

## SAB'S DANCE MAKERS

### *Students Expand Horizons Through Annual Choreography Workshop*

*by Roslyn Sulcas*

Professional classical choreographers are an elusive breed, generally emerging from ballet companies during their careers as dancers. Their apprenticeship in the art of making dances—learning about structure and musicality, translating ideas into physical form—tends to be derived from dancing in other peoples' ballets rather than making their own, and opportunities to practice on live bodies are rare.

Peter Martins, Artistic Director and Chairman of Faculty of the School of American Ballet, has been profoundly aware of the difficulties involved in starting to choreograph for a long time. In 1997, he introduced choreographic workshops for the students at the School—one of only a handful of such programs around—in order to give young dancers concrete experi-

enced accompaniment only; and no costumes. Those students who are interested then apply to participate, filling out a brief form about their musical choices and choreographic ideas. (Until recently, any intermediate or senior student has been allowed to apply; increased interest has obliged the faculty—for logistical reasons—to limit the workshop to the senior division for the past two years.)

In the first year that the workshop took place, the students were asked to choreograph to any piece by



ence in making dances. "Mr. Balanchine started choreographing very young," says Mr. Martins, "and I do think that it is valuable to be exposed to this early on. It's like teaching; it's not something you do because you retire from dancing. You have to begin young to understand the complexities involved."

Together with the SAB faculty, Mr. Martins laid down the ground rules for the students' works: at least two, and no more than four dancers; around five minutes in length;

Tschaikovsky. "I wanted them to use classical music, and I thought Tschaikovsky was a great idea because he wrote so many short piano pieces and other things," says Mr. Martins. "To my surprise, when the first session was over and I asked for feedback, everyone said, please don't pick the music for us!" Since then, the students have been given free musical rein,

although they are required to present their choices to the School's music instructor, Jeffrey Middleton.

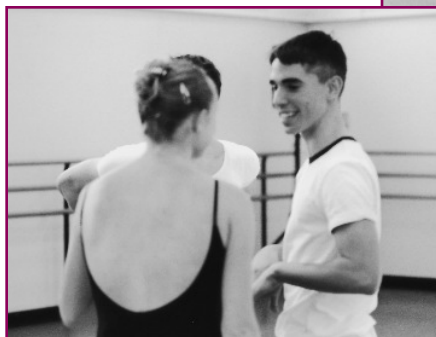
While Mr. Middleton does try to steer the students towards classical or serious contemporary music, he is open to all choices if there is a particularly strong concept around the score. "Some students have their minds made up, and some are searching," says Mr. Middleton. "I try to help the second group by investigating, with them, what they might like, or what suits a choreographic idea that they already have. For some students, music is primary

and they derive their movement ideas from it; for others, they already know what they want to do, and need to find music that fits their concept." He also tries to highlight any potential problems: for example, minimalist music, "which has been popular for the last few years, presents a more limited palette," he says, "and I point that out."

For the students, this guidance can be extremely helpful. Coco Gonzalez, who is now an apprentice with New York City Ballet, participated twice in the choreographic workshops. In her first year, she found a piano piece of just under three minutes that she liked. After discussion with Mr. Middleton, she decided to create opening and closing sections that would be danced in silence.

"He encouraged me to do that," she says, "and I don't know if I would have gone ahead without those discussions."

Once the students have picked their



scores, they choose dancers and begin to work, scheduling all their own rehearsals in their 15 allotted hours of studio time. Kay Mazzo, Co-Chairman of Faculty at SAB, co-ordinates the choice of dancers who will appear in the works so that no one is overburdened. Ms. Mazzo and Annette Burgess, the Director of Projects, remain on hand to consult about any artistic issues, but these tend to be few. "What's remarkable," says Ms. Mazzo, "is that they really do it all. They are left alone to deal with their dancers and music, and after the allotted two weeks of rehearsal time, we take a look at it. It's very impressive to see how respectful they are in dealing with one another, and how disciplined they are in pulling everything together."

For some students, the workshop is merely an interesting experience; for others, it can open up new career possibilities. "I had always choreographed in my head, but I had never thought about actually doing it," says Melissa Barak, an SAB alumna who has choreographed ballets for both the School and New York City Ballet, where she is a member of the corps. "Making a piece for the workshop was the first time I taught steps to people, and although I didn't know what I was doing, it provided a bridge into

the experience. I was lucky that the chance came early on because it was simply fun without any stress or expectations."

The lack of pressure or post-performance judgment is important, feels Mr. Martins, in encouraging the young choreographers to experiment freely. He meets with the



students after their works are performed (to an audience limited to SAB faculty members, staff, friends and family) to discuss the experience, but there is no formal evaluation. "I always looked forward to that part," says Avi Scher, an SAB alumnus who participated in the workshop three times. "It's relaxed and open and there is no critique to worry about, so you can really try things out with the dancers."

Many of the participants also perform in their fellow students' ballets, and experience the process from the other side, learning valuable lessons there too. "It gets you accustomed to working with different approaches," says Giovanni Villalobos, now a New York City Ballet company member. "Some choreographers allow the music to dictate, others concentrate more on developing the movement. When you're in a company later on, you have to be able to connect with different kinds of work, and it really prepares you for that."

The workshops also educate both the choreographer and the dancers in the craft of structuring a piece. "Now when I watch certain ballets, I think about how they have been put together," says Ms. Gonzalez. "It makes you appreciate those works in a different way, and I think it helps you to explore a new sense of artistry in your dancing."

The choreographic workshop has been popular since its inception: this year, 20 students applied to participate, "It's so great for us to get this opportunity to create something," says Mr. Villalobos. "Before I came to SAB, I thought choreography was something for the elders."

This increased excitement about making ballets is exactly what Mr. Martins hopes to stimulate amongst the students. If ballet is to survive as a vital, living art rather than a museum piece, choreographers need to emerge from new generations of dancers. "This is not about identifying the next Balanchine," says Mr. Martins. "It's here to stimulate the students and to make them more complete artists. But if a great choreographer were helped along by this—well, that would be a bonus." ❖

Pictured: Coco Gonzalez (page 1) and Giovanni Villalobos (page 2) at work with SAB students in 2003 and 2002, respectively, and the resulting new ballets they presented as part of the Student Choreography Workshop. All photos © Ellen Crane.

© School of American Ballet 2005  
All rights reserved