



Julie Kent in George
Balanchine's *Apollo*



WOMAN OF THE YEAR

2006 WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR FOR
AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE'S
Julie Kent.

Julie Kent appears at the costume fitting for the dress she wears on the cover after a rehearsal for Jorma Elo's new work for American Ballet Theatre. Her feet are killing her, so she slouches while she gets measured, but she's pretty easy-going about the whole thing, including being plied with questions. When conversation turns to her 2-year-old son, William Spencer, though, she perks up and insists on running downstairs to her locker to get photos of him.

"I'm a proud mom," she says, as she shows off images of William in a blow-up pool, somewhere at Chautauqua (where she taught during the summer) and in Massachusetts, where she has a house with husband Victor Barbee, ABT's associate artistic director.

BY JOCELYN ANDERSON

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—Frederic Franklin

At 37, Kent, the hugely popular principal at ABT, is having a big year, professionally and personally. In July, ABT celebrated her 20th anniversary with the company with a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, followed by flowers, confetti, appearances by current and past partners, and, of course, audience adoration. In September, she celebrated her 10th wedding anniversary.

Kent may be the epitome of the classical dancer; blessed with an amazing facility, she has the technique and elegance that others crave. Yet, she’s faced ups and downs in her career with the sometimes troubled ABT, and conquered the

occasional nerve, earning an enthusiastic fan base. (Her roles in the ballet movies *Dancers* and *Center Stage* helped.) Now it’s her status as a mom that’s leading some to talk about a newfound maturity onstage.

“Since William has come along, her work has deepened,” says ballet’s famed senior statesman Frederic Franklin, former dancer with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, who first saw Kent at age 14, when he judged the Washington chapter of the National Society of Arts and Letters, which she won. “I have seen her do many roles. [Now] she tackles them with authority. She’s grown up in her art.”

This is an understandable progression, because, as Kent says, “Ballet is no longer the most important thing in my life. I don’t love it any less. But, in a sense, not having that pressure on myself and that super sort of neurotic focus on my work has freed me in a way that allows me to be better.”

Looking back, though, she has advanced carefully through her career, paying attention to her development every step of the way. The youngest of three children—and two half siblings—Kent would accompany her mother, a former semiprofessional dancer from New Zealand, to adult ballet classes. And when Kent was 7, she started taking lessons herself. “It was just a normal activity for my family,” says Kent, whose sister also danced, before giving it up in high school.

Kent, however, continued and trained at the Academy of the Maryland Youth Ballet and School of American Ballet. When she was 16, she auditioned for ABT.

Baryshnikov, who was director at the time, offered her an apprentice position for the company’s *Nutcracker* performances—on tour and at the Metropolitan Opera House. By March, she had a corps de ballet contract.

“When Baryshnikov offered me the contract, I cried,” Kent says. “I didn’t think I was ready at all. I had barely taken a jazz class at that time.”

And though she describes herself at the time as “the one in back hoping the person I was understudying would never hurt herself,” she also says that she was never given anything she couldn’t handle. From her first roles as the nurse and the knitting lady in *Sleeping Beauty*, Kent slowly took on more solos, then Little Red Riding Hood, then the fairies.

When she was still in the corps, she danced her first principal role, Caroline in Antony Tudor’s *Lilac Garden*. Then she did Frederick Ashton’s *Birthday Offering*, with the other principal women of the company, after which she was promoted to soloist.

“It was a hard transition, when I first became soloist, because I didn’t have any rep,” Kent says, referring to her personal catalog of ballets. To make matters worse, Baryshnikov had just left, and

Julie Kent with
Frederic Franklin in
Romeo and Juliet



Right and left: Rosalie O'Connor

Kent with Jose
Manuel Carreño in
Swan Lake



the company entered a period of major financial difficulty.

The following year, however, Kent was given *Giselle* and *Juliet*, which she says made a big difference. Shortly after that, in 1992, Kevin McKenzie became artistic director, and in 1993, Kent won the Erik Bruhn Prize, danced *Swan Lake* and was promoted to principal—meaning more of the spotlight, and in time, stardom. ABT's money problems persisted a while longer.

