



ABT'S HOMEGROWN BALLERINAS

Isabella Boylston, Hee Seo and Sarah Lane have grown up at American Ballet Theatre. Now, they stand poised to lead the company's next generation.

By Joseph Carman

Photography by Nathan Sayers

Ascending the ranks to "ballerina" status at American Ballet Theatre comprises the stuff of dreams for many dancers. Since its inception in 2003, ABT's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School has been steadily molding students who graduate into the company. But within the last two decades, only several women have successfully journeyed from the ABT Studio Company to star. Three ballerinas emblematic of that distinction take a particular pride in being homegrown: Hee Seo, Isabella Boylston and soloist Sarah Lane.

Along the way, they have reaped sublime rewards, peppered with self-doubt, will power, patience, corps de ballet fatigue and a firm focus on their goals. While ABT regularly imports international guest stars for its spring Met season—a source of frustration for some dancers—Seo, Boylston and Lane have carved out a place for themselves in the company and in the hearts of their audience.

Alexei Ratmansky, ABT's artist in residence, has championed their talents; all three will dance *Aurora* in his acclaimed new production of *The Sleeping Beauty* in June. And with the retirement this season of three ballerinas crucial to ABT's identity—Julie Kent,

Paloma Herrera and Xiomara Reyes—these younger dancers now take center stage, becoming role models for the next generation.

Hee Seo

Lauded for her grace, delicacy and willowy strength, South Korean-born Hee Seo joined the ABT Studio Company in 2004 after studying in Korea and at the Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington, DC. She became a company apprentice in 2005 and was granted a corps de ballet contract in 2006. While still in the corps, she was cast in several principal roles, including her dream role of Juliet.

"I take big-time pride in being an ABT dancer," says Seo. "I know what it's like in every rank, from apprentice to principal. It gives me a good idea of how to understand people, and I think that is what ballet is about—understanding a human's life."

At the start of her career, Seo says she made the mistake of "knowing exactly how I was going to dance a full-length ballet from the beginning." She found it tough to concede to her partners' wishes or ideas. "I'm a princess," she says with a giggle. But now she's learned to be flexible with other points of view. "It's teamwork," she says.

Boylston, Seo and Lane
in costume for ABT's
new production of *The
Sleeping Beauty*



Seo, 28, didn't presume she would become a principal (although she had a burning desire) and admits she had doubts. "I didn't like something about myself. I think people are unhappy when there is a gap between what you think you are and what other people think you are."

With support from her family, artistic director Kevin McKenzie and coach Irina Koipakova, Seo linked her soul to her roles. "I truly believe that you can't fake who you are, especially onstage," she says. "You have to grow as a person first. Then everything else comes along."

In 2012, McKenzie made her a principal, because, she says, "he saw that I was able to physically maintain those heavy roles and was mentally

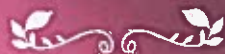
ready to push myself." Still, when the retirement of ABT's three senior ballerinas was announced, she initially felt scared. "I've only been a principal for two years. You always feel like there's someone you can learn from or look up to."

Seo prefers the mental and physical challenge of full-length ballets over repertory works. She cites Ratmansky's *Sleeping Beauty*, with the choreographer's imperative to "bring back the grace and femininity" and his emphasis on clarity of mime, as a milestone in her career. The ballet that has been most challenging for her: *Swan Lake* with its pesky 32 fouettés. Still, she's had practice. Due to other dancers' injuries, she had to perform three *Swan Lakes* in one week.

Nonetheless, ballerina roles are usually rationed during the Met spring season to accommodate both the ABT principals and visiting artists. But Seo claims that she doesn't resent guest dancers because of the artistry and energy she gleanes from them. And she's a guest artist in her own right: In April 2014, she danced *Giselle* with the Mariinsky Ballet.



"Try not to compare yourself to others. If you have a great goal and work ethic, you can get there in your own way."



