

A Star Is Born

American Ballet Theatre principal
Gillian Murphy is primed for prima.

Gillian Murphy is on the threshold of something big.

A principal at American Ballet Theatre, she's already reached the top. But now she's about to be catapulted into the spotlight even more.

You may already know Murphy from her pointe shoe ads, as one of the odalisques in ABT's 1999 video of *Le Corsaire* or even as ABT superstar Ethan Stiefel's girlfriend. But come June, Murphy will display her range as Odette/Odile, when PBS presents *Swan Lake*, airing nationwide on June 20 (see sidebar). And in the Metropolitan Opera House season in New York City this summer, she will open the run of the company premiere of Frederick Ashton's *Sylvia* and dance the female lead in *Le Corsaire* for the first time.

"I'm completely fulfilled and looking forward to the challenges that are coming my way," Murphy says. "A big part of me feels really comfortable expressing myself through movement, particularly classical ballet. I think with true passion you can do so much more than you think is possible."

At 26, Murphy gives off an air of confidence and thoughtfulness. Every decision has been carefully considered and it's obvious that she has reached this point in her career through strength and resolve—which may or may not create problems.

"I think sometimes there's a misconception that I'm not vulnerable or I'm some sort of robot," she says. "I think it's just that my family instilled in me this attitude that if you dream of something, you can make it possible, especially if you have

By Jocelyn Anderson

Photograph by Sarah Silver; hair and makeup by Felix



Gillian Murphy
and Angel Corella
in *Swan Lake*

Stage On Screen

Swan Lake, with Gillian Murphy in the lead, comes to a living room near you.

PBS celebrates 30 years of the program *Dance In America* with American Ballet Theatre's *Swan Lake*, starring Gillian Murphy as Odette/Odile, airing on *Great Performances* June 20 (check local listings).

Recorded in February at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, this production of *Swan Lake* also stars Angel Corella as Prince Siegfried and Marcelo Gomes as the evil Von Rothbart.

The presentation marks the first time *Dance In America* has shown the classic. "In the beginning of the series we really shied away from the big dramatic ballets," says producer Judy Kinberg. With new TV formats that allow for wide-screen filming, "I began to think that maybe we should reconsider some of the big full-lengths. And what better than *Swan Lake*?"

Once that decision was made, the team approached Kevin McKenzie at ABT about filming his 2000 version. He made about 15 minutes worth of cuts to move the story along faster and restaged the prologue with the camera in mind.

Kinberg promises that audiences who are familiar with the classic story will see this production in a new way. "You can never replace a live performance when you are seeing something on television—the kind of spontaneity, for example, you get in the theater," she says. "But we can do things on television that theater can't. [We can] bring you closer to the action."

PBS has a long history of producing quality dance programming. *Swan Lake* joins recent *Dance In America* successes featuring ABT, including Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*, the documentary *Born to Be Wild: The Leading Men of American Ballet Theatre* and the Emmy Award-winning *Le Corsaire* by Anna-Marie Holmes.

Swan Lake is a production of Thirteen/WNET New York. For more: www.pbs.org

the facility. If you have that, there is no need to hold back."

As evidence of that drive, Murphy refers to when she danced the complete "Black Swan" pas de deux from *Swan Lake* at age 11. By that time, she was living in Florence, SC, and had been dancing for eight years. "I was probably even more fearless [then]," Murphy says. "Now it seems really crazy and kind of amazing."

With 32 fouettés under her belt and her family's support, she began commuting three hours a day to Columbia City Ballet. At 14, Murphy decided to go to high school at North Carolina School of the Arts. There, she worked closely with former New York City Ballet ballerina Melissa Hayden.

"If she told you to do something, you could do it," Murphy says. "I don't think I heard her say, 'This is a difficult step, but give it a shot.' Instead, it was, 'You're going to do this. No excuses.'"

"She can be pretty hardcore. You know, there are a lot of horror stories out there about her, but for some reason the two of us connected. We got past the teacher-student thing. From the start, she's been really generous."

Hayden still remembers the first time she saw Murphy dance. She was cast in the school's production of *The Nutcracker*. "I kept watching the rehearsal as I passed the doorway, and I kept saying, 'That child is much too young!'" Hayden says. "I especially came to the performance to see her, and I was in ecstasy. I was so surprised by the maturity of everything she did."

