

Summer 2014

Ballet Review

**From the Summer 2014
issue of *Ballet Review***

**A Conversation with
Lourdes Lopez
on Miami City Ballet,
Morphoses, dancing
for Balanchine and
Robbins, classical
ballet, and much
more**

On the cover: Judson's Legacy in
Berlin - William Forsythe's *I don't
believe in outer space* with Fabrice
Mazliah and Christopher Roman.



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Summer 2014**

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**Cover Photograph by Dominik Mentzos, The Forsythe Company:
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Episodes: Jennifer Kronenberg and Reyneris Reyes in the Ricercata from Bach's Musical Offering; Jovani Furlan in the Op. 30 Variations. (Photos: Daniel Azoulay, Miami City Ballet)

A Conversation with Lourdes Lopez

Michael Langlois

When I walked into Lourdes Lopez's office at Miami City Ballet on a Wednesday afternoon in October 2013, the dancers were sixteen days away from opening their season, the first in the company's twenty-seven-year history that Edward Villella would not command.

In April 2012 Lopez was chosen to take over the directorship of Miami City Ballet from Villella, the former New York City Ballet star who started MCB in 1985 in a storefront space on Lincoln Road that now houses a Victoria's Secret emporium. Over the course of nearly three decades Villella transformed Miami City, with an annual operating budget of nearly \$15 million, into the eighth largest ballet company in the United States.

In spite of this remarkable achievement, Villella was seen as a polarizing figure. His company classes, which he insisted on teaching, were not, according to some dancers, well-rounded affairs that warmed you up and prepared you for a long day of rehearsals. "He might make the girls do fifty million hops on pointe. Meanwhile, the boys would sit around getting cold for half an hour and then he'd give us double tours to grand plié. Okay, maybe it wasn't that extreme, but you definitely needed to warm up for it."

On the other hand, another dancer said, "They were difficult, but also really light-hearted. Edward would dance around the room. He wasn't giving corrections. When I first joined the company people were throwing things and laughing. It was fun. It wasn't

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very serious. We had this pianist, Carl, and he had this crazy sense of humor. During class he would be playing along and then suddenly he would throw this fake plastic hand across the room and Edward would laugh. We were working, but we talked and joked around a lot. It was really easygoing. And then toward the end Edward kind of lost his sense of humor."

In my conversations with the company members at Miami City Ballet it was clear that they appreciated all Villella had done for them and for the company, in spite of his idiosyncratic teaching style. One dancer told me, "He loved the company, but it was difficult for him dealing with the board. So for him to be with the company for ninety minutes every day and teach class was really important. It gave him a reason to get up in the morning." The battles Villella reportedly waged with the board and the fact that his artistic objectives continually put the company in financial distress were excused to a great degree by the dancers because, as one put it, "Without Edward's vision and his constantly pushing, what sort of company would we have become? We would have been like any other regional company. He pushed us beyond our budget. Beyond our artistic limitations."

And so he did until 2012, when the company announced that Villella had agreed to step down at the end of the upcoming season. Five months later, however, he left. Almost overnight, Lopez was asked to leave her position as executive director of Morphoses in New York and guide Miami City Ballet through a year that was Villella's creation, a terrifically diverse season that would include Alexei Ratmansky's *Symphonic Dances*; *Euphotic*, a world premiere by Liam Scarlett; Ashton's *Les Patineurs*; Paul Taylor's *Piazzolla Caldera*; Robbins' *Dances at a Gathering*; and the usual supply of Balanchine that Miami City Ballet has become known for: *Apollo*, *Divertimento No. 15*, *La Valse*, and *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*.

At fifty-five, Lourdes Lopez appears little changed from the lithe, nineteen-year-old I remember when I first arrived at the School

of American Ballet in 1977. She seems at home in her new job and evidence of this is the fact that she meets regularly with her dancers, something Vilella apparently rarely did. "In fifteen years with the company," one dancer confessed, "I met with Edward three times. In fact, one of the things he told me he liked about me, when we did finally speak, was that I didn't cry [laughing]. 'Sometimes when people come in here,' he said to me, 'I have to have a whole box of tissues waiting.'" She paused for a moment, then added, "He wanted people to be happy, and I think it was hard for him to listen to dancers complain. I understood that, so I never complained."

Miami City Ballet resides in a 63,000 square-foot space a five-minute walk from the beach that made Miami famous. Designed by one of the city's most illustrious architectural firms, Arquitectonica, the enormous space on the ground floor where the company takes class has a bank of windows that look directly onto the sidewalk, affording passersby a kneecap view of the dancers within. This kind of showcase was something Vilella championed when he opened the company's original Lincoln Road home, keeping the windows exactly as they had been so anyone on the street could observe the dancers within.

