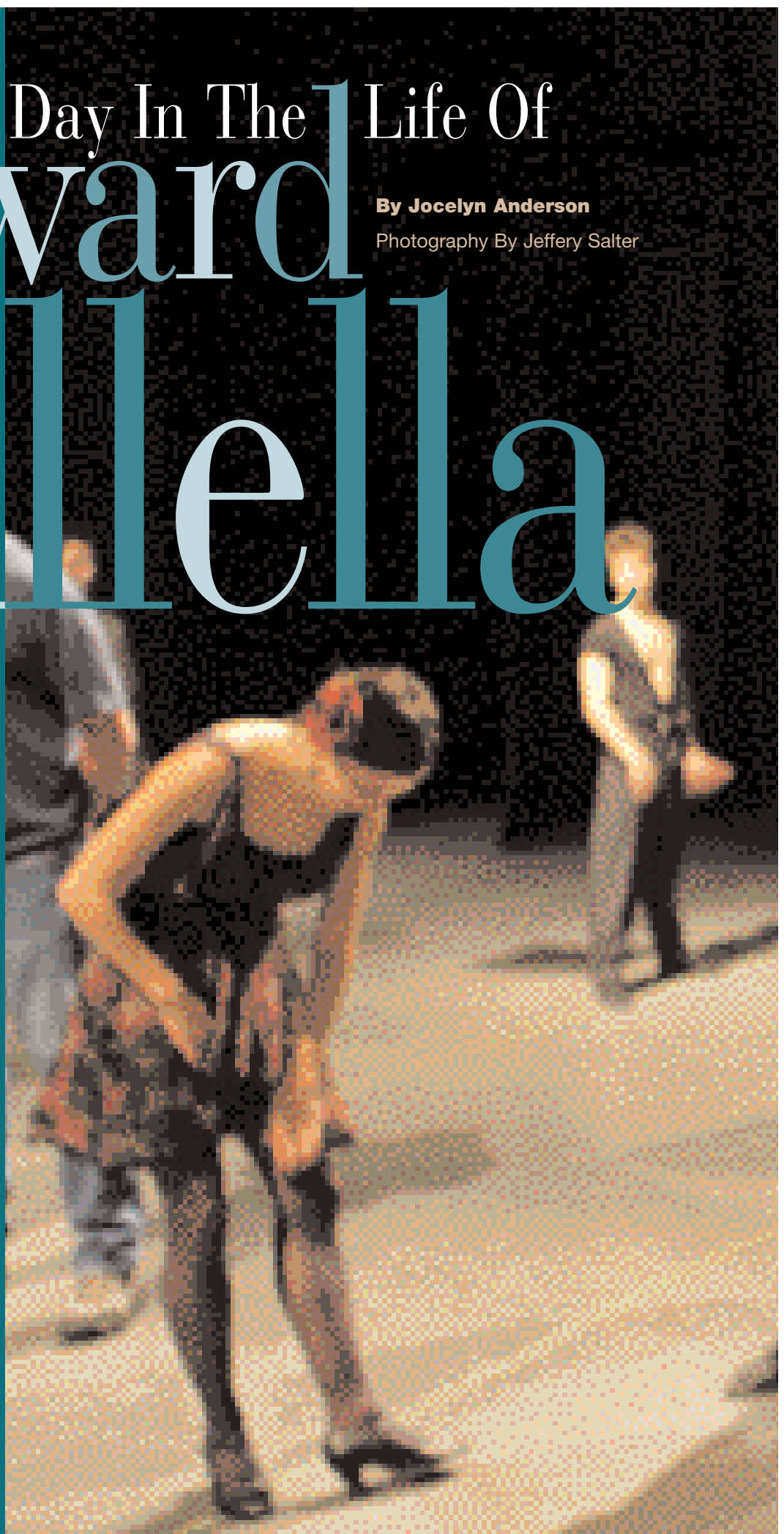


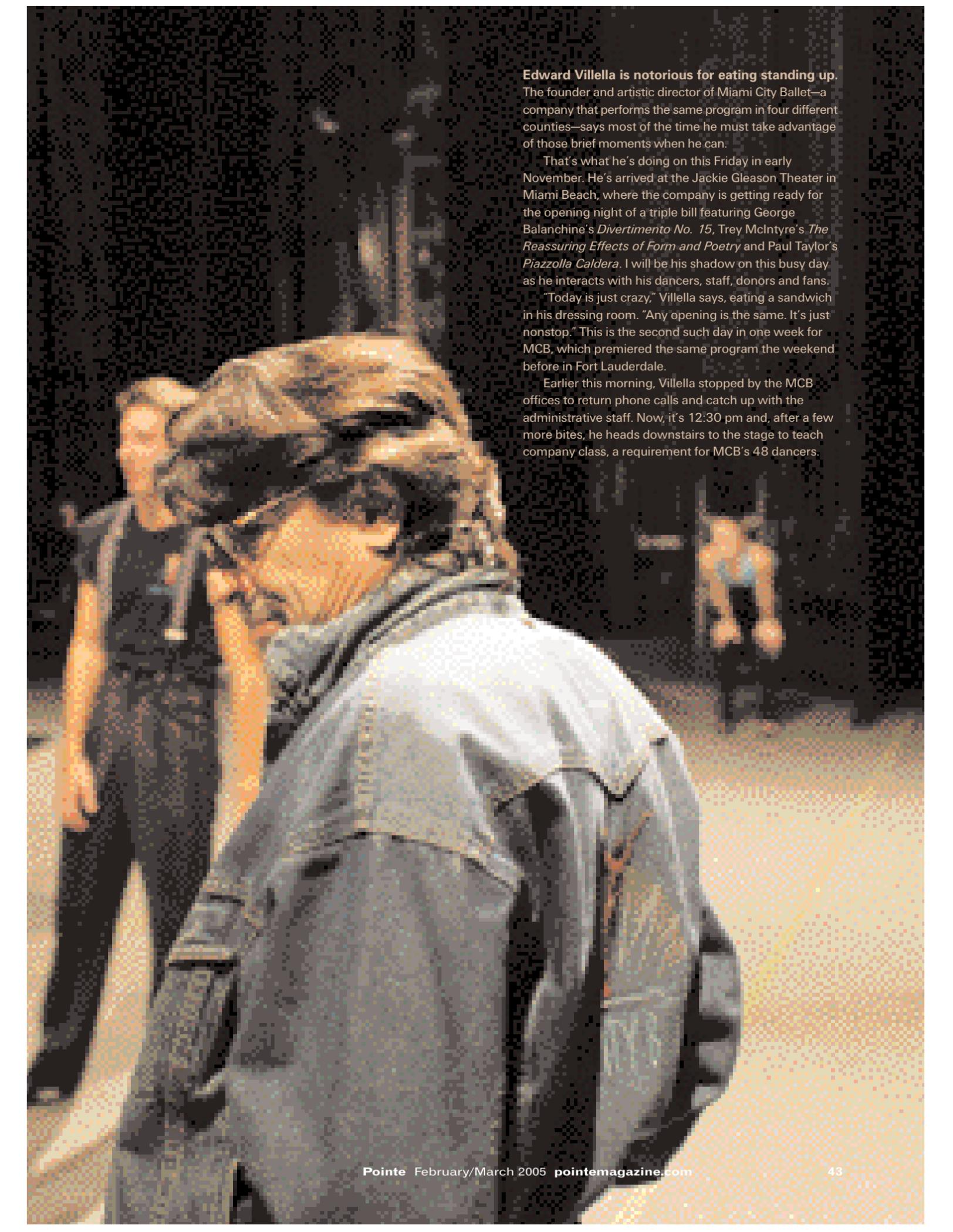
# A Day In The Life Of Edward Villella

By Jocelyn Anderson

Photography By Jeffery Salter

*Pointe follows  
Artistic Director  
Edward Villella  
as his company,  
Miami City  
Ballet, prepares  
for another  
opening night.*





