

MAG ZINE

DANCE

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

JANUARY 2009

25
TO
WATCH

WHO WILL SHINE
IN '09

Rachel Foster
of Pacific
Northwest
Ballet

SUMMER
STUDY
SPECIAL
OVER 400
LISTINGS, TIPS,
ADVICE

THE LURE
OF EUROPE
WHY DANCERS
LOVE IT

DOES
CAFFEINE
HURT YOUR
DANCING?

SAB
CELEBRATES
75 YEARS

dancemagazine.com





Women and the Sea, by Jessica Lang

Up & Up

BY LEA MARSHALL

On a September evening in the Richmond Ballet's intimate Studio Theatre, the company's versatile dancers delivered a touching performance of Tudor's *Lilac Garden* and swirled through a dance premiere by William Soleau. Each season, the company offers four Studio Series performances in which new pieces—often introduced by a short video—are paired with repertory works and ticket prices are kept low. With every step in the performance, you can feel the dancers buoyed by a loving audience. After the show, audience and performers mingle in the "Ballet Barre" reception area. The popularity of these evenings is one reason why, with a strong history of commissioning new work, growing national visibility, and a fierce commitment to their home community, Richmond Ballet is a jewel in the city's growing arts treasury.

Mission Accomplished

When dancer Phillip Skaggs was first hired by the Richmond Ballet 10 years

Richmond Ballet's strong sense of mission has helped it grow and thrive.

ago, there were buckets rigged up in the ceiling of the company's small studios on Lombardy Street to catch rain from the leaky roof. Skaggs was an extra hire, chosen as a "tall guy" to partner the tallest woman in the company of 12 dancers. He became the 13th. Now in the midst of its 25th anniversary season, the company consists of 19 dancers with 5 apprentices, and owns a spacious, renovated building in downtown Richmond a couple of blocks from the James River.

Artistic director Stoner Winslett, in her 29th year with RB (the first four were before the company turned professional) is one of the few women artistic directors in American ballet. She's also one of the longest-reigning leaders of a ballet company. Since its inception, RB has sought, according to its mission statement, "to awaken and uplift the human spirit, both for audiences and dancers."

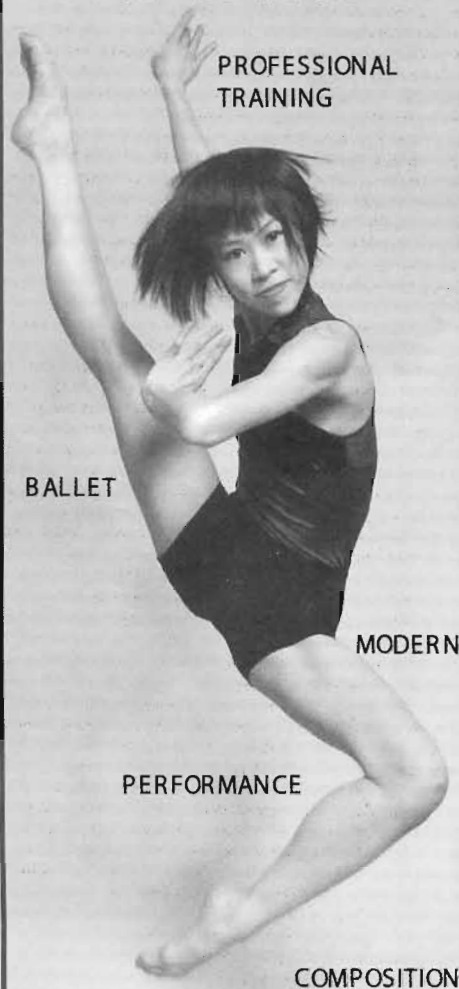
However, when preparing for their move to the new building (which occupies an entire city block) in 2000, the company put together a think tank to revise its mission. But after six weeks of hammering out a new statement, according to Winslett, "One of the trustees said, 'You know what—it's not as good as what we had before.'" At which point, the group redoubled its commitment to the old mission. "It was all about it being art-centered, and having a collaborative environment and a supportive culture," says Winslett.