The office that Lopez inhabits is about the size of your average New York City two-bedroom apartment. It's up on the third floor and it, like the main studio, is full of windows and natural light. One of the first things I notice as I enter is a large oil painting hanging over the gigantic Apple computer atop her desk. The painting is done in medium tones and depicts a young ballet dancer (Lopez) standing in fourth position in a virtually empty ballet studio. Just behind her, adjusting her port de bras, is the sixty-eight-year-old George Balanchine looking quite a bit younger than that.

*

Lourdes Lopez: Yes, that's me and Mr. B. In those days he would invite certain dancers to participate in his demonstration classes. He would teach and talk about his technique to

teachers from all over the United States. He invited Kyra Nichols, Maria Calegari, and me to this class. This must have been 1972, because I was fourteen at the time. The three of us were in the top level at the school then. I think Maria might have just joined the company.

Anyway, we went into the classroom and there were Merrill [Ashley], Colleen [Neary], and Karin [von Aroldingen]. It was fascinating because Mr. B broke down everything. Why do we do tendus? How do we do tendus? All of it. Somebody took a picture of him correcting me and sent it to my teacher in Miami, Martha Mahr. Ms. Mahr had a local Cuban artist do this painting from the grainy, not-particularly-good photograph. My mother sent it to me and said, "You should have Balanchine sign it."

By then it was a couple years later and I had just gotten into the company. I was so embarrassed, but I went to Mr. B with the painting and a box of paints of different colors so he could sign it. And what does he do? He keeps it for the entire season. Finally, he comes up to me in class one day and says [she imitates Balanchine], "You know, dear, I signed it." And I said, "Oh, great. Thank you." And then he said, "It's a horrible painting of you. You have short legs and a long torso and that's not what you are. But I look very handsome. I look like I'm thirty-five."

BR: The inscription on the left side of the painting says, "To Mona Lisa Lourdes, From Leonardo Balanchine."

Lopez: He never called me Mona Lisa. He was just being funny, I guess. The creator of . . . who knows? Of course, I'm unbelievably grateful that I have this painting signed by him.

BR: Let's talk about your background in Miami.

Lopez: I was born in May 1958 in Cuba. Castro came into power in January 1959. My father left in March and my mother a few months later. I joined them here in Miami in August. I was one-and-a-half years old. I have two older sisters who came with me: Teri is the middle one, and Barbara is the oldest. Barbara



Lourdez Lopez with Nathalia Arja and Renan Cerdeiro. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

lives here in Miami. Teri has moved up to New York. My parents have passed away.

BR: A lot has been made of this Cuban connection of yours.

Lopez: I think it's less a Cuban connection now. When I left in 1972 to go to New York, Miami was still very Cuban. I think my connection with Miami is that I grew up here. People have often said that there is no culture here. Even I said that at one point. I thought I had to leave because I couldn't dance here. I could only get to a certain point and then it was clear I had to get out.

But this is the city that introduced me to ballet, so there was something going on then. I always came back to Miami, for holidays and to visit my parents, and then there is the Spanish language. I think ballet companies take on the DNA of the city that they're in. I thought about this job for a while and it seemed that coming back was very organic. It almost felt as if I'd never left.

BR: When they came to Florida, your parents had to start from scratch, I assume.

Lopez: Yes, it's very much the immigrant story. My dad was in the military in Cuba, and he was quite high-ranking. Not a general, but we had some social status as a result of that. It was all taken away completely.

When my dad came here he got a job as a bus boy at The Red Coach Grill. He was educated and could read and write English very well. My mom was a manicurist at The Eden Roc Hotel and she also did massages. I was too young to remember how bad it was, but I heard the stories later on. When I was four or five, I knew we didn't have much money.

It was almost impossible for my parents to afford to put me into ballet, which came about because I was somewhat flat-footed at age five. I had very skinny legs and flat feet and had to wear orthopedic shoes. I had no muscles. The doctor said I needed to do something more physical, so my mom put me into this dance



Jennifer Kronenberg and Carlos Guerra in *Agon*. (Photo: Joe Gato, MCB)

class where I learned a little bit about ballet. I even got up on pointe, at six years old. When I was eight I was done with my special shoes and my father said, “We really can’t afford the lessons, so unless you tell me that you really like it you won’t be going anymore.” And I told him, “Yes, I really like it.” My mom said, “Okay, now we have to find you a real teacher.”

