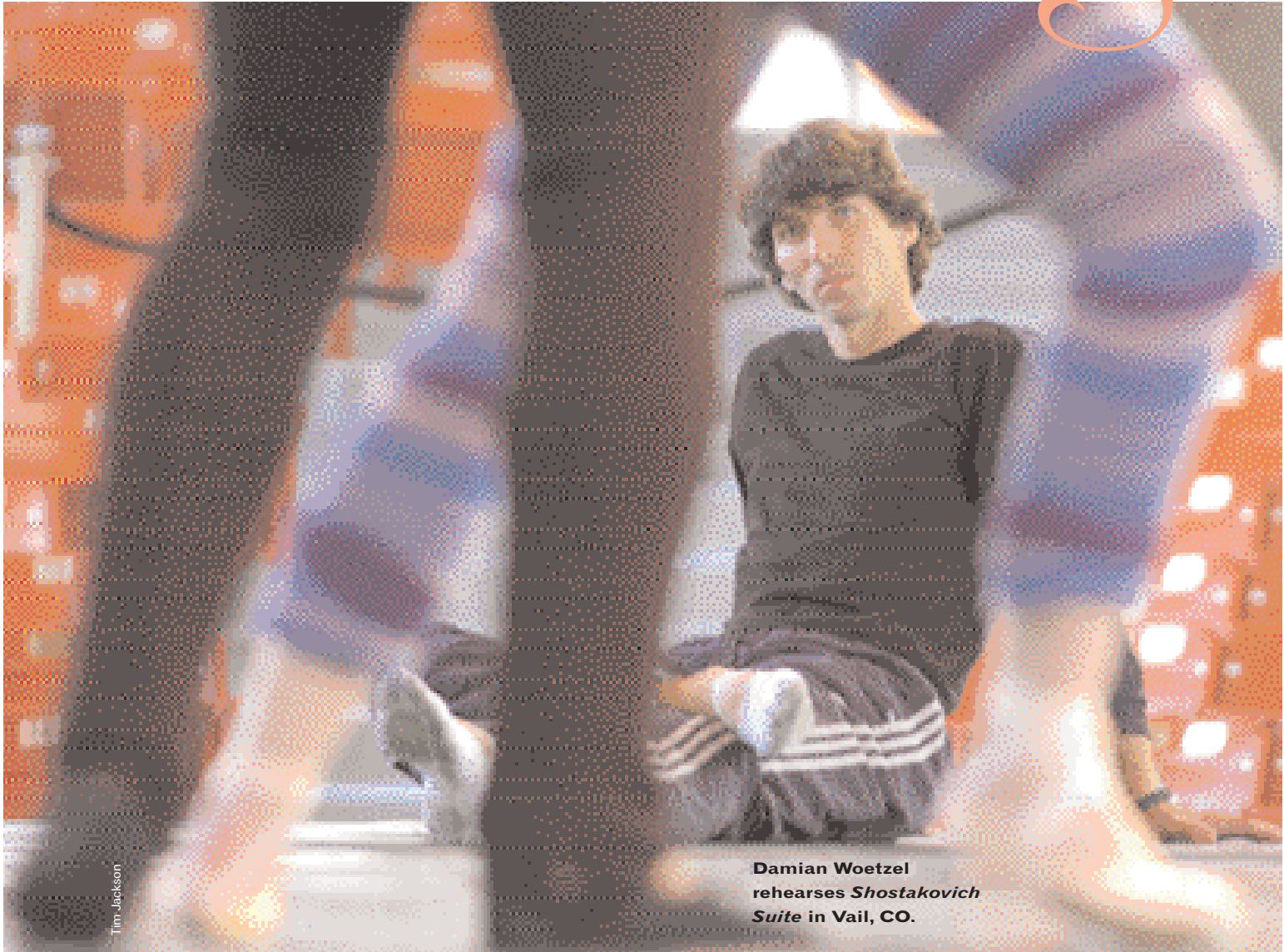


Working



Tim Jackson

Damian Woetzel
rehearses *Shostakovich*
Suite in Vail, CO.

