
David Hallberg isn't just one of the great ballet dancers of the era. He's the first principal dancer to perform for the two most important companies in the world: American Ballet Theatre in New York and the Bolshoi in Moscow. Maggie Shipstead talks to the ambassador of a new age of ballet.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Photographs by Henry Leutwyler

DAVID HALLBERG'S DAY begins at the barre. This austere wooden railing is where he gets right with his body, casts off the fogginess of sleep, the soreness of yesterday, sweeps his limbs in and out, up and down in time with the piano, puts his muscles and tendons and ligaments through their paces, reminds them of their responsibilities. The barre might be in New York, where Hallberg has been a principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre since 2005, or in Moscow, where in 2011 he became the



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city altogether—the location doesn't really matter. In a life defined by movement, the barre is a constant. The barre is bedrock.

But if you are fortunate enough to be in the audience when Hallberg is on stage, you would be forgiven for mistaking him for an apparition that has materialized fully formed: the ideal ballet prince, no barre necessary, no sweat required. Hallberg is tall, with long, gracefully proportioned limbs and a wintry cream-and-gold beauty that, in the blue glow of *Swan Lake*'s shore or the haunted forest in *Giselle*, is otherworldly. His technique is pure and classical; his textbook extension is enhanced by his extraordinarily arched feet; his height seems not to diminish his quickness and lightness. Inescapably, the word used to describe his onstage presence is *noble*, and though, yes, he embodies courtly refinement more naturally and believably than any 32-year-old from Arizona has a right to, Hallberg is not content to rest on his princely laurels. He is a restless, questing artist, always seeking new challenges and expanded horizons, whether geographically or choreographically—as when he danced the dark sorcerer Kaschei in Alexei Ratmansky's *Firebird* with vampy malevolence.

"Every company has its style, and that's what makes the Bolshoi so impressive," he says. "Their *attack* on jumps, or their *attack* on choreography." The invitation to join the storied company, extended by artistic director Sergei Filin when Hallberg was performing in Moscow with ABT, initially came as a shock. "It didn't feel like a logical step," he says. "It felt like I was making a big move and taking a

big risk." Hallberg's immaculate technique and calm aura were not necessarily an obvious fit for the Bolshoi, which is known for the fiery bigness and boldness of its aesthetic. (Lately, and troublingly, it has also been known for a horrific acid attack on Filin in January 2013 that was orchestrated by a disgruntled dancer and has necessitated more than 20 operations to repair Filin's face and salvage some of his eyesight.) Hallberg sought the advice of Ratmansky, who was Filin's predecessor at the Bolshoi and is now artist-in-residence at ABT. His answer was unequivocal, Hallberg recalls. "He said, 'You must go. It's once in a career.'"

Or once in history.

THE BOLSHOI BALLET was founded in 1776. Until the twentieth century, it struggled to compete with its St. Petersburg rival, the Imperial Russian Ballet (later called the Kirov and now the Mariinsky), but during the Soviet era, when the capital of the empire moved to Moscow, proximity to the Kremlin brought advantages. After Stalin's ascension, the Bolshoi became a de facto court theater, a means of rewarding those in power with glittering entertainments, a cultural buttress for the Communist regime via its often propagandistic repertoire, and a showpiece for visitors from abroad. As the Cold War hardened, ballet, like many other artistic, athletic, and technological fields, took on new significance in the battle to prove the superiority of a national system. The Soviet machine, with its amply endowed state-run schools and companies, forged undeniably excellent dancers but stifled

Previous page: American Ballet Theatre soloist Stella Abrera's pre-curtain warm-up before *Swan Lake* in New York, one of Hallberg's two homes. **Right:** Hallberg in his dressing room, getting ready to dance *Swan Lake*. **Below:** A rack of frothy tutus backstage at ABT.



HOW TO SEE THE BOLSHOI IN MOSCOW

The Bolshoi's Moscow season runs between October and May. Travel specialist Greg Tepper of Exeter International says you should arrange for tickets as far in advance as possible, since they sell out quickly (orchestra seats on bolshoi.ru sell for \$150 to \$300; for popular performances, they can go for up to \$1,000 on the secondary market). Tepper can also arrange a private backstage tour with a historian. "This is one of the grand historic theaters of the world," he says. "No one should miss it" (813-251-5355; greg@exeter.com)







them artistically. Stylistic experimentation was forbidden, as was travel to the West except on official tours accompanied by KGB chaperones.