So they moved me over to Alexander Nigodoff, who was on Coral Way. He was Russian. I think he was from the Bolshoi. Did he dance there? I have no idea, but he was tall, blond, and blue-eyed with curly hair. He was the one who really taught me the steps, the vocabulary of ballet. He showed me what the world of ballet was. Before, I just liked dancing. I had no idea there was this whole other fantasy that I could live. I moved over to his school at eight, and when I was ten, we all went to New York to my dad’s work.

After that first summer in New York, during which I danced at the Joffrey, I went back to Miami and then out to Los Angeles where my oldest sister was getting married. When

we got there we heard about this teacher, Irina Kosmovska. Los Angeles at that time was the place where David Lichine and his wife, Tatiana Riabouchinska, had settled and taught, along with other Russians, Vera Nemchinova, I think. Irina saw me in class and called the School of American Ballet and told them they had to accept me, even though I was only eleven.

The following summer I went to SAB. They gave me a scholarship and even paid for my classes when I went back to Miami. One of the requirements of the scholarship, however, was that I study with Martha Mahr. Her training was really my foundation, in spite of the many, many teachers I would go on to study with. Her approach was very clean. I don’t know if it was Vaganova. I don’t know what it was.

She taught us that turnout comes from the hip and fifth position is fifth position. It was strong and clear and when I went to SAB that’s the kind of technique I had. Ms. Mahr was continually learning as well. She would go to New York and watch Stanley Williams’ class.

She would go to London and Paris and watch teachers there. So I had this really clean, solid foundation, but I could not move fast. I just couldn't. That was the big hurdle I had to overcome.

When I was fourteen I moved to New York for good with my older sister, who was nineteen at the time. We shared a little studio apartment on 57th Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. As I said, this was 1972 and that area was one of the worst places in New York. You'd walk down the street and see heroin needles everywhere. I went to Professional Children's School, which was on 60th Street, right near my apartment. By then SAB was in the Juilliard Building at 66th and Broadway so everything was really close by. My sister worked as an usher at State Theater to make extra money and SAB paid for my apartment and gave me a living stipend. They paid for half of PCS, too. I can honestly say I became a dancer because of the School of American Ballet.

Even though I ended up at SAB, eventually

I would study with a number of different teachers: David Howard, Kim Abel, Maggie Black, Balanchine, Stanley Williams, Suki Schorer. There wasn't one teacher where I thought to myself, Wow, this person is a really bad teacher or I can't believe I have to take this class. I always loved class.

I still love class. It's where I learned everything. It's where you work at what you have to work at without any pressure on you. You don't have to finish that variation or get through your pas de deux. That hour and a half is where you hone what it is you need, and it comes from teachers who are watching and correcting you. That's one of the things I don't understand about the way some teachers teach nowadays. How can you teach a class without correcting the dancers? Whether you're Makarova or Joe Schmo, the fact is you need corrections in class.

I think with the way Mr. B taught, you felt as if he wasn't trying to teach you everything at once. His approach was, I have all these years



Tricia Albertson and Renato Penteadó in Justin Peck's *Chutes and Ladders*. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

so it's not essential that you figure everything out in this class. So sometimes, yes, it was just a focus on tendus and it was very specific and very clean and sometimes he would just hound you in class about doing things exactly right.

Never in rehearsal, though. In rehearsals he was a dreamboat. At that point it's too late. Yes, there was a sense of experimentation in his classes, but it was really about teaching you how to do a movement. I'm going to teach you how to do bourrées, for example, or I'm going to teach you how to do ronds de jambe. So even though his classes were hard and not fun, and painful, you were learning. You weren't going through the motions. You were actually learning, and that's what I loved about my career. I had interesting teachers and they didn't let you get away with stuff. As a dancer and as a teacher you're always learning. Even now, I'll watch Roma Sosenko, one of our ballet mistresses, teach class and I'll say to myself, Wow, I forgot that.

I said to the dancers here at Miami City when I came, "I correct. It's not because I like you or think you're a good dancer or a bad dancer; it's because that's how I learned. I will give you all that I have and all I have learned and you can take it or leave it. Maybe it will work and maybe it won't, but I am not going to sit here and clap to the music and then walk out of class."

BR: You've been here for a little over a year now. Do the dancers look different from what you recall seeing when you first arrived?

Lopez: They look more unified, and I don't mean that they look alike. They look more unified in their execution of the steps. The syn-copation is still there. The energy is still there. But there's an awareness of their bodies as they move through space that I think is different. They have more of an awareness of their body placement.

