

## LECTURE-DEMS: INTRODUCING NEW GENERATIONS TO BALLET

In a small theater just steps from SAB's Rose Building studios, over one hundred seventh graders on a much-anticipated field trip wait restlessly for a presentation to begin. The room darkens, and colored spotlights flash out of control. The disturbance, it turns out, is caused by the landing of a time machine with a surprise passenger aboard. Louis XIV, fresh from the seventeenth century, has arrived smack-dab in the middle of Lincoln Center's Clark Studio Theater just in time to preside over an introduction to ballet presented by the New York City Ballet Education Department.

Ballet, much to the king's surprise, has changed radically since his dancing days over 300 years ago. So, while Louis eagerly takes on the role of master of ceremonies—after all, he tells his audience, I invented ballet—he is about to learn, along with the seventh graders assembled, what ballet in the twenty-first century is all about.

A video sampling of New York City Ballet's diverse repertory sets the stage for the arrival of live, in the flesh, ballet dancers, who happen to be advanced students from the School of American Ballet. In quick succession, they perform a handful of musically and stylistically varied pas de deux from NYCB's repertory. Puss in Boots and the White Cat's playful spat from Peter Martins's *The Sleeping Beauty* is followed by the jazzy romp of Rubies from George Balanchine's *Jewels*. Two boys vie for the upper hand in the male pas de deux from Jerome Robbins's *Dances at a Gathering*; then a boy manipulates a girl through the contortions of the third theme of Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*. The mood turns light, and one couple dances the lyrical opening adagio to Balanchine's *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux*, followed by another couple's romantic swoon through Embraceable You from *Who Cares?* Between the ballet excerpts, the performers stop to chat with Louis about the particulars of their costumes and shoes and to explain the advanced technique required for ballet in the present day.

By the end of the hour, not only are the young audience members and the Sun King well versed in the wonders of modern day ballet, but they have discovered the choreographic invention that is New York City Ballet's hallmark and acquired an appreciation for the remarkable talents of students at the School of American Ballet.



SAB Advanced student Jessica Flynn dances Balanchine's *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux* at a January 2002 lecture-demonstration as Louis XIV looks on.

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NYCB's lecture-demonstration program, informally referred to as lecture-dems, originated in 1962 when the New York State Council on the Arts funded four Company performances at schools throughout New York State. With further NYSCA funding and support from City Center, the next decade saw NYCB principal dancers like Melissa Hayden and Edward Villella periodically conducting lectures at New York City public schools, using both NYCB and non-Company dancers to demonstrate.

Just before NYCB principal dancer Suki Schorer retired from dancing in 1972, George Balanchine asked her to take over responsibility for the lecture-demonstrations. The program had originally been started at Mr. B's behest, according to SAB Board member Nancy Lassalle, who worked hand in hand with Balanchine to get the initiative off the ground. She vividly remembers his strong belief that young people should be introduced to the art of ballet, and that the lecture-demonstrations would enable them to better appreciate the superb spectacle the human body is capable of presenting. In placing Schorer in charge shortly before she joined the permanent faculty at SAB, he made a major change in the program that lasts to this day. Instead of using NYCB dancers and other professionals to demonstrate and perform, Balanchine directed Schorer to train SAB students and take them on the road.

And, for the next twenty years, Schorer did just that. Piling into a station wagon for early morning commutes



February 1973: Suki Schorer receives assistance from a student volunteer during a lecture-dem at Paramus High School.

to schools across the New York metropolitan area, Schorer and her students introduced thousands of children and teenagers to the fundamentals of ballet. With the group typically performing under less than ideal conditions in school gyms, cafeterias and libraries, the audience response varied widely—from delighted youngsters who

paid rapt attention to ambivalent teens who laughed instead of applauded. Among those SAB students who toured with Schorer over the years were now familiar names like Maria Calegari, Jock Soto, Victor Barbee, Stephanie Saland, Lourdes Lopez, Judith Fugate and Joseph Duell. At Schorer's invitation, young NYCB company members like Jean-Pierre Frohlich and Colleen Neary also participated.