"We had to work for two years in a row for 26 weeks, and it was really rough," Kent says. "To try and build on [a rep] when you only have one *Swan Lake* a year and 12 weeks off in the summer, trying to take huge leaps artistically and physically was a huge challenge."

Even before they married, Barbee was a bright light for her during the tough times, with his encouragement and support.

"He always made me feel like the audience should be happy because I was dancing that night," Kent says. "He's given me so much as an artist, not only by example, but with his words. He has the capacity to always say exactly the right thing to inspire you or unlock something."

Early on, especially, they discussed all of her roles. He encouraged her not to act by demonstrating, but by delving into the motivations of the characters. They focused most on *Manon*.

"I think there is always something not quite right about a performance if you are faking it," says Barbee, who was a principal at ABT before becoming associate AD. "For Julie, because she's got the ability and the instinct for it, I just had to remind her to ask the right questions. Why does Manon do this? Where does she want to go? If it's Julie acting like Manon, it's not real."

Kent with husband and ABT Associate Artistic Director Victor Barbee and their son, William Spencer, at her 20th anniversary celebration in July



“In a way, those 20 years [with ABT] have just led me to [my husband and son]. That’s what I want to celebrate most in my life.” —Julie Kent

Slowly, he says, she stopped needing to ask so many questions and started to feel more comfortable with the ballet.

“Manon was difficult for me,” Kent says, “because she makes these decisions that are hard to understand. Victor really helped me discover how to make her a person that I could fall in love with. I had to learn some skills about how to bring to life a character that isn’t so close to my own personality.”

By all accounts, the hard work paid off. Franklin recalls a performance of just the pas de deux from *Manon* that Kent performed with Robert Hill. “Other things were on the program, and it didn’t mean a thing,” he says. “That was it for me. It was time to go home after that. It must have been the fulfillment of what she was trying to do with the interpretation part [of her work].”

Though she has accomplished a lot in her 20 years onstage, Kent remains challenged by her work. She still gets nervous before ballets with 32 fouettés, and contemporary ballets, such as Elo’s, force her to step outside of her comfort zone. “I think my tendency is to seek fluid movement,” she says.

In addition to fluid, Kent is often described as composed, serene and poised. Sometimes appearances can be deceiving. She recalls back when she was in the corps de ballet, dancing the Kingdom of the Shades in *La Bayadère*, in which she was always front and center. “You can’t hardly see anyone else onstage, so you feel like the only one out there,” she says. “Part of me was so serene and looking like nothing could bother me, and literally every time I lifted my foot off the floor, I had this vision of myself running off the stage!”

Those experiences have made her the perfect mentor for younger dancers coming up through the ranks at ABT. She would even like to write a book about how to handle the ballet experience.

“Because she’s been with ABT for a while, she passes on her wisdom,” says principal Marcelo Gomes, who frequently partners Kent. “For me, it was how to take my dancing to the next level—maybe a certain habit I need to cut. That made such a big difference on my dancing. I would look into her eyes and remember, ‘Oh, yeah, she told me not to do that!’”

Kent shows no sign of slowing down. In September, she guested in *Swan Lake* with Ballet de Monterrey in Mexico (now headed by former partner Hill). In January and March of 2007, she will appear with Malakhov and Friends in Berlin.

These days, trips to the poultry farm in Massachusetts with William rate up there with guesting spots abroad. In fact, it was William and Victor’s appearance onstage at her 20th anniversary celebration that she says she will remember most from that night.

“If I had to sum up how I feel about my career at ABT,” Kent says, “I have always felt that I had the support of everybody. I never felt like I had to overcome some huge obstacle. The dancers, my friends and partners have all given me something incredible. But, in a way, those 20 years have just led me to them. That’s what I want to celebrate most in my life.” ■

Left: MIPA; right: Rosalie O'Connor



Kent with Angel Corella
in Jerome Robbins's
Other Dances