It's difficult, but you teach what you like and you teach what you know. They had an attack that was very Edward, very Balanchine, if you will. But now, with the women, there's an articulation of the pointe work that has

improved. With both the men and women there's better use of the upper body.

BR: Given all that your job entails, do you find it a burden to teach?

Lopez: It depends on the day [laughing]. And you know why? Because I take my classes seriously. I prepare. If there's a lot going on I'm thinking, Oh, my God, I can't believe I have to do this. But I've learned. I've learned not to freak myself out. I've learned to focus on something for that particular class, pirouettes, for example. So I will make sure they jump and do what they need to do, but the focus of the center work will be pirouettes.

In the girls class today I really wanted to work on the articulation of the foot and how the foot comes up from fifth position into a retiré, let's say, so I really worked on that and I've learned that it's okay if the class is used in that way. They have other teachers. This is not the only class they're going to take for the rest of the year. I've removed that burden from myself. I don't feel as if I have to throw the whole kitchen sink at them all the time.

I do like teaching and class tells me a lot about the dancers. I can keep my eye on them. There are forty-seven dancers and you'd think you wouldn't be able to take all that in, but you can. If you spend ninety minutes teaching class you can look at a girl and see right away that something's going on with her or realize that a boy has really improved.

BR: When you see a dancer who's having issues what do you do?

Lopez: I believe in communication. It was not something I grew up with. Mr. B didn't communicate, really. Peter Martins was a bit better. You know, our careers are so short that, as a dancer, I would rather have heard earlier about what I needed to work on. Mr. B would come up to me in class and say, "Lourd, lourd," which means *heavy* in French, "your legs are heavy." That was always my trouble; I could not move quickly.

And what did Mr. B's comment tell me? It told me that if I wanted to get ahead, I had to figure it out. Mr. B didn't look at me and say to himself, I'm not going to worry about her,



Jeanette Delgado and Reyneris Reyes at center in *West Side Story Suite*. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

she doesn't have what it takes or she's not going to work. Peter was another one; he said to me once that when I was up on pointe, my line has to start from down at my second toe and come all the way up through the leg and I wasn't always there, it wasn't defined enough. After he said that, I thought, Okay, I get it.

Those comments from both Mr. B and Peter gave me something to work on. But to get back to your question about what I do with these dancers, I'm very proactive. I noticed some things with a few of the dancers so I brought them into my office and I said, "This is what I'm seeing, and this is what I'd like to see. What are your thoughts?" Some of them said, "You know, you're right, that's exactly how I feel." And for some it was a big surprise. But at least I said something to them. Because with forty-seven dancers I don't have the luxury of being able to say, "I don't want to use this person or that person." I need to use everyone and I want to use everyone.

BR: When you were dancing did you watch yourself on film very often?

Lopez: Not really. At that time we didn't have much. It began to become more common after Mr. B died. When I did see myself on film I hated it. Really hated it. I probably would have been a better dancer if I had used tape more. All I could see were my faults. I couldn't do it. The dancers here at Miami City watch themselves all the time on video. Right after a performance they'll be watching. I could never have done that. But everybody's different.

BR: You were, in some ways, a wunderkind. You were noticed by SAB at eleven, moved to New York and into the school full time at fourteen, and joined the company at sixteen. You had to have felt special. Yet you once said that you never thought of yourself as a Balanchine dancer and that you didn't really believe you were going to make it until Balanchine promoted you to soloist after you'd been in the company for seven years. Did you lack self-

confidence? Why did you have so little faith in yourself?

Lopez: I always felt that the only way to achieve anything was through hard work. I've always had a very strong work ethic – my whole life. Where that came from I have no idea.

BR: Your parents? Who came here with nothing and made a life for themselves and their children?

Lopez: Yes, of course. But, you know, I don't think I ever thought I would get into New York City Ballet. I never thought I'd get into SAB. Because I didn't see myself as this gorgeous, long thing with hyperextended legs, a long neck, who was super flexible. I was a good dancer, a good strong dancer but not in the way that I would look at the company as a fourteen-year-old or at the advanced classes at SAB as a fourteen year old. I didn't have what I considered the Balanchine "look," if you know what I mean.

BR: Did you ever imagine that you would direct a ballet company?

Lopez: Never in my wildest dreams. I never said to myself I want to be a ballerina. I never said to myself I want to be a mother. I never said to myself I want to direct a company. My life kind of led me this way and I said to myself, All right, let's go for it. When I arrived in New York I thought, Oh my God, I'm in New York now. And when I got into the company I thought, Wow, I'm in the company now, and then it was, Oh, I'm a soloist. It was weird. For me, I always just felt that I had to keep on working. None of those things were goals I set for myself. I never saw myself with a tiara and crown. I don't know if that's good or bad, but that's just how I functioned.

