A Young Dancer Searches for Her Juliet

Isabella Boylston will dance the part this week at the Metropolitan Opera House.

American Ballet Theatre Principal Dancer Isabella Boylston rehearses her role of Juliet in ‘Romeo and Juliet’ at the Met Opera House. PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By PIA CATTON
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American Ballet Theatre has long relied on flashy guest stars to light up its roster, but the company’s emphasis has shifted to spotlighting homegrown ballet talent.

Among the beneficiaries: Idaho-born Isabella Boylston, who will headline “Romeo and Juliet” for the first time Wednesday at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Ms. Boylston, age 29, reached the top ranks at Ballet Theatre as a principal dancer in 2014 and has steadily taken on lead roles, gaining critical praise for her strong jump and athletic spark in ballets like Alexei Ratmansky’s “Firebird.” Playing Juliet, though, calls for a dramatic dancer-actress, shifting from childish girl to passionate lover to tragic heroine. Her preparations are rooted in treating dance and theater equally.

“You learn the choreography, and you take into account aesthetic things. How does this look?” she said. “Then you have to forget how it looks and go to how it feels. What is your motivation for everything?”

It is an approach she learned from an acting coach before her 2014 debut in “Giselle,” one of ballet’s most important roles and one that requires a sharp switch from a bubbly peasant girl to a jilted undead spirit.

Acting enhanced her work overall, she said, when she deepened her use of imagination. “People assume it’s a natural gift,” she said. “That might be true to some extent, but it’s a craft. There are skills you can learn.”

Ms. Boylston also tapped expert help: Her coach is retired Ballet Theatre principal Julie Kent, who created a signature Juliet: delicate at first, adding glamour to love scenes and then a picture of abject despair in the tomb. Ms. Kent first danced the role in 1992, learning it from Georgina Parkinson, who danced in the production’s original 1965 cast under choreographer Kenneth MacMillan at London’s Royal Ballet.

Teaching a new generation how to achieve the lines and shapes the choreographer intended is crucial in ballet, and the company’s artistic director, Kevin McKenzie, oversees the process by pairing current dancers with former stars and watching rehearsals.
“If you don’t protect it, it is easy for it to look like anything else and lose what made it so groundbreaking at the time,” said Ms. Kent.

At times, her guidance is paired with freedom to explore, said Ms. Boylston: “She’ll say, ‘You make a choice. Do it with conviction, and we’ll tell you if it works or not.’ ”

Laughing at the wrong time definitely doesn’t work, as Ms. Boylston discovered with her Romeo, James Whiteside, a friend who became a principal dancer in 2013. “We got to the kiss, and we were cracking up,” said Ms. Boylston. “He’s like my brother, my best friend.”

Mr. McKenzie wasn’t amused, making the dancers repeat the entire scene. Lesson learned. “Since then, we were really serious,” she said.

Ms. Boylston preparing to rehearse. PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Then there are tricks of the trade. While rehearsing the bedroom scene, Mr. Whiteside twirled Ms. Boylston in a lift that made her so dizzy she had to stop and stand. Ms. Kent’s solution: Shut your eyes.

An obvious note, maybe, but tiny stagecraft details add up to a fluid, relaxed performance in front of a New York ballet audience that has seen masterful performances in this role.

Ballet Theatre first staged this production in 1985, and it returns regularly. Fans flock to it again and again to see how different dancers portray the doomed lovers, just as audiences do to see great actors play Hamlet or Macbeth.

“When it is danced by experienced couples, it looks so natural,” said Ms. Kent. “But it takes a lot of hours and years to make it look that way.”

With this debut, Ms. Boylston is at the start of a process that can continue for a decade or so as she develops the character—after years spent working up to this rank.

Her dancing began at age 3, though she was also outdoorsy and an avid skier in Sun Valley. As she grew more serious about ballet, she attended a boarding school to focus on it, and at 18 moved to New York to join Ballet Theater’s feeder company in 2005.

In 2007, she joined the corps de ballet, or ensemble, of the main company. For a young dancer who had obsessively watched Ballet Theatre stars on VHS, it was an achievement to take classes and be onstage with those dancers.

“It was surreal when I finally got in the same room with these people,” she said.

Now her goal is to hone characters like Juliet by relying on real-life experience: “I just want to make it as real as I can for myself and then hopefully it will be real for the audience, too.”