Ballet master Jerri Kumery, a former dancer with New York City Ballet who has worked with RB for a year, cherishes the company's philosophy. She came to Richmond after 17 years with North Carolina Dance Theatre. "A door opened one day, and I walked in and fell in love with it," she says. "Throughout the

Suzanne Grandis, Courtesy RB

CONSERVATORY OF DANCE

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING



Peng-yu Chen
BFA '03 Conservatory of Dance member, Atlanta Ballet
2007 *Dance Magazine* 25 To Watch

Auditions '09

REGIONAL - BFA ONLY

Baltimore, MD January 16
Chicago, IL January 23
Los Angeles, CA January 25
St. Petersburg, FL January 25

PURCHASE COLLEGE BFA & MFA

February 6, 14, 20 & March 6

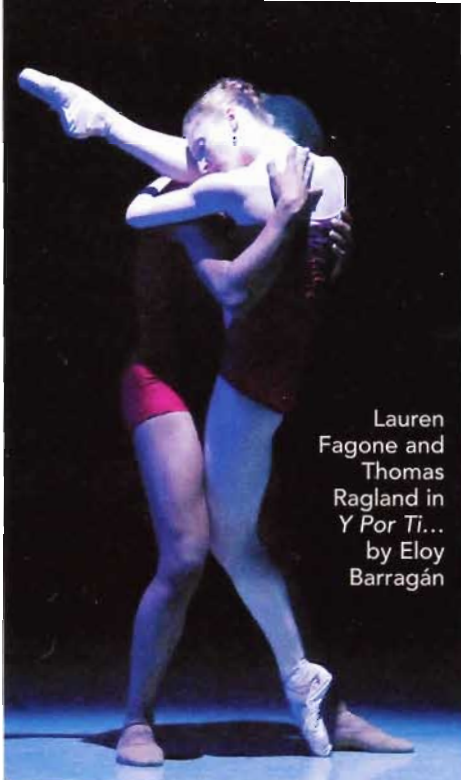
OFFICE of ADMISSIONS

735 Anderson Hill Road
Purchase, NY 10577
www.purchase.edu/dance
914.251.6300

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
Purchase College

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

photo: Frank Capri



Lauren Fagone and Thomas Ragland in *Y Por Ti...* by Eloy Barragán

organization, it's not about you or me or I. It's *we*. It takes all of us to do this."

Creativity and Growth

Part of that joy, for dancers and audience alike, stems from the creation of new work. RB's repertory of classics like *Giselle*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and, of course, *The Nutcracker*, is complemented by original works created by dance artists such as Colin Connor, Jessica Lang, Mauricio Wainrot, and William Soleau. "The level of commitment to new work here is amazing," says Connor, who has set four works on RB since 1996.

When commissioning new works, says Winslett, "I look for choreographers that can take the ballet vocabulary and use it in new and interesting ways. I love liquid movement. I'm not so interested in people who make new ballets in the style of Petipa or in the style of Balanchine."

Richmond Ballet's dancers move fast and cover lots of ground; they're not afraid to give in to the floor. "They were always incredibly visceral and energized and willing to take risks—sort of ballsy," says Connor. "The technique of the dancers, to me, has lots of dimension to it now—and they're still ballsy."

Kumery lauds their openness, saying, "They try anything. They accomplish any kind of style, whatever you throw at them. They will continue to work until they get it."

Strength in Humility

Indeed, alongside their talent and seasoned professionalism these dancers convey an endearing humility, a willingness to remain in service to the art. You can

see it both in their dancing—clean and impassioned, with no showboating—and in their offstage demeanor. "There is a sense of shared purpose here," says Connor. "People come in, and they don't have their love of dancing kicked out of them."

The dancers agree. "The Richmond Ballet creates a very special bond, as far as friendships go, and how we relate to each other in the studio," says veteran Phillip Skaggs. Also, he feels he has been challenged at just the right pace. "They pushed when I needed to be pushed," he says. "They gave me opportunities when I was ready for it; I was never left behind." He points out that the company does not have a ranking system. "Some days I get to be the prince, and some days I'm in the back holding a spear," he says. "And I think that keeps you humble."

Dancer Angela Hutto is now in her third season as a full company member. Having started out as a child in the School of the Richmond Ballet, she exemplifies the locally grown talent: a broad smile, lean and leggy, and seemingly fearless. Like Skaggs, Hutto sees RB as a place to grow. "I know audiences enjoy the technical side of it," she says, "but what keeps them coming is that growth, and that artistry." The company has influenced her own growth both onstage and off. "I used to be so shy," she says, "And now I'm more comfortable in my own skin. It's nice to be able to have that kind of relationship with the people you work with. I feel like it's my second family."