In 1924, George Balanchine defected while on tour in Germany with the Soviet State Dancers. Rudolf Nureyev defected in France in 1961. Natalia Makarova failed to appear for a performance with the Kirov Ballet troupe at London's Royal Festival Hall in 1970; she sought asylum instead. In 1974, Mikhail Baryshnikov, touring with the Kirov, ran out a stage door in Toronto and was spirited away in a waiting car, never to return to his home country. Among American ballet fans, a certain nostalgia for the defector days sometimes surfaces. How dramatic that a dancer would make tremendous sacrifices to dance on our stages instead of theirs! How reassuring! How thrilling it was when suddenly one day you could go out and buy a ticket to see a fully armed artist, a star, who had been previously unreachable, locked away behind the Iron Curtain, but who had risked everything for freedom.

Such nostalgia is, of course, silly. Defection was wrenching for those who undertook it, and the decades-long freeze on cross-pollination among the world's best dancers and choreographers benefited no one. "You're Benedict Arnold in slightly tighter pants," Stephen Colbert joked to Hallberg after he joined the Bolshoi, a sly take on Hallberg's status as symbol of a new world order, one that isn't perfect but at least allows a dancer to join both the Bolshoi and ABT without committing treason. If dance, for two countries with a fractious history and a tense present, is a mutually comprehensible language, when Hallberg is something of a poet laureate. Who better to represent the state of American art? Who better to turn rivalry into collaboration? In July, he performed *Swan Lake* with the Bolshoi at Lincoln Center. "It was a homecoming of sorts," he says. "It was as if I were welcoming the Bolshoi to the U.S. and showing the U.S. the Bolshoi." As photographer Henry Leutwyler—who took the images here—puts it: "He's an ambassador for both."

AND YET, being an ambassador has demanded a period of adjustment as well. In 2004, when Hallberg first visited Moscow to dance in a gala, the city left him cold. "It wasn't as accessible as other cities I'd visited," he says. "But once I moved here, I met some great friends who showed me their side of Moscow." His friends tend not to be dancers but artists and photographers and people in the fashion world—global wanderers like himself. Moscow today is nothing like the dour Soviet metropolis of putt-putting Ladas and empty shelves it once was. This is a city of conspicuous abundance, of high-fashion boutiques and luxury

complete with round-the-clock babushka doorwomen, was "furnished very nouveau Russia," he says. "I had to swap some things." In fact, he has adapted so well to his bicontinental lifestyle that when he returned to New York this past May, he was disoriented. "I'd lost the pace of New York. Moscow became more home," he says. "New York at times runs me dry because there's so much to do. There's never enough time to do everything. It's nice to have the balance in Moscow."

Not that Hallberg is a stranger to being dropped into foreign environments. At 16, he moved from Phoenix to Paris to study at the Paris Opera Ballet School. "I didn't know anyone," he says. "I didn't speak the language. So I went in blind to everything, and that's essentially what happened in Russia. But the benefits I reaped when I left Paris and looked back on the experience completely outweighed all the hardships, and that's what I realized Moscow would be. I'm pushed very hard in Russia. I have no choice but to improve. Sink or swim." Both the Paris Opera Ballet and the Bolshoi are state theaters and, as such, the object of considerable national pride and weighty expectations. In those companies' schools, Leutwyler says, "it's ballet, ballet, ballet, ballet, bed; ballet, ballet, ballet, bed. And the state is watching." That Hallberg was welcomed into both institutions is a testament to the universal appeal of his talent; he is coveted and, fortunately, lives in an era when he can be shared.

On YouTube, you can find Hallberg's audition tape for the Paris Opera Ballet School. In it, he is impossibly lanky in black tights, with big white-slipped feet like a rabbit's, his blond hair slicked close to his head. He wobbles here and there, but already you can see the regal carriage of head and shoulders, the supple back, the flawless fifth position. Thousands of miles away in France, someone was about to open an airmail envelope filled with the ballet equivalent of uncut diamonds. While recorded music plays, Hallberg works at the barre and then moves into the center floor, a solemn young ghost of the artist he will become.

This is something uniquely moving about ballet: The appearance of effortlessness comes only through years of the most taxing effort, through dogged, endless repetition, through bloody feet and perpetually aching muscles, and through a relentless pursuit of perfection made with full, poignant knowledge that perfection will never be possible. All this work is done with the purpose of rendering itself invisible. The dancer labors so that he may offer a performance to an audience as a gift, so that they may thrill at the possibilities of the body, at the dancer's freedom of movement. For those watching David Hallberg perform in Moscow or New York or