Professional dancers strike a special balance between choreography and performance.

By Jocelyn Anderson

“[Dance] doesn’t necessarily need an actual tale to tell, but I am much more interested at this point in theatrical dance than just pure dance.”

—DAMIAN WOETZEL,
NEW YORK CITY BALLET

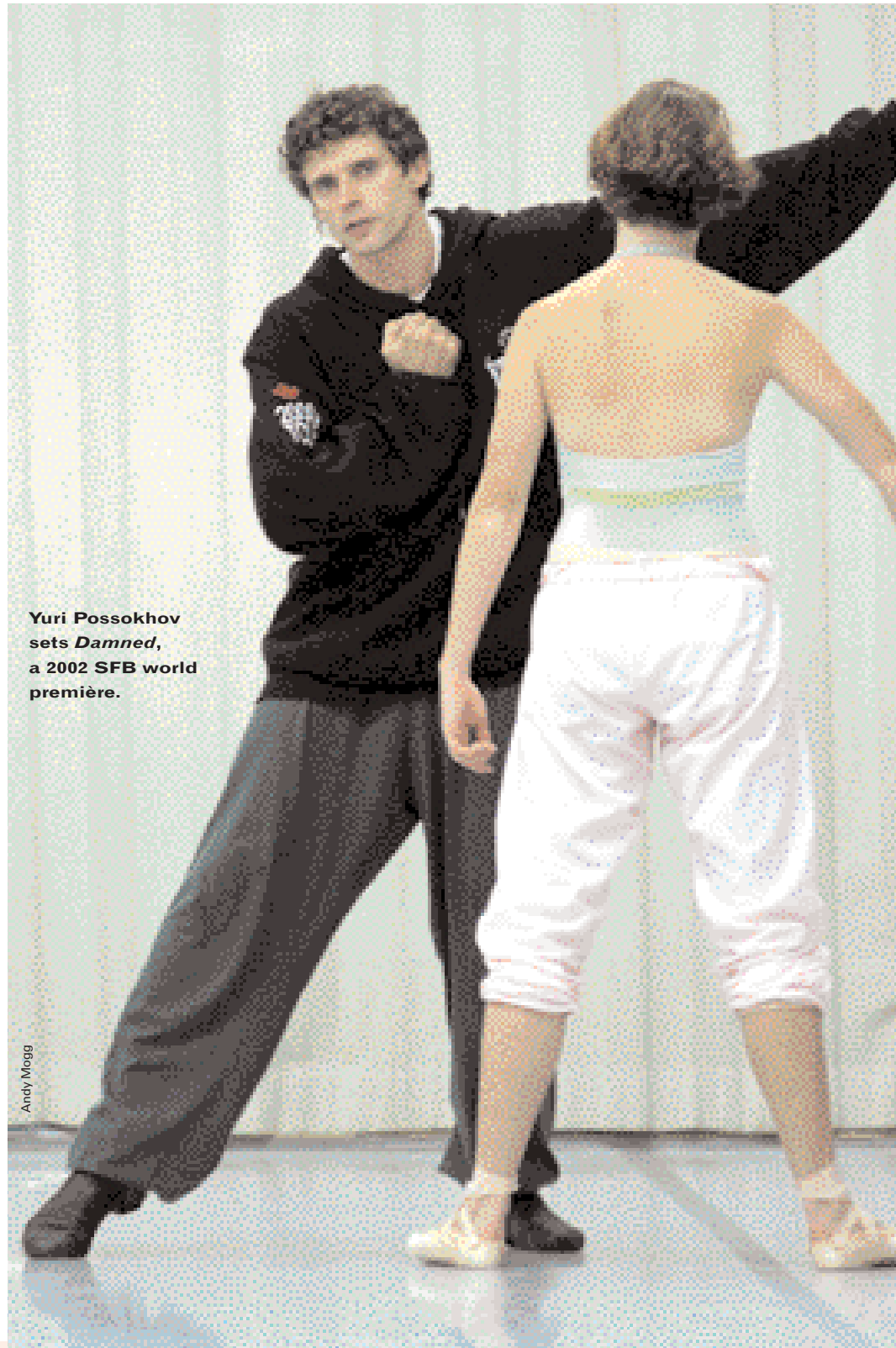
Double Time

When San Francisco Ballet came to New York City last year for a week-long engagement, principal dancer Yuri Possokhov's 2002 ballet, *Damned*, had its NYC première at City Center. But while the other choreographers of the evening—Christopher Wheeldon and Mark Morris—were sitting in the audience, Possokhov was warming up in the wings, getting ready for his performance in Morris' *Sandpaper Ballet*.

That's par for the course if you're a working dancer trying to balance the responsibilities of performing with a company and a burgeoning career in choreography. Many are facing the challenge. From Possokhov at SFB to Heidi Cruz at Pennsylvania Ballet to Damian Woetzel at New York City Ballet, more and more dancers are trying to make it work. While it can be a difficult prospect, most find the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

"There is no question that it's very hard because you have to concentrate on [each thing]," Possokhov says. "So it's like you are not concentrating on the dancing or not concentrating so well on [choreography]."