BR: How different is this job from what you imagined it would be?

Lopez: For anyone who has spent a life in ballet, it doesn't feel so different. It feels like everything I've known. The difference is that now there are decisions that have to be made and you're thinking differently. I'm thinking much more ahead. I'm learning that every decision I make, whether it's in marketing or PR or casting or programming, is my respon-

sibility and it all has to be tied to some aesthetic, to some value, to some taste. What I feel now is very much what I feel for my own family. With my daughters when they were young I was thinking about their future, and with my dancers now I'm thinking, What's going to happen for our thirtieth anniversary? How many musicians do I have? Do I have that pianist I wanted? The environment feels natural, but it's all-encompassing.

BR: When you came here the programming for the year had already been done.

Lopez: Yes. And in many ways that was great. It allowed me to walk into a machine that was already going and assess how it runs, what it needs, what it doesn't need, what it does right and what it doesn't do right. It allowed me to settle in, whereas if I had walked in and had to create all that from scratch it would have been quite hard.

The ballets that were done last year were dances I was extremely familiar with, *Apollo*, *Dances at a Gathering*, *Divert*, *Nutcracker*, *Tschai Pas*, all these ballets that I had done for years and years and years or seen for many years and, in some cases, knew from having danced various roles in them and having been coached by both Mr. B and Jerry [Robbins]. It was familiar territory for me.

BR: On the other hand, reportedly Vilella's departure was not exactly smooth. It seems he left abruptly, after having agreed to stay through that last season.

Lopez: I had to be careful about how to handle that. I didn't always know the situation I was walking into so, yes, it was very stressful and, yes, I was walking on eggshells. I understood that. Everyone had been through a hellish year and a half and they didn't know me. One day they woke up and Edward was gone and I was here. As daunting as it was, I said to myself, I am who I am. I can't be anybody else.

I knew that all the dancers wanted, as clichéd as it sounds, was to work, to dance. They didn't want to be bothered with what the board was doing or if we had any money. They didn't want to be bothered with any of that

crap. They're all selfish. That's how artists are. They want to do their class and rehearse and get onstage because you have a limited amount of time in your life as a dancer that you are able to do this. So I thought, let's get to work.

There was a funny moment when I thought to myself, When should I go into rehearsal? On the third day, one of the ballet masters called me in to watch *Don Q*. I said, "I barely know *Don Q*. I did it once when I was a kid." They said, "Come in and watch anyway." And that broke the ice. What it taught me was that I have something to say, even in a work that I really am not that familiar with.

BR: Rumor had it that Vilella made enemies on the board. Have there been issues for you as well or have they been supportive?

Lopez: In general, there has been tremen-

dous support, but I'm not going to lie, there was some attrition. One or two board members left when Edward left or soon thereafter. It was a concern of mine because I thought, Am I walking into a situation or a company that is really only supporting Edward or are they interested in supporting the institution and the art form? That was really important to me. Mr. B taught us to leave our ego at the door. And I have to say it was wonderful when I walked in here because I felt the community, the dancers, the city, the board, and the staff had had tough times, but they were here for Miami City Ballet. They said to me, "How can we help you? What do you need?" You really can't ask for more.

BR: When you came over from Morphoses, the company you founded with the choreographer, Chris Wheeldon, had you been coach-



Patricia Delgado and Jeremy Cox in Paul Taylor's *Mercuric Tidings*. (Photo: Lois Greenfield, MCB)



Katia Carranza and Sara Esty in *Concerto Barocco*. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

ing and teaching or were you primarily an administrator?

Lopez: I was always in an administrative position with Morphoses. I think there was one year when I taught some classes, but I did not take rehearsals or work in the studio with the dancers. This is an off year for Morphoses, but they will be coming down here to Miami. They just finished their last performance in August in Aspen. Let me backtrack a little bit about Morphoses.

I am really a geek at heart. I love dance history. I adore it. It took me months to read Jennifer Homans' book on the history of ballet, *Apollo's Angels*, but I did it. It sat on my nightstand for quite a while, and every time I would look at it, it seemed to get bigger [laughing].

But to get back to my comment about being a nerd, I've always loved thinking about what could be different. How can we do things dif-

ferently? What are we doing in terms of the art form to help it evolve? I enjoy thinking about the history of dance. Why were there so many creative people working in ballet in the 1920s, for example? The idea of where ballet is going – specifically the pointe shoe, this unbelievable tool that makes us, as ballet dancers, different from everyone else. Art has to relate to the people out there. It has to move them, and I think that as society changes, art forms have to change, or sometimes it's the other way around.

