



ABT

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE

July 2006

PLAYBILL

METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE
LINCOLN CENTER

Flower Dance

BY DANIEL CAPPELLO

This season, approximately 17,000 flowers will make their way through the hallowed halls of the Metropolitan Opera House. They will comprise nearly 700 bouquets, most professionally arranged, some purchased at the corner deli. They will include roses, for sure, and some might include daisies, orchids, lilies, and delphiniums. Sometimes sprigs of eucalyptus will help aromatize them. Some will be thought out and arranged days in advance, while others will be improvised. Some will come expressly to be presented on stage during curtain call, some will come with the hope of making it onstage, and some will have no chance of seeing the stage. They will all share a common purpose—to celebrate the distinguished dancers of American Ballet Theatre.

In Elizabethan England, it was standard practice for disappointed theatergoers to hurl such things as wood and fruit at actors onstage. Today, dancers around the world have become accustomed to the more appreciative (and, no doubt, appreciated) custom of having flowers strewn at their feet. Theater, after all, is an exchange between performers and spectators, and audience participation—be it disgruntled or elated—is part of what



Paloma Herrera in *Le Corsaire*. Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

makes the performing arts come alive. Let us not forget that American Ballet Theatre, as its name suggests, *is* theater. And the presentation ceremony that accompanies ballet finales is every bit a part of that theater. It is, to be sure, a coordinated effort executed with equal parts precision, care, quality control, and love.

It all begins a week before the night of a ballet. Tina Escoda, Ballet Theatre's Artistic Administrator, reviews the performance schedule to determine which ballerina or ballerinas will receive a bouquet from the Company. If the ballet features a *prima ballerina*, then she will be the only one to receive a bouquet; if there are other ballerinas in prominent roles, they may be included as well. A ballerina dancing a supporting role can never receive more bouquets than the *prima*—they are almost always principal dancers. Sometimes, a ballerina from the corps de ballet dancing a primary role will be singled out. Men rarely get presented on stage, unless they are dancing in an anniversary year or farewell performance. In that case, they will receive a wreath.

Escoda then calls Robb Alverson, of H. Robb Alverson Designs, Ltd., to set the orders. Alverson has been preparing flowers for American Ballet Theatre since the late 1980s, when, while pursuing a career in the theater, he worked at The Rhinelander Florist, a high-end flower shop. While handling the ABT account for Rhinelander, Alverson composed elaborate displays that caught the eye of ABT's then Artistic Coordinator, Florence Pettan, and, when the Rhinelander closed shop, Pettan retained Alverson as ABT's bouquet master. Alverson does not see himself as a florist, but rather, as a creative force. "I have to be artistic," he makes it clear, in a consonant South Carolinian drawl. "This bouquet has to be an extension of the production itself. It's part of the finale, but also a part of the celebration. It's also a prop, and has to read from the audience, but it's got to have some love bundled up and tied into it."

And so the bouquet is conceived. Escoda will direct what colors she imagines. Washed-out blues and whites make sense for *Swan Lake*, but, Escoda points out, "Sometimes I'll say, Let's do bright, vibrant colors, if the stage is set in a more dramatic palette." Alverson will think about the dancer receiving each bouquet, and will make adjustments accordingly. "It must be an extension of the dancer. If she's petite, you don't want it to be too big. Each one is a custom design." Next come the flowers themselves. Alverson considers the role being danced, the individual dancer, her personal preferences, and what will look right onstage. Delphiniums? Peonies? Roses? If something needs to be flown in from California, or from some exotic locale, he will make the call.

At the crack of dawn on performance day, Alverson picks up the flowers, which often come from the 28th Street market in Manhattan. The stems are cut, the flowers drink for four to six hours, and, by afternoon, they are arranged. In special cases, when the flowers have to look more vibrant onstage, Alverson will purchase them two days in advance, and give them drink and nourishment so that they are already open and resplendent for presentation time.

The bouquets are delivered to the stage door at the Metropolitan Opera House by "half-hour," the thirty-five minutes before the performance's start. They are received by a member of ABT's production staff, namely the Principal Stage Manager, Dathan Manning. During the performance, they are stored in what's called the Flower Room, which, in reality, is a stairwell inside the Met, with a table that typically holds two, six,



A floral shower. Cynthia Gregory on the occasion of her 20th Anniversary with ABT. Photo: MIRA

or eight bouquets per production. On nights of special performances, there can be a stunning number of flowers overflowing the room. Manning, along with Stage Manager Danielle Ventimiglia, will then perform a quality-control inspection of the bouquets, making sure that all plastic and cellophane have been removed, and fashioning what's known as the "pull flower," the single flower that the ballerina is likely to offer her partner in a show of appreciation. To spare her the unsightly scene of yanking on the bouquet, the pull flower is de-thorned, made smooth so that it easily slides out, and demarcated by a satin ribbon, for easy recognition.

