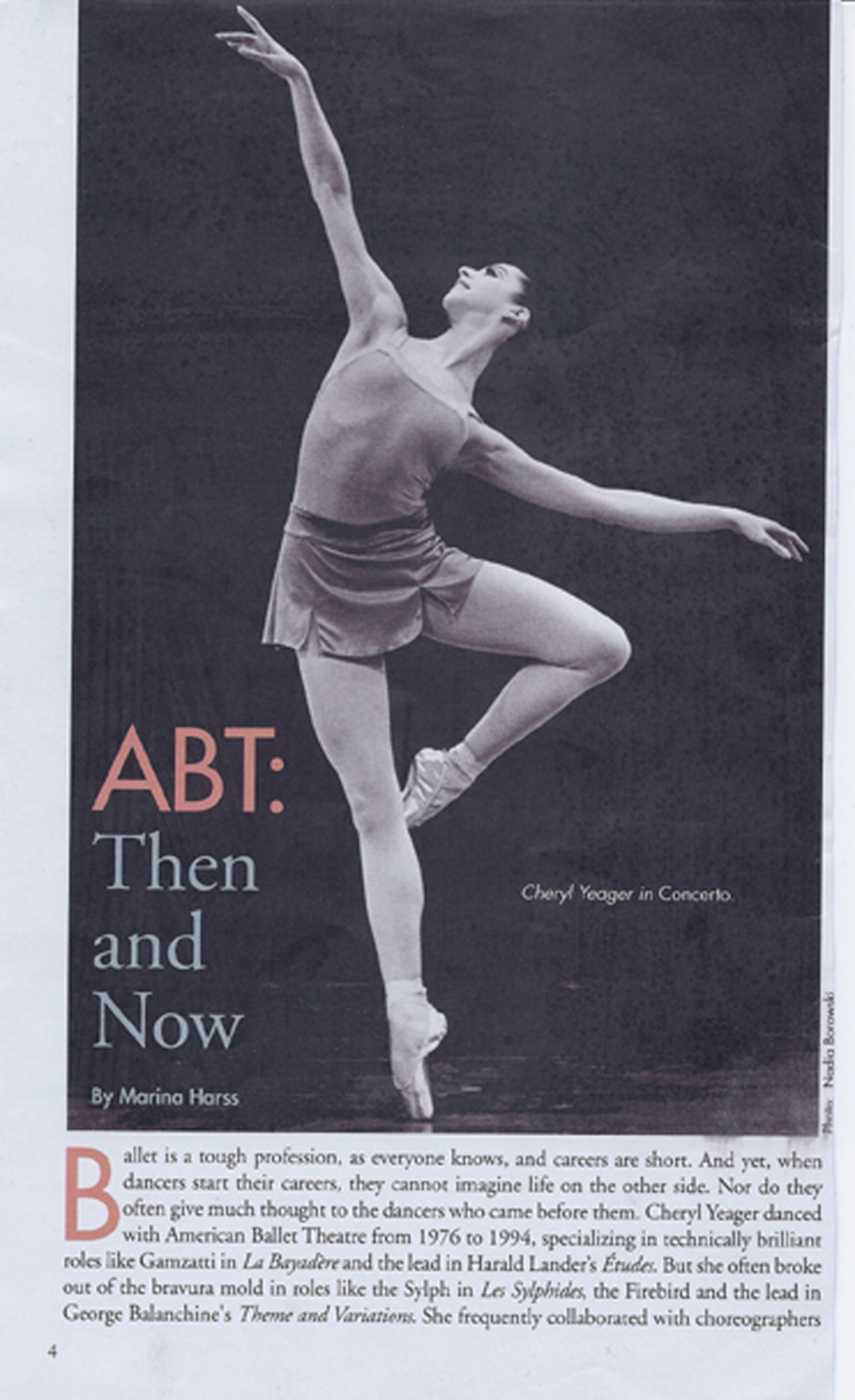




ABT: Then and Now

By Marina Harss

Cheryl Yeager in *Concerto*.

Ballet is a tough profession, as everyone knows, and careers are short. And yet, when dancers start their careers, they cannot imagine life on the other side. Nor do they often give much thought to the dancers who came before them. Cheryl Yeager danced with American Ballet Theatre from 1976 to 1994, specializing in technically brilliant roles like Gamzatti in *La Bayadère* and the lead in Harald Lander's *Études*. But she often broke out of the bravura mold in roles like the Sylph in *Les Sylphides*, the Firebird and the lead in George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*. She frequently collaborated with choreographers

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Photo: Katsuyoshi Tanaka



Isabella Boylston in Theme and Variations.



Yuriko Kajiya in Brief Fling.

Photo: Gene Schiavone

it's everything. Everything is a science now. Training to be a gymnast, a tennis player, a golfer... And there's the Internet. When I was a kid, I didn't know what was out there. I couldn't go on YouTube and watch dancers from all over the world. Dancers today don't need to be taught a variation, because they already know every version of every variation.

What do you feel when you see videos of dancers from the past online?

YK: I trained in China, so I didn't have the Internet. I moved to China when I was ten, by myself, to go to ballet school. I was there for six years. All the teachers were Chinese, but they followed the Russian system. Then, after the Prix de Lausanne, I went to Canada for one year. In China it wasn't necessarily about how high you can jump or how many turns you can do, but more about the style, the hands, the head. But if you compare those dancers with dancers from outside of China, they're definitely lacking something because they didn't have the input from outside. That's changing now.

IB: I grew up on Russian ballet, and also on New York City Ballet and ABT. Some people watch stuff from the eighties and say, that's busted [as in bad], but I love it. I watched people like Suzanne [Farrell], and Natasha [Makarova], and Gelsey [Kirkland]. I love that kind of eccentric flair, because there's less of that now. I definitely agree that there's too much emphasis on technique and less on individuality.