So, the idea of Morphoses, whether it was successful or not, was to ask those questions. It allowed artists to come in and create as they saw fit. I asked the board of Morphoses, "We have all these resources, we have a name and a history and a following, why end it? Is there a way we could bring it down to Miami and it can be an artistic program, not a company, but an artistic arm of Miami City Ballet the same

way that the school is an arm?" And they agreed.

The Miami City Ballet board then essentially agreed to absorb Morphoses. It will be a choreographic component of Miami City Ballet, doing what it set out to do in New York in terms of creating multidisciplinary collaborative work, but doing it down here with these dancers. In a strange way, what Morphoses never had, which was a set group of dancers, studios, and an infrastructure, it will have here.

BR: Logistically, how exactly will this happen? You will create new work with Miami City dancers and send them off to perform as Morphoses?

Lopez: A choreographer or a theater director will come in and create a work using our dancers and this work could be performed at any number of theaters in this area, smaller venues that in all likelihood Miami City Ballet wouldn't go into because they're not the right size for us.

There is a huge amount of time during the year when we are dormant, usually April through September, about four months, and if you don't have the funds yet to have longer seasons or to tour, what other options do you have? It could be a whole new market and a whole new audience we could reach out to, and the dancers would be getting an experience they wouldn't otherwise have. How it's all going to work, I have no idea, but I have until 2015 to figure it out.

BR: Whom do you turn to when you're grappling with a problem?

Lopez: It depends on what it is. My husband can be a good resource, yes. [Lopez's husband, George Skouras, is the Managing Director of CUE Capital and a descendant of the Skouras brothers, founders of United Artists Theaters.] I have spoken to Peter Boal at Pacific Northwest Ballet. He has been great. He said, "It's a tough first year but you ease into it." He gave me some advice. We talked about an open-door policy with the dancers; should I limit the access the dancers have to me. Those are the kinds of conversations we have.

My view is, I'd rather see how it goes. I am here for the dancers and they know that, but if it becomes too much I would reconsider it. I talk a lot to my husband because this is a business and we discuss strategy. I talk a great deal to Dan Hagerty, our executive director. He is really a partner to me, and this company is like a child you're trying to raise. Dan is like a father, in that respect. We, as parents, ask ourselves, where do we want this child to be in five years? I would like to see the company tour more, especially to Latin, to South America.

BR: Isn't touring now a huge loss-leader for ballet companies your size or bigger?

Lopez: I have to say that I don't know how Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes did it. They just toured like crazy. As prices for productions have increased and salaries have increased, about the only thing we can do is increase ticket prices. We can't add seats to our theater. So touring can really make money or break even only if you have a set program or two set programs and a group of cities, say five, that are willing to share the cost. Then, have the company go from one to the other and you can do it. But that is fairly rare. We won't go back to New York, for example, for a while. The company doesn't have a new enough personality yet.

When I looked at the repertory of this company when I came in, of course I saw the many Balanchine ballets they did, but I asked myself, What ballets, if I were dancing here now, would I love to do? And, secondly, what is the audience here ready for? *West Side Story* was a no brainer. I remember rehearsing it with Jerry and it is just so joyous, so much fun to do as a dancer. Nacho Duato's *Jardi Tanca* was a ballet I thought would be really great for the dancers as well. He choreographs for classically trained dancers and at the same time it is movement that feels natural. *Jardi* has a Spanish flavor, a sort of folk dance air about it.

Then there's Mr. B's *Episodes*, which is a very interesting ballet to me. When Pat Neary set it, I think I came to understand it. Not every-

one does it. It is such a classical work. And there's Chris Wheeldon's *Polyphonia*, which I think is a fantastic ballet.

I must say, though, I hate programming. It is so hard. It's like a puzzle. You have these six ballets that you love, for example, and then you realize that they all have white leotards. So you bring in three more ballets and you realize you have six ballets, but four of them are piano music. So you move on again and even if you arrive at something you think is a terrific program, you might finally realize that it's an evening with all dark lighting or it's all bright lighting or you're only using your principal dancers. Programming is truly one of the hardest things about this job.

BR: What will MCB be dancing next year?

