

DANCE

Isabella Boylston on Treasuring ‘Giselle’ and Trusting Herself

By GIA KOURLAS MAY 8, 2015

Some years are so full of happy transformation that they seem conjured from a fortuneteller’s hopeful reading. In 2014, the ballerina Isabella Boylston had one of those years. She danced her first Giselle, magnificently, with American Ballet Theater and was promoted to principal soon after. She got married. “He’s not a dancer,” Ms. Boylston said, flashing a smile. “He works in finance.” And she performed as a guest artist at the Mariinsky Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet. “You show up, and they’re expecting you to be this prima ballerina,” she said. “So you just have to fill the shoes.”

Ms. Boylston said that year boiled down to one thing: She learned to trust herself.

“I’ll speak out, and I didn’t used to be like that at all,” she said in an interview after a recent rehearsal. “I was trying so hard to do what people wanted me to do that I had to realize what they wanted was for me to shape the movement myself.”

Most dancers can’t help revealing their true selves in the studio. Ms. Boylston, assertive, self-deprecating and confident enough at 28 to recognize when something’s not working, doesn’t keep her opinions to herself. In preparation for Ballet Theater’s spring season at the Metropolitan Opera

House, which begins on Monday, she ran through Odile's variation in "Swan Lake" with Ballet Theater's artistic director, Kevin McKenzie.

"I just wish I'd danced it better instead of doing the steps," she said of what she had just done. "It feels very blunt."

A bit later, her self-criticism took a darker turn. "I feel like that's the most averagely executed by me," she said. "It's such a nothing."

Earlier that day, the teacher Irina Kolpakova, rehearsing Ms. Boylston in "Giselle," had insisted that she hold her body higher while in arabesque to capture the ballet's 19th-century Romantic quality.

"I know," Ms. Boylston said, with some resignation, "you don't want me to move."

And Ms. Boylston lives to move, which can be difficult in a Romantic ballet like "Giselle," where freedom is found in restraint.

"That's what we're working on right now, which doesn't always come naturally to me," she said later. "I feel like the expressiveness gets lost. Now that I have this foundation for 'Giselle,' I'm trying to recapture that Romantic style but still do it in my own way."

This season is a busy one for Ms. Boylston, who reprises "Giselle," along with "Theme and Variations," "Les Sylphides," "La Bayadère" and "Swan Lake." She will also, on June 10, perform Aurora in Alexei Ratmansky's new production of "The Sleeping Beauty."

But "Giselle," though she's only danced the part twice, is her most treasured role.

"I really felt like I connected with her and became her," Ms. Boylston said of the heroine, a young peasant girl who dies of a broken heart after learning that Albrecht, the man she loves, is really a count engaged to a princess.

“Everyone’s experienced heartbreak,” she said. “I could draw from my own experiences.”

“Of course, you don’t want to just play yourself,” she continued. “You have to try to find who Giselle is and bring you to her, not the other way around.”

At Ballet Theater, Ms. Boylston, known as Bella to her friends, is a rare sight among the roster of principal dancers. Not only is she an American in a company best known for its Russian imports, but she is both a dramatic ballerina and a dancer with the technical chops for Balanchine’s “Theme and Variations.” With the departures this season of Julie Kent, Paloma Herrera and Xiomara Reyes, a dancer like Ms. Boylston represents Ballet Theater’s future.

She has a way of locating the vulnerability of a character like Giselle, even though acting is still relatively new to her. Ms. Boylston’s acting coach, Byam Stevens, explained that she “has an incredible sense of honesty, which is a huge gift.”

“If she doesn’t believe it,” he added, “she isn’t going to do it.”

Her other asset is her spectacular ballet body: Hyperextended legs and arched feet give her limbs an otherworldly length. And there’s that dazzling, elastic jump, which she didn’t know she had before working on the pas de trois in “Swan Lake” years ago with the ballet mistress Georgina Parkinson.

“After I did the cabriole section, George just looked at me,” she said. “I was thinking, Oh, no — was that really bad? And she was just like, ‘Your jump.’”

Ms. Boylston began dancing when she was 3 in Sun Valley, Idaho, where she was also a skater and skier. The first day she could walk, her parents sent her down the mountain. (They used a harness.) She spent her early years living in a trailer with her younger brother and her bohemian parents, who met on a ski lift. “My mom’s from Sweden, and she was on a business trip and she met

my dad, who was basically a full-time drummer and ski bum,” she said. “They fell in love.”

There was no television; she and her brother practically lived outdoors — camping, hiking and skiing. But there was also dancing. When she was 7, her family moved to Colorado, where she continued training at Boulder Ballet and the Academy of Colorado Ballet. From there, she moved to Florida to study at the Harid Conservatory.

After John Meehan spotted her at a summer intensive for Ballet Theater, she joined ABT Studio Company in 2005. Two years later, she became a member of Ballet Theater’s corps de ballet and in 2011 was named a soloist. At that time, she knew what she needed most: onstage experience. That doesn’t come easily at Ballet Theater.

“It’s hard when you get one ‘Swan Lake’ a year,” she said. “I was watching New York City Ballet — I love City Ballet and go all the time — thinking, these girls must have done this ballet 100 times. What would it feel like to do ‘Giselle’ 100 times?”

The upside, she said, is that Ballet Theater’s schedule makes her performances more sacred.

“You are so tuned in when you have that one ‘Giselle,’ ” she said. “It’s like the most precious hours of your life.”

Still Ms. Boylston used a portion of her 2013 Leonore Annenberg Arts Fellowship — it provides artists with resources to further their potential — to create a different space for her dancing. In the short film “Early Sunday Morning,” directed by Yoonha Park, Ms. Boylston shares a pas de deux with James Whiteside. Its choreographer is Justin Peck; the film was unveiled at the recent Tribeca Film Festival.

Inspired by the paintings of Edward Hopper, the film also spotlights Ms.

Boylston's ever-changing face, which can transform from stark to sunny or vintage to modern with blink-and-you-miss-it speed.

“One of my friends photographs me a lot,” she said. “He says I look completely different in every photo.”

As a dramatic ballerina, it's a handy thing to keep in your back pocket. She laughed and said, “I'm a mood ring.”

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