Still, when SFB Artistic Director Helgi Tomasson invited Possokhov to participate in a discovery program for dance makers, he seized the opportunity. He had often thought about trying to choreograph while he danced with the Bolshoi Ballet, but says he didn't have the knowledge to make it happen.



Yuri Possokhov sets *Damned*, a 2002 SFB world première.

Andy Mogg

“I like doing choreography because it gives me a chance to explore my individual movement.”

—HEIDI CRUZ,
PENNSYLVANIA BALLET

After working with choreographers like Morris and James Kudelka, Possokhov learned to distill his vision into a ballet. “To combine it all and digest enough to show it on the stage, this is my goal,” he says. He did this in 2001 with the creation of *Magritomania*, which was dedicated to the painter Magritte; the ballet won Possokhov an Isadora Duncan Award. Now he’s scheduled to create a new ballet for SFB next season.

Despite the accolades and future projects, he still considers himself a choreographer-in-training, rather than a professional—something he is striving to become.

This season, Possokhov co-staged SFB’s *Don Quixote* with Tomasson, but his real love is contemporary ballet. “For me, contemporary choreography is one of the best things existing,” he says. “It’s strange because I used to be a very romantic and classical dancer. But I’m tired of [that] . . . It’s today’s expressions, feelings and technique, a different way of introducing what you want to say.”