ABT is as exacting on its bouquets as it is on its dancers; there is no room for sloppy showmanship. With custom arrangements ordered a week in advance, then, do outside flowers stand a chance? "As long as they're not 'deli flowers,'" Manning insists, meaning those purchased ten minutes before curtain from the local market, "And as long as they meet our presentation standards, then of course there's a chance we will present outside flowers. If it's something we can beef up with baby's breath from another arrangement, or with flowers from another bouquet, and especially if it's important to the dancer—sent from a family member—then we'll make them come up to our standards."

Deli-flower senders should not be discouraged; their bouquets make it to the dancers' dressing rooms, and hardly go unnoticed by the production team or the dancers themselves. "We certainly remark on all the flowers that arrive backstage," Manning says. It can be staggering at times. Sarah Lane, a corps de ballet dancer since 2004, thinks it's "humbling" to receive flowers directly from fans. "It's easy to get into your own little world as a dancer," she explains. "You're always trying to perfect things, and then all of a sudden you realize that other people are taking notice of what you're doing, and that is an over-the-top reward for an artist." Not that having the

Company present a bouquet isn't grand in itself. Lane received her first presentation flowers almost two years ago, for dancing leads in *VIII* and *Theme & Variations*. At that moment, "it all of a sudden hits you that you've accomplished something."

The Company is also a stickler on presentation protocol. At the end of the ballet, as the dancers begin to take their curtain calls, the stage managers will be waiting in the wings with one or two presenters, who must always be dressed in tuxedos. Edwin Backer, who by day is in strategic planning for a national fashion company, has been volunteering since 1999. "The presentation must be seamless," he notes. "The stage manager will give a tap at just the right moment. We pretty much know when that is from having done it so many times. Then you must pace yourself to arrive at center stage at precisely the right moment in the bow—not too soon, not too late." The idea is to have it look rehearsed, even though it isn't. Manning discourages playfulness: "We tell them, 'Step lively and come right back to us.' If we have multiple bouquets, we'll send them back quickly." Ventimiglia points out that there is little to worry about at the Met because Backer, along with two other presenters, including Iggy, a house superintendent/downtown performance artist, "are our standard of excellence."

For all the thoroughness, however, there can be bumbles. Manning explains that timing is a learned art, not a science. "Some dancers tend to linger longer in a bow than others," he says, and if a presenter leaves the wings too soon, he risks standing onstage unacknowledged by the dancer. "We had a moment like that last year, and we were all standing from the wings yelling, 'Give her the flowers! Give her the flowers!'" Gillian Murphy, today one of ABT's most accomplished principals and the epitome of grace, had a crash course in bouquet etiquette and faux pas. After dancing the *Black Swan Pas de Deux*, at the age of 12, Murphy was presented with flowers that she proceeded to offer to her partner: "When he wouldn't accept them, I tried giving them back, and it became a tug-of-war scene." Since then, she's come to master the moment, and has finessed the system somewhat, too. Though most bouquets come ready with a single pull flower, Murphy requests an additional one, for the conductor. "I like to show my appreciation and respect for the conductor as well as for my partner," she says. "It's always a beautiful experience to receive a fresh bouquet of flowers after a performance; it seals the moment, and it's a lovely tradition."

The woman who believes in that tradition perhaps the most, and who keeps it alive at ABT, is Karin Schwalb, a member of the Board of Governing Trustees who funds the presentation bouquets. Raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, Schwalb studied ballet and received her teaching certificate from the London Royal Academy of Dance, and was a dancer herself until a knee injury ended her career. She knows firsthand that it is "one of the most difficult things in the world to be a ballet dancer," and she is dedicated to ABT's talent. "If I could, I'd have massage therapists waiting for them after their performances. But nobody in the audience would understand that. The only way for me to show my appreciation is to give the principal dancer—and I wish I could give them to every dancer onstage—flowers." Schwalb's voice nearly warbles with excitement about the topic. "I want the audience to understand that that dancer tried and poured her heart out to interpret that role!" She knows that every dancer "sweats bullets, twenty-four/seven," to accomplish what they do onstage, and wants them to know how much she appreciates them. "I see every one of the dancers—the principals, the soloists, and every member of the corps de ballet—even if the audience doesn't."