Sarah Lane

As one of ABT's most radiant and expressive dancers, Sarah Lane was promoted to soloist in 2007, four years after her apprenticeship. Having proved herself in such diverse ballets as *Theme and Variations* and *Sinatra Suite* and in roles ranging from Aurora to Swanilda to Clara in *The Nutcracker*, she acknowledges the enigma of why she hasn't been promoted to principal. "I don't specifically say, 'Why don't you promote me?'" says Lane, 30. "In the end that's management's decision. If I'm not a humble dancer, I've lost everything that is special about being an artist and I can't be grounded enough to express what I want to in my dancing. That's the reason I'm not incredibly pushy."

Lane admits she "would die" to dance roles like *Giselle* or *Juliet* someday. "It's hard when someone from outside the company comes in and gets an opportunity. But I don't want to focus too much on that because it's not going to change anything."

One obstacle Lane has mitigated is her approach to performance nerves. "I've always been very on edge before I go on stage," she says. Now she centers herself by focusing on why she dances. "It just comes down to loving what I do and having a lot of beautiful things in my life that I try to take with me on stage," says Lane, who has been married to former ABT corps dancer Luis Ribagorda for seven years. She now even makes light of it with her frequent partner Joseph Gorak. "Joey and I were laughing today because we're both so OCD—we're always analyzing things too much," she says with a chuckle.

Two seasons ago, Ratmansky created the role of Miranda in *The Tempest* for Lane, and she has danced a number of his ballets, including *Seven Sonatas* and *The Bright Stream*. "He's a really tough person to please," she says. "That's actually a positive thing because I always appreciate the challenge." Lane identifies with Aurora, a role she thinks has been career-shifting. "The qualities in her character that the fairies bring her are ones that I strive to have as a person every day—even though I fall short."

Lane says she has considered dancing with another company, "but for now ABT is my home." Because she never expected to be hired by ABT as a young dancer, she's happy that she's come so far. "The people that you grow up with and the people who support you are your family," she adds.

Among those are the three ballerinas retiring this season. "The saddest thing would be to see the legacy of those amazing principal dancers lost," says Lane. "I hold that as a responsibility to measure up to."



"Work hard, but don't lose who you are. Try to maintain balance in your life."



Isabella Boylston

"I think there's a level of support you get from the company when you're a homegrown dancer," says Isabella Boylston, who in nine years zipped through the troupe's ranks from ABT Studio Company to principal dancer in 2014. "We're rooting for each other."

Boylston exhibits amplitude, femininity and a natural sense of command in her dancing, but she credits Kolpakova, Susan Jaffe and the late Georgina Parkinson for shepherding her into leading roles. Ratmansky cast Boylston, then in the corps, in her first full-length principal role in his *Bright Stream*. But living in the odd purgatory between soloist and principal proved trying. "I would be doing Odette/Odile and then have to dance big swans and the pas de trois the next day," she says.

Boylston felt a sense of responsibility towards preparing herself for principal status. "I definitely put in a lot of extra time on my own in the studio. At ABT you have to prophesy your own future. You have to show them you want it."

She has also had to be consistent when ballerina roles come once annually. "I would love to have three or four *Swan Lakes*, for example," she explains. "It's hard because the stakes are so high if you get that one show every year."

Boylston thinks she made the biggest career impressions with her interpretations of Aurora, Odette/Odile and Giselle, with the latter carrying the most dramatic challenges. "You're putting yourself in a really vulnerable place when you're doing a mad scene in front of your peers," she says. She would love to dance Juliet, Manon and more Balanchine roles, and relishes working with new choreographers.

"One of the most rewarding experiences was probably Christopher Wheeldon's *Thirteen Diversions*," says Boylston. "I felt that Chris recognized my individual qualities and highlighted them."

Savvy at self-promotion through social media and her website, Boylston has acquired numerous prestigious guesting engagements by herself. Last April, she danced *Swan Lake* with the National Ballet of China in Beijing. She has also performed Gamzatti in *La Bayadère* with the Mariinsky Ballet and the Sugar Plum Fairy in the Balanchine version of *The Nutcracker* with the Royal Danish Ballet.

Now 28, Boylston says it seems strange not to be the baby ballerina anymore. "I grew up on Julie and Paloma. They were the reason I wanted to be in ABT. I think it'll be very emotional to see them go." P



“Always approach your career with joy. It should be about doing what you love.”