CY: I like going to the ballet and having someone take a risk. I think Marcelo [Gomes] is the perfect example of how you can take ballet into 2013 and make technique look modern and give it everything positive without anything negative. He can take a variation like the Black Swan pas de deux and make it look like it's part of the narrative of the ballet. He's bringing it to another level, which is where ballet needs to go. A place where you feel like the dancers are actually speaking

to you from the stage. Sometimes that means doing less, not more.

Does working with choreographers help bring out that individuality? And is that one of the benefits of having Alexei Ratmansky around as Artist in Residence?

YK: Having Alexei definitely changed things because before, we had choreographers come in, but they tended to do small pieces, so it didn't really involve the whole company. But Alexei has made big and small pieces, like the new *Nutcracker*. Everyone has had the chance to work with him.

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Yuriko Kajiya and Daniil Simkin in Don Quixote.

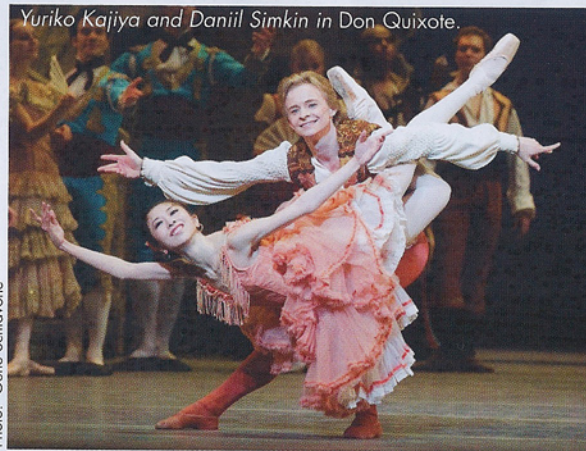


Photo: Gene Schiavone



Photo: MIRA

Cheryl Yeager and Julio Bocca in Don Quixote.

making new work for the company, most notably Twyla Tharp. Now she has a new life, as a teacher at Ballet Academy East on the Upper East Side. Her seventeen-year-old daughter, Hannah, is a member of the ABT Studio Company. Recently, we met at ABT's headquarters, three floors of studios and offices down by Union Square, to talk about her experiences, and to exchange reflections with two young ABT Soloists on the rise: Yuriko Kajiya and Isabella Boylston. At one point Yeager paused and said, almost in disbelief: "It's so weird. This place is exactly the same."

You danced with the company during the height of the dance boom in New York. What was that time like?

CY: It was an unbelievable time to be a dancer. Unbelievable. People knew me in the street. Now people have Facebook pages, and promote

themselves, post reviews, whatever. We never had to do that.

Isabella Boylston: You almost feel like you have to do that now or be left behind. Some people take their careers to a new level, in addition to being talented, by using social media. In some ways it seems like [the 1980s] were such a glamorous time. I love watching the dancers of that era.

How is ballet viewed in Japan?

Yuriko Kajiya: Ballet is actually getting bigger in Japan. You see ballet on TV and dancers even do TV commercials. And when you go to Europe, you see more ballet than here in the United States, but of course the governments there fund the arts more than here.

Do you think ballet and ballet technique has changed since you were dancing?

CY: There was less attention to physique in my day. Misha took dancers with good feet and good legs, but now—what's in the water?—everyone has good feet. But I do believe that there's too much emphasis on technique. Technique has advanced to such a point that the dancers in the corps today could be principals anywhere. They're all fabulous. I don't think it's just ballet,

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CY: I think it's really amazing, as someone who has done every full-length, to see that new *Nutcracker* and see how much you actually get to dance. It's like being in a Balanchine ballet. He gives the corps a lot to do, it's not just 'run, run, run, kneel.'

American Ballet Theatre used to go on extensive tours. What was it like to be on the road so much?

CY: We used to go on seventeen-week tours every year. My very first tour with the company was a ten-week European tour. We went to ten cities in Europe. I remember dancing at the State Theatre, at City Center, but mostly our bread and butter was touring. We were in Miami, Chicago, and Detroit, and we spent six weeks in California. And we had so many more ballets. We would take fifteen repertory pieces on tour. I danced something different every night. And we didn't have two casts of anything. I did two *Don Quixote*'s in one day once.

YK: I was talking to another dancer who danced during that time, and it's so interesting that they used to perform so much more than we do now. Because when you're onstage all the time, you're definitely in shape for anything.

Were dancers as aware of things like nutrition as they are now?

CY: I lived on cheese and crackers when I danced. On tour, they served French fries with everything. One of the dancers I danced with used to live on McDonald's. Even in Japan, she would go to McDonald's.

There were many more newspaper reviewers of dance back then. How did reviews affect you and how has that changed with the rise of online reviews?

IB: I definitely don't read blogs, because some bloggers can be really vicious. I don't read a ton of reviews, but it's hard not to.

CY: But that's the way critics always have been. I knew who liked me and who didn't. But then, there were more writers: in my day it was [Anna] Kisselgoff, Jack Anderson, and Jennifer Dunning, at the *Times*. And Clive [Barnes] at the *Post*, and Tobi Tobias at *New York* magazine. Of course, what really counted was what you discussed with your coach. If you and your coach had an agenda, and during a performance you did two or three things that were on that agenda, to me that was a good performance.

Who was/is your coach?

YK: Irina Kolpakova.

IB: Irina.

CY: She was mine too.



Isabella Boylston
in *Swan Lake*.

Photo: Gene Schiavone

Marina Harss is a freelance dance writer and translator in New York.