Lopez: We're starting, for many reasons that have nothing to do with my choice, with *Romeo and Juliet*. We'll be doing *Symphony in Three Movements* and two pieces by Twyla Tharp, *Sweet Fields* and *Nine Sinatra Songs*. We have Richard Alston's *Carmen*. He's British and this *Carmen* premiered in 2009 at the Scottish Ballet. It is highly musical – Mark Morris musical, Balanchine musical. It's a *Carmen* suite, in pointe shoes, but it's a modern retelling of the story with abstract scenery. We'll also be doing Robbins' *The Concert* and a new commission by Justin Peck of City Ballet.

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Two months after our first interview I sat down with Lopez to talk more about Balanchine's classes, her life, and her thoughts on the first performances of the season.

Lopez: The most joyous thing for me was that every single time the curtain went up on *Serenade* there was this collective sigh [she gasps] and I said to myself, This is from 1934 and it is still getting a reaction from an audience. I thought the dancers really rose to the occasion. Some dancers surprised me, inasmuch as they were not quite what I hoped they would be onstage relative to what I see them do in the studio. They were not quite there yet.

There were others, one girl in particular, Ashley Knox. She had been in the company for

some time. I used some of the final performances to give opportunities with casting because both the dancers and I had to find out what they could do. Ashley did a stunning Russian girl. It was like another dancer onstage. It took a lot of talking to her to make her understand that she could dance that way, but it was worth it. It was beautiful.

BR: It was surprising for me to watch rehearsals of *Polyphonia* and then to see how different the ballet and the dancers looked in performance. It was remarkable to see such a transformation.

Lopez: The dancers here are real stage animals. I felt that I was the kind of dancer that held back onstage. I would be worried. These dancers don't get worried [laughing]. They really break through when they're onstage and they surprise me.

BR: Did you become less inhibited as a performer as the years went on?

Lopez: A couple of things happened. First of all, when Mr. Balanchine died I was still really young. He was just starting to give me stuff and there was a real comfort I felt with the roles he was giving me and the patience he had with me.

Then, all of a sudden he passed away and I was caught in this strange moment. Mr. B said he wanted someone to look out for me. He understood that I needed some guidance. But after he died I had to figure things out on my own. Eventually, I think I lost some of my reticence onstage. I had always held back, but at that point I had Jerry Robbins and he pushed me to break free a little bit.

The breakthrough for me came when I was away from the company for two years and gave birth to my daughter. I came back to the company and realized I had changed but the company hadn't. It was bizarre, because I thought, I'm going to walk back into this place that is completely different and what am I going to do and . . . the only thing that had changed was me.

BR: How late into your pregnancy did you dance?

Lopez: Two days before I gave birth I was



Emily Bromberg and Chase Swatosh in Christopher Wheeldon's *Polyphonia*. (Photo: Gio Alma, MCB)

in class [laughing]. You don't remember this? Well, before I even became pregnant I injured my foot so I was out for a couple of months, then I tried to come back but the pain was too much. People were telling me I needed surgery, so I had surgery in January and was thinking I might never come back.

I decided to go to college and to get pregnant. Everything went fine. I had my baby in November and in the spring of 1990 I tried to come back for *Barocco* and tore my calf muscle the day before the performance. Then I was in a cast. At that point Peter Martins called and said, "We just don't think you're going to come back so what do you want to do? We can't pay you." I said, "Okay, I understand, you don't have to pay me. Just don't pull my name off the roster."

BR: Was that hurtful?

Lopez: Not really. I'm a very pragmatic person. I was thirty years old then and I'd been out for two years and had had a baby. I got it. I understood.

BR: That surprises me a bit. I always felt that City Ballet was the kind of place that would never abandon a dancer, Balanchine in particular.

Lopez: Yes. But those were different times, after Mr. B died. And who knows how Mr. B would have felt about me having a baby? [laughing] He may not have liked that, whereas Peter embraced it. You have to look at it from those perspectives. But I was really fine with it. And then, when all was said and done I came back to the company in November 1990. And I wasn't vindictive about it. I just knew that I wasn't done.

BR: What were your expectations in college?

Lopez: I had none. I just wanted to do the things I'd never been able to do when I was a dancer. And I always loved school, loved it. I love reading and I read a lot. Fordham University had something called the Excel Program. I took one class a semester and even after I came back to dancing I managed



Renan Cerdeiro in *Ballo della Regina*. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

to continue my classes. I never got a degree, but I loved it. The only reason I can type now is because of Fordham [laughing].

What it taught me was that I had the tools to do whatever I wanted to do. As a dancer I had important tools. What I didn't have was an education. That's a completely different thing than intelligence, or dedication, or focus. It was great to be in a place and realize, hey, I can figure this out.

BR: So you came back after two years and your perspective was quite different?