Some of that family atmosphere may come from having a woman in charge. "I think Stoner brings a very nurturing quality to RB," says Connor. He points out her holistic approach to the way the



Stoner Winslett with company member Shira Lany

Top: Aaron Surten. Bottom: Aaron Surten, both Courtesy RB



**Alonzo King's LINES Ballet
Summer Program 2009**

- Exploring a variety of dance techniques with ballet as the core discipline
- Offering a rigorous curriculum with a diverse world-class faculty
- Encouraging dancers to recognize their individual gifts and realize their full potential

"This program has completely changed the way I approach dance both mentally and physically... I feel like I have improved more this summer than I did in my past year of training."

- Summer Program participant

Audition Tour:

Orlando	Jan. 10
St. Petersburg	Jan. 11
Charlotte	Jan. 15
New York	Jan. 17
San Francisco	Jan. 17
Atlanta	Jan. 18
Boston	Jan. 19
Los Angeles	Jan. 24
Chicago	Jan. 31
Austin	Feb. 1
Santa Fe	Feb. 8
Phoenix	Feb. 9
Las Vegas	Feb. 11
Salt Lake City	Feb. 12
Denver	Feb. 13
Seattle	Feb. 16
San Francisco	Feb. 21

For information:
www.linesballet.org
415.863.3040 ext 248

alonzo king's LINES BALLETS SCHOOL



Maggie Small and
Fernando Sabino in
Stoner Winslett's
Other Places

dancers represent the company offstage as well as on. With new company members, he says, "Stoner always does a sort of etiquette lesson." She tells them the dress code for company events and to write thank-you notes to patrons.

Looking Ahead

Winslett acknowledges that diversity among the dancers is still a challenge, as with many ballet companies. "I hire the best dancers I can possibly find," she says. "I'm always delighted when that group of dancers reflects all the different faces in our community, and it usually does." She admits that, at the moment, the representation of minorities in the company is not proportional to their presence in the community.

"That's something to fight for," she says. Minds in Motion, RB's major outreach effort, reaches 1,500 fourth-graders of all shapes, sizes, and colors in 22 local schools. Many Minds in Motion students later enter RB's school on scholarship and occasionally progress all the way to company members, such as dancer Maggie Small, now entering her third season with the company.

Small says the program is a great incubator for potential company members, but not at first. It took four or five years "to reach more kids who might want a ballet career. But," she says, "it's starting to happen now."

For her part, Winslett would like to see Minds in Motion become part of every fourth-grade class throughout the Richmond community.

In the larger dance world, Winslett says, "I'd like to see the field looking more creatively at how this art form can exist as time goes on. The czar is not coming back, as far as I've heard." Like the English language, she says, ballet needs to grow and change with the times, and that's part of what the Studio

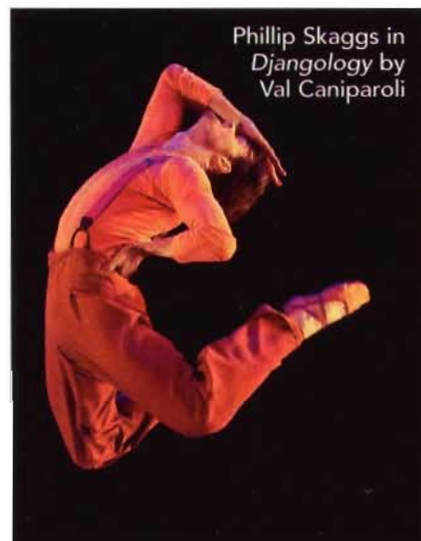
Theatre is about: making ballet more accessible. This season the company changed the theater configuration to accommodate 50 more seats.

"A Little Up"

Richmond Ballet's constructive mentality gets noticed when they travel far from home. During the tech rehearsal for the company's 2005 debut at The Joyce Theater, one of the Joyce staff said to Winslett, "You're making your debut at the Joyce! Are you freaking out?" She replied, "We don't freak out at Richmond Ballet. We prepare."

Looking back over the company's history Winslett feels justifiably proud, yet she doesn't rest on her laurels. "Nicholas Beriosoff, who was my mentor when I first came to RB, used to say to me, 'Stoner darling, every time you go onstage you must perform a little up, every time just a little up. Then one day you'll realize it's become a big up.' The dancers and I talk about that all the time—the idea that every single show, every minute, counts, and let's just go 'a little up.' Then you look over your shoulder and realize it's 'a big up.' And that's what I think has happened to us."

Lea Marshall teaches dance at Virginia Commonwealth University and directs Ground Zero Dance Company in VA.



Phillip Skaggs in
Djangology by
Val Caniparoli

Left: Suzanne Grandis, Courtesy RB; right: Aaron Surtan, Courtesy RB