



# Sara Mearns Keeps Dancing The star talks about her multifaceted projects.

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Since being promoted to principal in 2008 at New York City Ballet, a company she joined as an apprentice in 2003, Sara Mearns has been, by turns, a forceful, sensual, tender and mysterious presence on the stage. In addition to mastering repertory works by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, the South Carolina native has also originated roles in pieces by top choreographers like [Justin Peck](#), Alexei Ratmansky and Christopher Wheeldon. Recently, her star has been burning brighter off-stage, too. This summer, she starred in campaigns for Luna Bar and HP and is designing an ongoing capsule collection of shoes and soon handbags with Cole Haan.

As the NYCB's fall season kicks off, notably with a splashy Cartier-sponsored gala on September 30<sup>th</sup>, we chatted with the 29 year-old about *Swan Lake*, Oscar de la Renta costumes and what it means to be modern day ballerina.

**You are premiering in *Swan Lake* this season. I read that *Swan Lake* was actually the first major role you had years ago, before you became a soloist. How does dancing it now compare to when you first starting out? How has the role grown for you and vice versa?**

It's been ten years for me and just thinking about that and everything I've gone through these past ten years has been pretty emotional and surreal for me. *Swan Lake* is so emotional—all the more so for me because it's such a special thing, seeing the role as a more established dancer and a seasoned dancer. I'm not a naive 19 year-old anymore, so it's definitely been a process getting to this place.

Actually this past weekend it all sort of came together for my partner and me. It feels really good and I'm just now really, really excited. During the dress rehearsal on Friday, I got really emotional when I was about to go out on stage and I didn't expect that.



**And you're dancing in a couple of new ballets this season, choreographed by Robert Binet and Kim Brandstrup, respectively. Which do you find more challenging: tackling a new piece or revisiting something like *Swan Lake* and having to find a new, different circuit in the familiarity?**

Creating a new work is always challenging because you have to

try the steps over and over and over again—you don't know what's going to work, or what the choreographer wants and so it can be a very long process. So those days can be really hard on your body. With a ballet like *Swan Lake* that I've done for ten years, I know the steps; it's just putting it back in my body and finding new ways of doing it and improving on those techniques and the steps. So it's just two different extremes and so this past month, but I mean, I guess that's what makes us such a diverse company and the fact that we can do so many things at the same time. It's being able to change, to mold to each new thing you're doing. It's fun.

**You're 29, which is so young, but ballet dancers function on a different professional time line. Earlier this summer, a *New York Times* piece referred to you as being in the prime of your career. Do you feel that you are in your prime?**

A ballerina's career is so short and it's kind of hard for me to think that these are going to be the best years of my career and after that it's just going to suck. You know? I don't want to think about it like that. But it's a great feeling to think that I'm in the best time of my career and everything is going so well. You always dream about this moment, finally being comfortable and respecting the artist that you are and basically saying, this is who I am, this is what I want to be.

**Speaking of new things, you had a cameo in the musical *On the Town* on Broadway this summer. How did that happen and what was the experience**

**like?**

Well my boyfriend [Joshua Bergasse] choreographed the show, and he created that little cameo appearance on me in the dance lab. And we would always joke about what if I had to get thrown into this little part because someone slipped out. And one day he texted me and was like, Honey, I think you're actually going to have to go on stage. And I was like, Oh yeah right. I thought he was kidding. He was like No, the girls who were able to do the part are out. I was like, Wow okay. And I had two hours. I had to go over there and fit the costumes and just have one rehearsal on stage with my partner. So yeah, in two hours we were on stage doing it and then we left. It was the best experience ever.

**You've recently had a lot non-dance projects, collaborating with HP and Luna Bar and Cole Haan, for whom you designed a pair of shoes. And then you're very active on Instagram. Do you feel the role of a ballerina in contemporary culture has changed a lot in recent years?**

Just in the past year and a half ballet itself has been pushed to the forefront of culture and is being accepted as equal to sports, which in my mind it always has been, obviously, because what we do on a daily basis is extremely physical—we are top athletes! So to be recognized like that is awesome. And I do think it's important to put myself out there on social media like that, on Twitter and especially Instagram. Probably most of my 30,000 followers are girls from ages 10-15 and that's how their dreams stay alive nowadays. I didn't have that when I was younger. I had VHS tapes. And I still have them, I still watch those VHS tapes of *Swan Lake* that I watched when I was 10.

**At the Fall gala on September 30<sup>th</sup>, you'll be performing in the Robert Binet world premiere and Peter Martins' *Thou Swell*, with costumes by Hanako Maeda of Adeam and Peter Copping of Oscar de la Renta, respectively. How important are costumes to your performance?**

Costumes play a huge part in any ballet because they have to have a certain look, the right feel... and you have to be able to move in them. That's sometimes the biggest challenge. We have to be able to move in any sort of way and get our legs up in them and jump in them and the guys have to be able to partner with us. I think that's the most challenging thing for the designers to figure out, but we have an amazing costume department. Marc Happel one of my very dear friends is the costume director and he's worked with designers for decades so he really knows his stuff. For this Peter Martins ballet, my character is a very romantic and glamorous. We eventually came up with a great dress. I'm really, really excited about it. I actually kind of want to wear the dress for the dinner afterwards.

**Are you allowed to?**

I mean I probably could if I wanted to, because it's like a gala gown, literally, but I think they're dressing us in his actual dresses, so that's good, too.

**How do you handle the social interactions and intensity of a gala crowd after giving such a physically demanding performance on stage?**

It is very challenging to have to go and sit for like two to three hours afterwards. But we only have to do it once a season and so we kind of just suck it up. And you know we're sitting with amazing people, I mean I got to sit next to Valentino and Giancarlo [Giammetti] at the last gala and I was like, okay, I don't have any objections to this! I've done it for so many years. And I like to get dressed up. Yes, our job looks so glamorous, but we don't get dressed up very often, we don't get to wear these amazing gowns and shoes and I love that. I love playing dress up like that. so that's totally fine with me, I have no problem with that.

**What about the heels, though? How do you put them on after having been on pointe?**

That does suck a little bit, but again, you deal with it and when you're sitting at the table, you take your shoes off underneath. I take my shoes off totally. I walk on them as little as possible. And usually, if [my boyfriend] Josh is sitting next to me, I'll put my feet up on his lap. You can't see it.