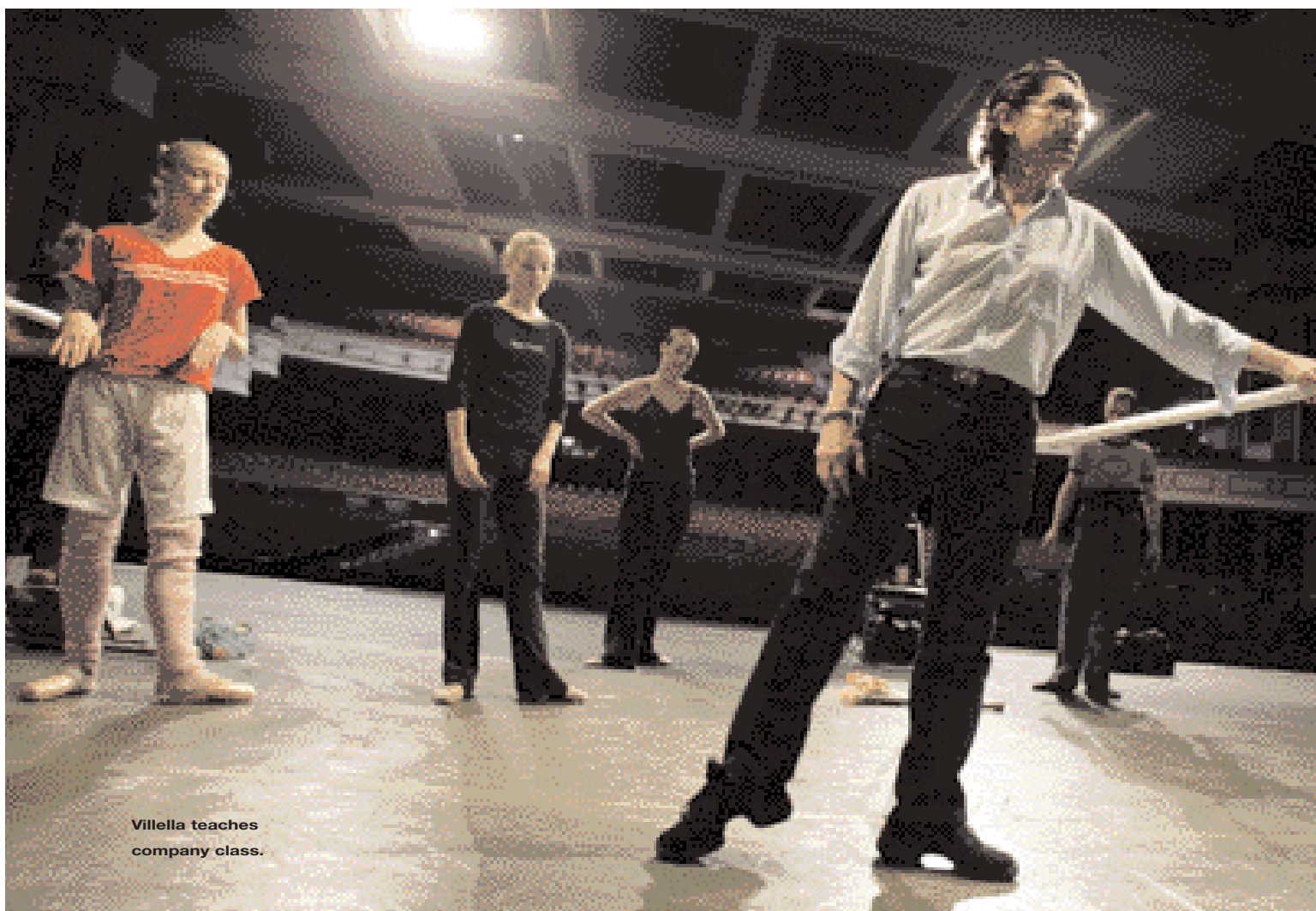
**Edward Villella is notorious for eating standing up.**

The founder and artistic director of Miami City Ballet—a company that performs the same program in four different counties—says most of the time he must take advantage of those brief moments when he can.

That's what he's doing on this Friday in early November. He's arrived at the Jackie Gleason Theater in Miami Beach, where the company is getting ready for the opening night of a triple bill featuring George Balanchine's *Divertimento No. 15*, Trey McIntyre's *The Reassuring Effects of Form and Poetry* and Paul Taylor's *Piazzolla Caldera*. I will be his shadow on this busy day as he interacts with his dancers, staff, donors and fans.

"Today is just crazy," Villella says, eating a sandwich in his dressing room. "Any opening is the same. It's just nonstop." This is the second such day in one week for MCB, which premiered the same program the weekend before in Fort Lauderdale.

Earlier this morning, Villella stopped by the MCB offices to return phone calls and catch up with the administrative staff. Now, it's 12:30 pm and, after a few more bites, he heads downstairs to the stage to teach company class, a requirement for MCB's 48 dancers.



Villella teaches company class.

"I think a company should reflect the manner and style of its artistic director," Villella says. "And the most consistent way I can do that is by teaching company class. Essentially, it's taking a harmonious signature approach to gesture, so it looks like a company. The dancers know where I come from and what I am attempting to do."