With Hayden's guidance, Murphy entered the USA International Ballet Competition, where she made it to the finals, and the Prix de Lausanne, where she won a scholarship. Murphy decided to use the funds for one last year at NCSA and graduated from high school a year early.

A few months before graduation, Murphy caught the

Hidemichi Seito



Murphy in George Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial*

“*[Sylvia’s]* got a wide range. It’s a role that fits her like a glove.”

—Kevin McKenzie, ABT artistic director

eye of ABT ballet mistress Georgina Parkinson during a rehearsal of Frederick Ashton’s *Les Patineurs*. At Parkinson’s urging, Murphy attended an open class to audition for ABT.

“I hadn’t actually considered auditioning at ABT, because I had heard they were having financial difficulties,” Murphy says. “I thought now was not the time, because they were falling apart. But as it turned out, I was blown away by the company.”

They were obviously amazed by her too, because ABT Artistic Director Kevin McKenzie offered her a corps de ballet contract on the spot. “Already at that age, one could see the brain,” says McKenzie. “It was clear she had amazing command of her technique and musicality. She had all the ingredients.”

Murphy knew she had to turn him down and graduate first. Luckily, McKenzie understood, and she joined ABT the summer after she turned 17.

She got off to a slow start, but after about a year, she understudied a soloist part in Twyla Tharp’s *Elements* and unexpectedly performed it—and did it well—on tour when another dancer got sick. She was promoted to soloist in 1999 and principal in 2002—six years after joining ABT. “I would acknowledge that there’s luck involved,” Murphy says, “but I think my sort of steady rise also came from being prepared for luck.”

And according to those who work with her, preparation is an important part of her process. “She does her research,” McKenzie says. “It’s not just, ‘what’s my next step?’ But ‘why is that step there, and how did it come to be?’ You see an evolution happening before your eyes. She’s absorbing it all.”

In fact, Murphy studies every role like a college student. For *Pillar of Fire*, she headed to the library to learn about the ballet’s history and the work of Antony Tudor. The result, says Hayden, was breathtaking. “Seeing her do *Pillar of Fire* was the most touching experience,” Hayden says. “I cried through the whole performance, she moved me so.”


So when it was time to cast *Sylvia*, McKenzie had faith that Murphy could take on the multifaceted role. “If

you were to look at the three acts out of context from each other, you might cast three different ballerinas,” says McKenzie. “In the first act, she’s this great Amazonian-type goddess. In the second act, she’s an entrapped female. And in the third act, she’s a *Sleeping Beauty* ballerina. So it’s got a wide range. It’s a role that fits her like a glove.”

Because she gets so immersed in dancing, Murphy likes to separate work from her time off. “It’s so important to at least attempt to become a complete individual outside the ballet bubble,” Murphy says. “You can’t become a complete artist if all you have to offer is your limited perspective of being a ballet dancer. Luckily, the man I’ve been with for the past seven years also has outside interests.”

She took a cross-country motorcycle trip with Stiefel, and the two also like to get away to the house he built in Pennsylvania. As for ballet, Stiefel says he only gives advice when he’s asked. “I’m there for her and for support or giving her my thoughts,” he says, “but early on, I wanted her to find her way and know that she made her career and shaped it herself.”

Working together, they say, has also been gratifying. “I feel really lucky to be partnered with Ethan, who I have not just feelings of friendship [for], but love,” Murphy says. Stiefel says *Swan Lake* and *La Fille mal gardée* have been particularly memorable. “The ‘White Swan’ pas de deux takes me back to what I thought of her when I first saw her,” he says. “The kind of sensations you feel, like on a first date. And then I have to look at *La Fille mal gardée*, because that’s almost the essence of Gillian—very sweet and a little bit naïve—not in a bad way, but very good-natured.”

Stiefel plans to continue dancing with ABT part-time when he takes the helm of Ballet Pacifica, after which he will move to California. As for what the future holds for Murphy, she’s open. “I would hope to be dancing in Ethan’s company, because he is going to do really great things,” she says. “But I also see myself finishing my career at ABT. I am definitely still going to be dancing. I love what I do.” 



Murphy as Frederick
Ashton's Sylvia