Lopez: Yes. Jerry was still there and that was important because he was our connection to

the past. But what happened, really, was that I started dancing for myself. I stopped feeling as if every performance was the end of the world. It wasn't brain surgery. It wasn't cancer research. It was just a performance. So a big pressure was removed. And because I was away for so long it just felt great to be back.

There's a lot that goes on when you have a child, every minute. What I was doing onstage did not seem as important as my daughter, who might be home with a fever. For me as a dancer it was a good thing. It's age. It's wisdom. There's a phrase is Spanish that roughly translates to, "The devil knows more because he's old and because he's the devil."

I remember sitting in my apartment in New York for two solid weeks, crying and depressed because I thought my career was over when I needed

foot surgery. I thought it was the *end* of my life, it's over, done. Two weeks! I didn't leave my apartment until I had the surgery. But guess what? My life didn't end. Now I have a twenty-four-year-old daughter. Do those two years really matter very much now?

I think there's a problem with dancers who think their lives are over when they stop dancing. No. You have this fantastic career when you're very young and you finish with plenty of time to begin another. It's a process. Your life can change. It doesn't end. That bad performance doesn't matter.

Balanchine wasn't judging us by how we

did *Stars and Stripes* that night, he was judging us by what we did in our career; in our lives; not what we did that one time in our life. When I speak to dancers I will tell them that I understand they are hurt by an individual performance, but if they rise above it, they will realize in time that it's okay.

BR: Did that attitude change when Peter took over? Was there more of a premium placed on how you did in a particular show?



Nathalia Arja in *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux*. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

Lopez: I felt it. Even though I knew it did not matter, it seemed it was more important, for example, how you did that season. Peter is a different person, but he was quiet in the same way that Mr. B was. Peter taught fantastic classes and he was a great coach one-on-one, but, like Mr. B, he would watch you rehearse

and perhaps give you some correction, but you never knew where you stood. One of the things I loved about Jerry, even though he was a real taskmaster, was that there was information. He was constantly talking and that, to me, always made a difference.

BR: Robbins didn't react well when a performance wasn't to his liking.

Lopez: Oh, my God, no! But Peter didn't react. I would give horrible performances and

Peter would never tell me it was awful. What Jerry would tell you had very little to do with technique. It was more: you didn't get it. The interpretation was wrong. I remember that once we were doing maybe twelve *Dances at a Gatherings* in two weeks and it was the same cast.

At this point we were down to performance ten. I was doing the Purple Girl and Ben Huys was doing the Green Boy – the slide and look – and it was one of those moments when we gave one another a slight smile because there was a comfort level between us. But Jerry came back, livid. Livid, livid, livid! “How dare you smile! It was completely out of character!” And he was right. But that sort of thing helps you. I didn't go to the dressing room and pout. I thought, You know,

I should not have smiled. So at the next matinee there was nothing.

BR: What memories have you of the lecture-demonstrations that Balanchine gave?

Lopez: What I recall was Mr. B being very specific about technique. His combinations were very simple, and very specific. Fifth po-



Alexei Ratmansky's *Symphonic Dances*. (Photo: Daniel Azoulay, MCB)

sition was fifth position. A tendu was directly in front and turned out, and to the side directly to the side of your heel, and to the back directly behind your back. He had no interest in warming you up. He had no interest in making sure you got to do a grand allegro or pirouettes. He was only interested in teaching you how to dance.

That's why I'm talking about a process, because if he were interested in a moment, he would have given it a full class. But when you're interested in developing a dancer and you know you have years and years, or hope you have years and years, it's a process. You have the time. That's a very different concept. The class wasn't a warm-up. You were there to learn.

BR: In Stanley Williams' classes at SAB I remember that we rarely ever got to grand allegro. We did scores of pirouette combinations and petit allegro but almost never went across the floor.

Lopez: I know, but the specifics of what Stanley taught were the components of grand allegro. I remember him saying, you're always in fifth position. He would say, for example, that in *à la seconde*, you're always in fifth position. What he meant was that when the leg comes back in, you arrive in fifth. It's the shape of the leg. Balanchine would make Peter Martins stand in fifth position and say that that's what it's supposed to look like.

I believe that's what the art form is. It's not third position. The legs are turned out. It's an aesthetic. But the body is whatever you want it to be. So, to get back to your question about Mr. B's classes, he didn't do much correcting. Of course, there were people he would correct but he didn't talk that much. He was very humorous, but the classes were hard, really hard. You walked out of there tired, and physically frustrated. It was always the extremes of things. Very very fast, or very very slow. It was a commitment.