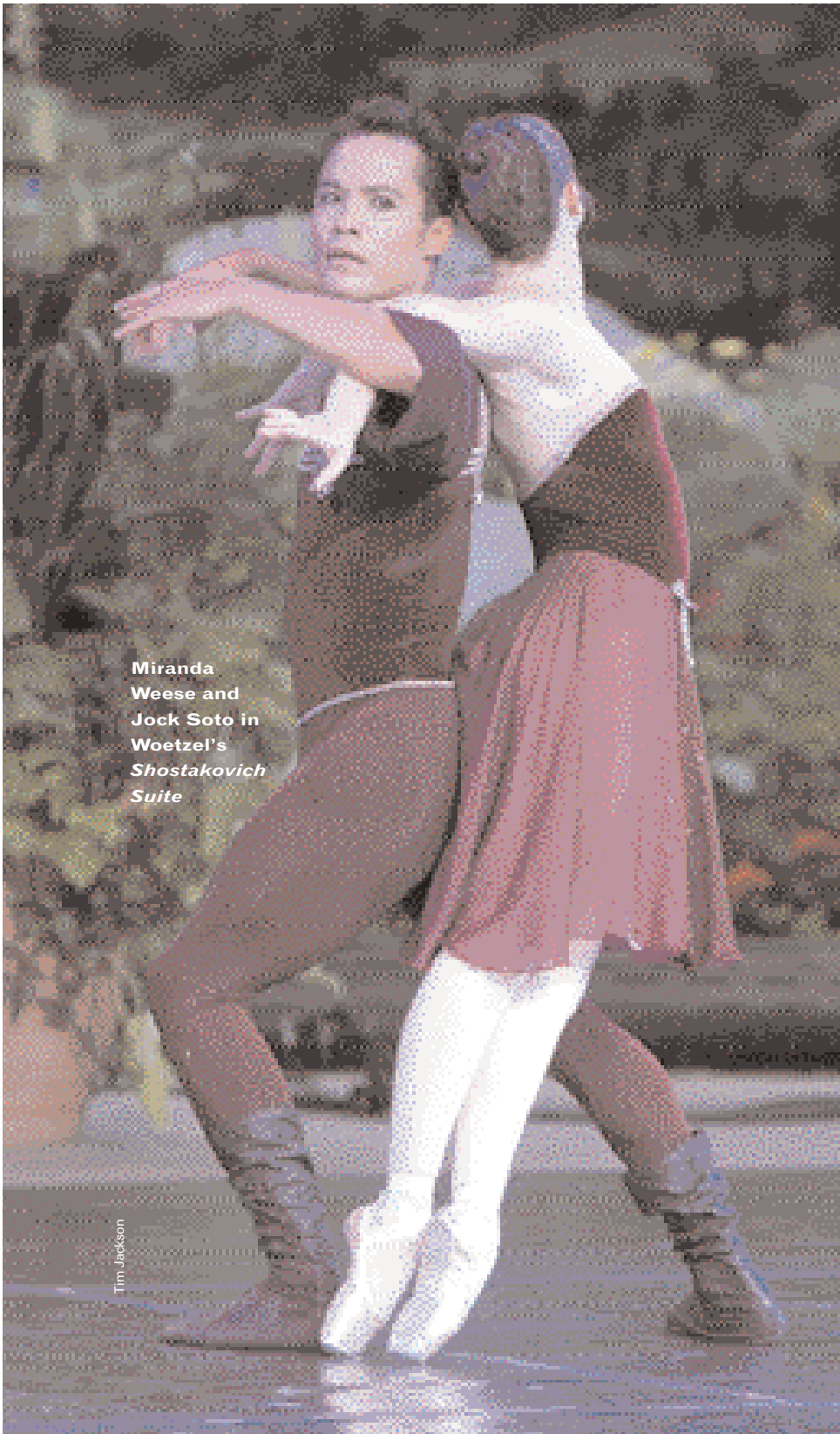
PB’s Cruz has taken a different approach to fitting in everything she wants to do. By choreographing on students, she doesn’t overwhelm her calendar. For the past two years, she has choreographed two pieces for students at Allentown, PA’s Repertory Dance Theatre (*Harsh Angels* and *Kafela*), which they have performed at Regional Dance America, and has also made dances for the yearly performances at the Newtown School of Dance in Newtown, PA.

“I like doing choreography because it gives me a chance to explore my individual movement,” Cruz explains. “When you are constantly doing other people’s works, you don’t really get to see where you can go as an individual. I learn more about myself when I choreograph.”

As she has gained more experience, Cruz says her choreography has enriched her work at PB. “I think it’s made me a lot freer and less self-conscious,” she says. “It kind of helps me to just do [it], no holds barred. It makes me more confident.” Cruz will try her hand at choreographing for college