In 1992, Schorer stepped down as ballet mistress of the NYCB Education Department (which was formally established in 1979) to free up time for other projects. Various NYCB ballet masters and mistresses took over responsibility for teaching the ballets to SAB students until 1998, when SAB alumna and retiring NYCB soloist Katrina Killian followed the same path that Schorer had taken, becoming, at Peter Martins's invitation, a member of SAB's faculty and the Education Department's ballet mistress.

Today, lecture-demonstrations are a key component of the NYCB Education Department's Ballet Bridges program, which consists of a comprehensive school curriculum combining movement workshops, supplemental classroom lessons, lecture-dems and NYCB repertory performances at the New York State Theater.

Approximately 1,500 third through eighth graders from ten schools in the New York metropolitan area participate each year.

In 2000, lecture-demonstrations underwent a major transformation with the guidance of current Education Department director Ellen Sorrin. Not only was the format revamped to include the character of Louis XIV (portrayed by professional actor Brian Bara), but the lecture-dems found a new home in the Rose Building's Clark Studio Theater. With the time-consuming road trips eliminated, SAB students could now take a short elevator ride to performances, thereby minimizing academic and SAB class absences. For the past three years, elementary and middle school students participating in Ballet Bridges have traveled by bus to the 125-seat Clark Studio Theater, where the production values and dancing conditions are considerably superior to what most school auditoriums can offer.

Participating in lecture-dems is, and always has been, considered a special privilege for the handful of SAB's advanced students invited to take part each year. Katrina Killian, who was cast during her student days by Schorer in one lecture-dem, remembers the experience as the biggest deal for me. To learn a ballet from Suki was a big honor. Students who participate today not only get to work for several months with Killian, but NYCB assistant ballet masters like Victor Castelli, Sara Leland and Jean-Pierre Frohlich also step in to teach specific roles. For most students, it is the first opportunity to learn and dance some of NYCB's vaunted repertory, and the experience is transforming.



Mid-1970s: SAB student Joseph Duell demonstrates the finer points of partnering to a delighted lecture-dem audience.

Musically, many of the ballets are very difficult. There's a story when there's not a story in each ballet, and the kids have to evolve so much as dancers just to be able to do the parts, explains Killian. The current lecture-dem script emphasizes pas de deux, which adds an even larger challenge, especially for the male students involved. Adrian Danchig-Waring, who got his first real taste of dancing Balanchine in this year's lecture-dems, was shocked to discover that partnering in performance is so different from adagio class. It's so much more showy. You're not able to just focus on what you're doing with your hands and stare at the girl's back. You have to be dancing *with* her. As Killian had in her day, Danchig-Waring enthusiastically squeezed in extra rehearsals with his partners on top of the regularly scheduled three hours per week to work out the kinks in advance of the early January performances.

While titters and exclamations of Ooh! inevitably escape from the young audience members at the sight of close contact between dancers, today's audiences are uniformly enthusiastic about the presentation. They made the per-

formance a performance, enthuses nineteen-year-old Ashley Laracey, who alternated performances of *The Four Temperaments* third theme and an excerpt from *Who Cares?*

with seventeen-year-old Laura Gilbreath. We had a blast performing for them, and it was nice that they were so interested.

Education Department director Ellen Sorrin sees one important advantage to using SAB students for the NYCB lecture-demonstrations rather than Company members, and perhaps Mr. B did, too, when he enlisted SAB's participation thirty years ago. We always give the children a

chance to ask the dancers questions after the formal part of the lecture-dem is over, explains Sorrin, and having SAB students is very inspirational for the youngsters who are coming to see the program. They themselves are just beginning to be interested in things. They are developing the discipline necessary to accomplish what they would like to do. They see how much practice it takes, and they see people much closer to their age who are not quite as removed from where they are at that point in their lives. And I think that makes a very big difference. ❖



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Adrian Danchig-Waring partners Laura Gilbreath in the third theme of Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*.