I sit in the wings stage right and watch the dancers at the barres onstage. I can tell that musicality is very important in this company. Founded in 1985, MCB started with a plethora of Balanchine works, which Villella danced for 20 years as a principal at New York City Ballet. Villella made it a mission to bring that neoclassical style to southern Florida and introduce audiences there to the legendary choreographer's sophisticated musical structures.

In class, Villella offers exercises with difficult syncopated beats and claps his hands against his thighs to help the dancers keep time. Clad in black jeans, a light blue dress shirt and dance sneakers, he moves across the stage with the flair of someone who's listening to his favorite song on the radio.

At 68, Villella is amazingly spry. He has been very frank about how, as a dancer, he never properly warmed up his body. As a result, he's had three hip replacements, nine broken toes, stress fractures in both legs and a bad back. "I've been around the block," he says simply. "You don't walk away easily from this stuff."

The prospect of a more-than-10-hour day can be daunting, but he knows what has to be done. He's determined to be a hands-on director, which means that he will be at the theater whenever the dancers are there.

After a 50-minute barre, Villella teaches a center. He gives the women piqué and fouetté turns and the men jumping exercises. He also takes the opportunity to finish his sandwich.

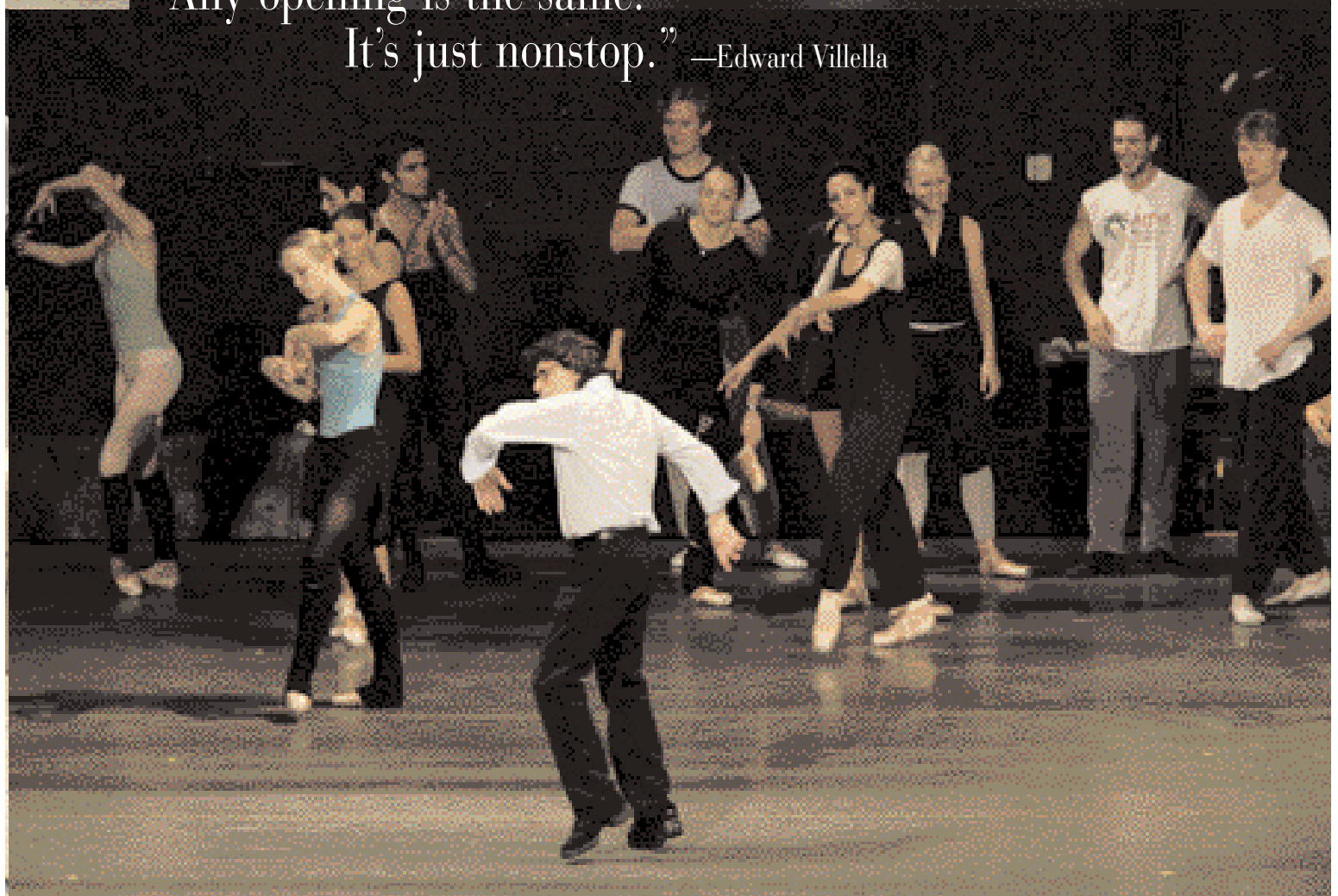


In the dressing room





“Any opening is the same.  
It’s just nonstop.” —Edward Villella





Clockwise from top left:  
Vilella at pre-performance  
talk, technical  
rehearsal, reception,  
*Piazzolla Caldera*,  
flowers backstage,  
*Divertimento No. 15*





Villella congratulates the dancers after the performance.

Class ends at 2 pm, and Villella gets the only break he'll have all day. He spends it in his dressing room reading *The New York Times*. A native of Queens, NY, and a longtime resident of NYC, he still likes to catch up on the news from home.

At 2:30 pm, we move to seats in the house for the technical rehearsal. In addition to finalizing the lighting, this is a chance for Villella and the ballet mistresses, Iliana Lopez and Roma Sosenko, to address last-minute issues. Dancers get a chance to fine-tune and double-check positions.

"We have not only had our rehearsal and dress rehearsal, but four performances [last week]," Villella says. "So now when we come here, I think that everyone is prepared. Now, it's really just placing it on the stage and keeping an eye on detail and style, period and musicality."

The dancers run through the program in the order in which they will dance the ballets later that evening. For the most part, everyone dances full out, and it's amusing to see half the cast of *Divertimento* in tutus and the other half in their warm-up clothes. Those who aren't dancing sit in the aisles, stretch and applaud the solos. The massage therapist also sets up shop backstage for those who need her services.