Miranda Weese and Jock Soto in Woetzel’s *Shostakovich Suite*

Tim Jackson



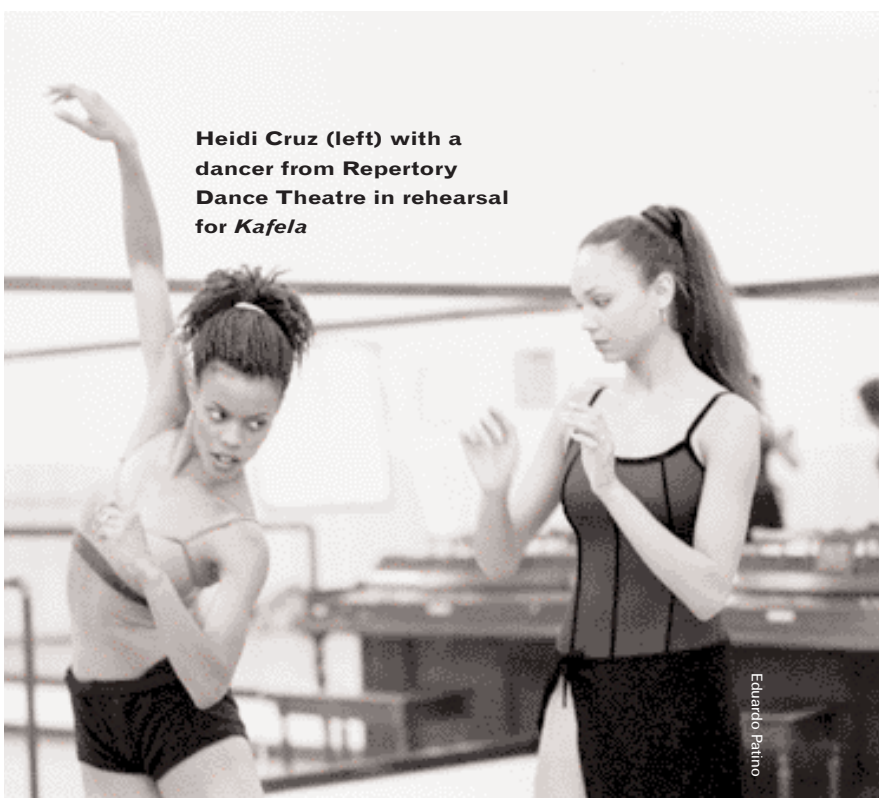
students in November when she creates a new ballet at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA.

Woetzel's chance to choreograph also came pretty easily. He actually started working on a professional level almost 10 years ago, but found it too tricky to manage all the assignments. In 1994, he created two ballets for NYCB (*Glazounov Pas de Deux* and *Ebony Concerto*), an opera for the New York City Opera, a piece for Joffrey II and a number of workshop works. "I realized I wasn't giving the dancing its due in some ways," Woetzel says, "and I really backed off for that reason." He took a break to focus on his work as one of NYCB's ever-popular principal dancers and has only recently started choreographing again.

Now Woetzel concentrates on projects that will fit into his busy dancing schedule. For two summers, he has attended NYCB's New York Choreographic Institute, which has allowed him to get down to work and explore movement. Out of that experience, he created *Copland Portrait* for School of American Ballet's spring workshop last year. He also premiered *Shostakovich Suite* at the Vail International Dance Festival last summer in Colorado.

"I'm curious as to what can be done in dance on the stage," Woetzel says. And over time, he has discovered in himself a real love for the theatrical side of dance. "I am not that interested in just good combinations of steps," he says. "[Dance] doesn't necessarily need an actual tale to tell, but I am much more interested at this point in theatrical dance than just pure dance." Woetzel takes his first real foray into the dramatic side of ballet in May, when he premieres a new work at Carolina Ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen tale *The*

Heidi Cruz (left) with a dancer from Repertory Dance Theatre in rehearsal for *Kafela*



Eduardo Patino

Nightingale, set to Stravinsky's score of the same name. He won a Choo-San Goh Award for choreography that will help fund the ballet.

While most choreographers have been dancers at some point in their lives, it takes a special person, capable of doing a lot of juggling, to choreograph and dance professionally. In the end, the payoff is clear: They get the chance to explore ballet from a different vantage point with the promise of something that will last far beyond retirement.

As Possokhov says, "I think for me choreography is the highest level of ballet. Everybody has to dedicate themselves to the process of choreography. It's my role in life. This makes ballet move forward. It makes audiences happy. I'm not a choreographer yet, but I understand that the most important thing in ballet is choreography." P

SFB performs Possokhov's *Damned*.



Weiford Watts