

Irlan Silva: From Favela to Boston Ballet First Soloist

BY MARY HIERHOLZER | JANUARY 29, 2016, 20:09 EST



Brazilian dancer Irlan Silva performing in the Boston Ballet's production of Christopher Bruce's *Roost*er. (Photo by Rosalie O'Connor, courtesy of Boston Ballet)

BOSTON – Irlan Silva was 14 years old when he first visited America. As a young Brazilian ballet dancer from the most violent favela, or urban slum, in Rio de Janeiro, Silva traveled to New York to compete in the 2005 Youth America Grand Prix. It was his first international dance competition, and he returned home with first prize. But one award wasn't enough. In 2008, he returned to the competition and earned Best Contemporary Dancer and first place in the Pas de Deux, which is choreographed for two.

These were only the first big steps in Silva's blossoming career. Now 25-years-old and in his fifth season with the Boston Ballet, he was recently promoted to First Soloist. It was his second promotion during this season alone.

A First Soloist is a dancer in the ballet company above the Corps de Ballet, who are dancers who perform as a group onstage. First Soloists perform the majority of the solo and minor roles in a ballet. The highest ranked performer is a Principal Dancer, who is usually a star of the ballet. "Irlan is such an invigorating performer," Mikko Nissinen, the Boston Ballet's artistic director, said in a prepared statement on Jan. 19.

The Boston Ballet is not the only group to take an interest in Silva's talent. During the 2008 competition, Silva inspired a critically acclaimed documentary, "[Only When I Dance](#)," released in 2010. The Boston Ballet will host a [free screening](#) of the film at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester on Friday, Feb. 5, at 7 p.m.

The filmmakers followed Silva and his friend, dancer [Isabela Coracy](#), chronicling their transitions from dancing students in Rio to professional ballet careers.

Isabela and I, Silva said, "both had almost the same problem about coming from a poor place in Rio and trying to reach your dreams to become a professional ballet dancer." Silva first saw the documentary when it was shown at the

Tribeca Film Festival in 2009. He said it was an emotional experience to see his story on the big screen. Nevertheless, he looks forward to sharing the story with Boston audiences.

“The documentary tells about that and getting to the place where you want to be,” Silva said. “It’s not just about dance, it’s about life in general because from our story you can take a little piece from yourself as well.” His optimistic attitude is evident as soon as he hits the stage, bringing a happy authenticity to his performance. It is easy to spot Silva onstage; show after show, his infectious smile and energy are captivating, even when he is stretched to his limits. “You have to be prepared for anything,” he said. “Anything can happen at the last minute.” And recently, it did. When two injuries kept soloists from performing in “[Third Symphony of Gustav Mahler](#)” in October, Silva rose to the occasion, dancing Principal, Soloist, and Corps de Ballet roles. “I thought to myself, ‘Wow, this is my chance,’” he said. It was indeed Silva’s chance to prove his capability, and his hours of learning multiple roles in an exceptionally difficult ballet paid off. “He has matured, and he rose to the occasion in a major way with ‘Third Symphony of Gustav Mahler,’” Nissinen said. “He is ready for the next level of challenges.”

Silva was one of three dancers to earn a new title in the mid-season promotions. [Paul Craig](#) was also promoted to First Soloist, and [Alexander Maryianowski](#) was promoted into the Corps de Ballet. “This means a lot because I’ve been working really hard,” Silva said. “To be promoted for the second time in a year means that they are seeing my work and they are happy with what I am delivering onstage and how I’m working day-by-day.” Silva said he is looking forward to dancing in “Swan Lake” later this season, but his long-term plans stretch well beyond that. “My next goal,” he said, “is to become a Principal Dancer.”