Everything goes smoothly, and the dancers congregate onstage for notes before going onto the next two pieces. "Like in *Divertimento*, [one dancer] held her passé too long and then she was late," Villella tells me. "Those are the intricacies and the details. It's mostly reminding. There are so many things you have to be aware of when you are onstage."

Villella has programmed a wide-ranging lineup for this evening. *Divertimento*, set to the music of Mozart, features tutus, while *Piazzolla Caldera* is an Argentinean tango with men and women in character shoes. Sandwiched between the two is McIntyre's free-form contemporary work.

The stage rehearsal ends at 5:30 pm, and Villella returns to his dressing room to change his clothes. He quickly puts on a checkered double-breasted suit, taking a moment to tame his still-brown mane. His wife, Linda (who is also the director of the

MCB School), has called to say she will soon arrive at the theater.

Together, we drive a couple blocks to attend a special reception that starts at 6 pm for company donors who have contributed \$1,500 or more. The party is held at Pacific Time, an old restaurant on Lincoln Road, a trendy shopping and dining street. There, Villella chats with donors and eats a few hors d'oeuvres before he has to hotfoot it back to the theater to give his pre-performance talk at 7:15 pm.

Before every performance, Villella speaks to the audience about the evening's program and answers questions. "It accomplishes two things," he says. "It makes the audience more aware of what they are going to see and it also humanizes this stuff."

"I brought a rep here 18 years ago that was unfamiliar to this community. They had been very accustomed to 19th-century spectacle. I wanted to start with Balanchine because it's the most difficult." As the repertoire has grown to include other works—seven premières this season—his own choreography and even the occasional *Giselle* or *Coppélia*, he has continued to introduce every performance.

The curtain rises at 8 pm, and Villella takes a seat next to Linda on the aisle in row M. "I try to sit back and enjoy it," he says. "By the same token, I allow myself to critique." If he notices something that needs fixing, he'll bring it up the next day or possibly break it down in the next company class.

By this hour, Villella's energy hasn't flagged. He springs up at each intermission to run backstage before making an appearance in the VIP room. He is able to grab a quick drink and a few more hors d'oeuvres before he is due back in his seat.

After the third ballet ends at 10:20 pm, I follow Villella backstage before the crowd has even finished applauding. He tells me that he likes to be available to the dancers before and after every performance.

"[Before the show] I just go to them," Villella says, "kiss them and say, 'Have a good time. Have a wonderful experience. You're prepared. You understand who you are. Show us.' Afterward, I come back and I say, 'Thank you.'" **P**