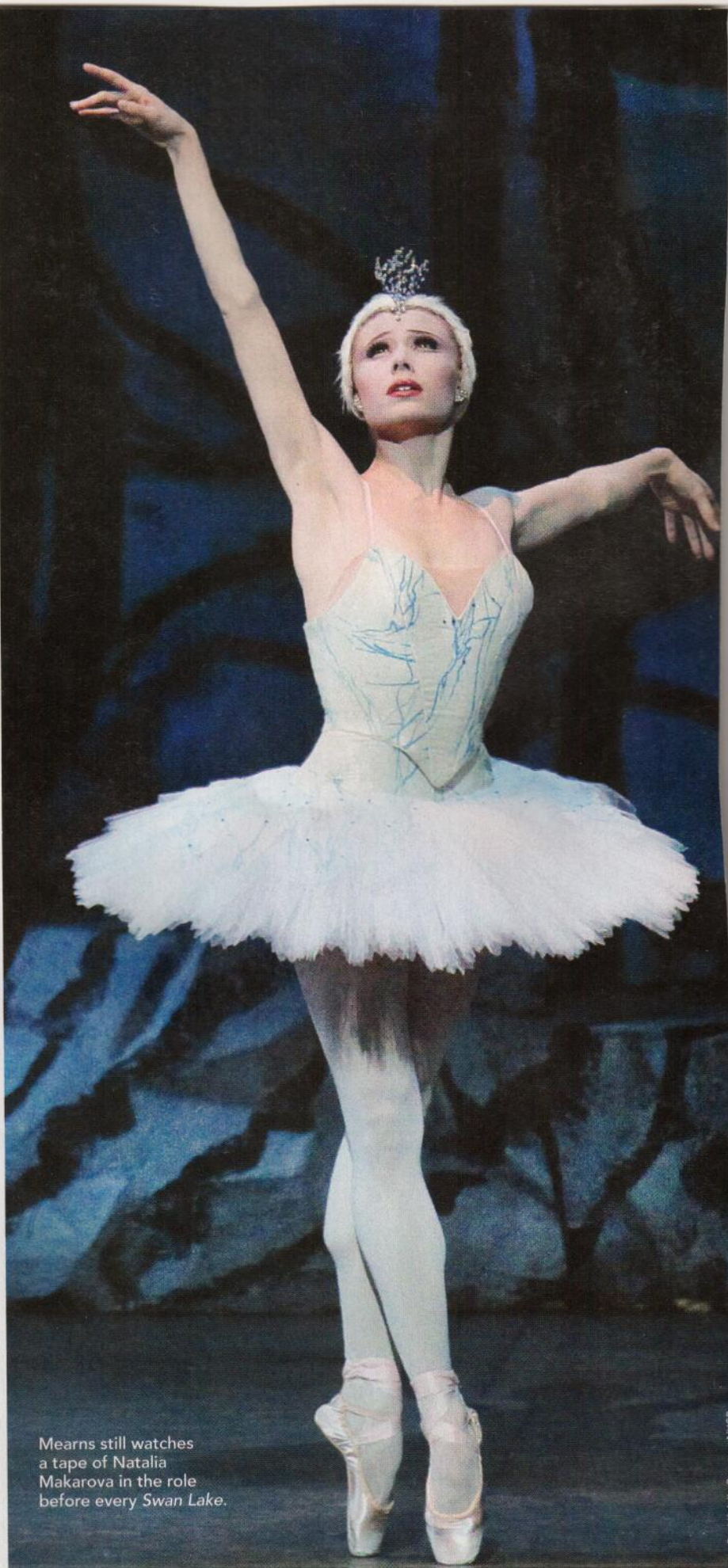
After the performance Merrill Ashley, who had taught her the role, came backstage with tears in her eyes. "I thought, 'I guess I did a good job,'" recalls Mearns. "I was in a daze. I have vivid pictures in my mind of moments right after the show—it was kind of out-of-body, as if I was looking at it from above."

Still, from the roots of that auspicious debut, Mearns has wholeheartedly expanded her interpretation of the dual role. "I definitely approach steps differently, and some steps I emphasize more now. The in-between steps are much more important to me than the tricks—every gesture, every facial expression. I've done the fouettés many times, the solos, the codas, all of that. Everybody does that. But what else do you have to give to it? What comes after that?"

A Valentine's Day-weekend performance in 2011 proved to be a turning point in her portrayal. Mearns and her partner Jared Angle (she calls him her *Swan Lake* "soul mate") had weathered a marathon week of repertory ballets and the opening night of *Swan Lake*. For the Sunday performance, she says, "We couldn't see straight, we were so tired." She didn't think her way through the performance, but instead surrendered to her muscle memory and gut passion. "I never thought about a step, never thought about my turns, nothing," she says. "I believe that was the best show I've ever had in my career." The thunderous applause at the end reminded her of the ovation for Makarova on the videotape (which she still watches before every *Swan Lake*).

"What I learned from that is that it's a much bigger picture—it's not about the steps. It's about what you give emotionally and fully to your performance and the captivating moments at the end that everybody is waiting for." As Odile, Mearns thinks of a type of "vicious, puppet-like person who doesn't really have a soul," easily capable of betrayal. "I've brought it to a human level, and that's how I portray it," she says. "Whatever I've gone through—either that day or that year, or for the past 10 years—all goes into that performance." ■

Joseph Carman is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine.



Mearns still watches a tape of Natalia Makarova in the role before every *Swan Lake*.