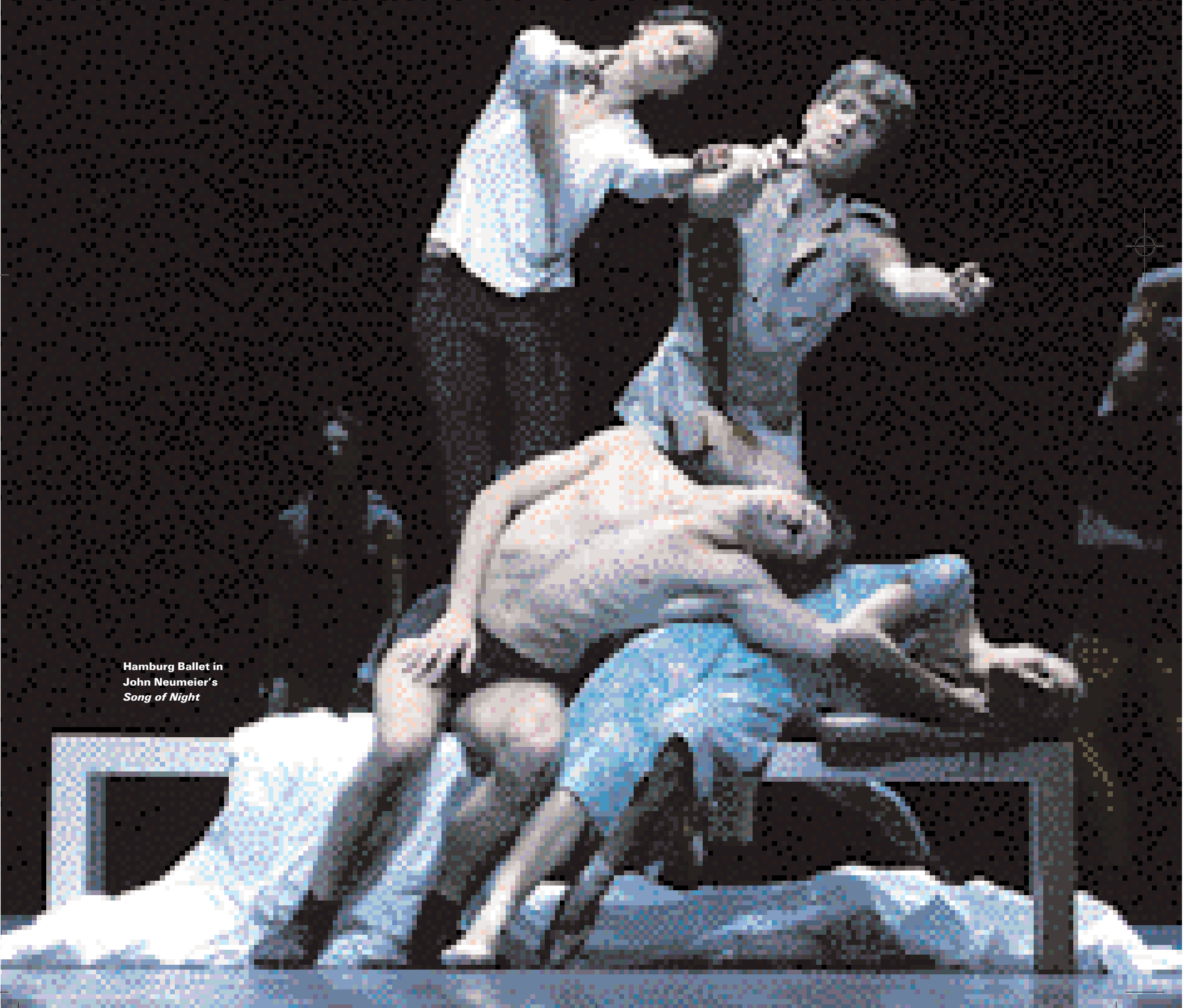


INTIMATE

Hamburg Ballet director and choreographer
John Neumeier creates ballets
that focus on the human condition.

Hamburg Ballet in
John Neumeier's
Song of Night



Stories

By JOCELYN ANDERSON

John Neumeier sits backstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City. His company, Hamburg Ballet, has just arrived from Germany for a four-night run of his 2003 ballet *Death in Venice*, and everyone has a case of nerves—including the choreographer.

"It was about 24 years ago that I came here for the first time, and inside I feel like the same person," Neumeier says. "It's still so important to me. I'm still nervous about how the work will be accepted and still anxious that the company shows itself the very best."

Now, one of the foremost choreographers in Europe, American-born Neumeier has made a name for himself with dramatic, story-driven ballets. Over the years, he has found great inspiration from emotion-packed works of literature, poetry and music—*The Lady of the Camellias*, *Hamlet*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Giselle*, *Windows on Mozart* and a new version of his 2005 *The Little Mermaid* in July (see page 46), to name just a few, though his catalog of well over 100 ballets includes its fair share of abstract works as well.

Neumeier began his dance training in Milwaukee at age 9 and continued his study at The Royal Ballet School in London, before joining Stuttgart Ballet in 1963. Early on he was given the opportunity to choreograph for the company, which he parlayed into more assignments. In 1969, he was appointed director of the Frankfurt Ballet. His second year there, he created *Romeo and Juliet*, which he describes as a turning point because it led to his appointment as ballet director and chief choreographer at Hamburg in 1973. Since then his works

have been commissioned by companies around the world, including the Royal Danish Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, The Royal Ballet and Munich State Opera Ballet. In 1996, he was named "Balletintendant" at Hamburg—he now oversees the artistic and business sides of the company.

"I have accepted this responsibility because I think it's important that we establish that dance is not just an art for children," Neumeier says. "It isn't, and those who practice it are adults."

Indeed, Neumeier's work shows that ballet is a sophisticated art form, and his profound, philosophical approach demands that he give each project thorough study. His dancers portray characters in distinctly adult situations, whether it's Marguerite's sacrificial love in *Camellias* or the title figure's doomed sensuality in *Nijinsky*.

"I look for a dancer who is not interested only in technical perfection," says Neumeier, "but a dancer who can use that technical perfection to go beyond that to be able to express something. Basically what I want to see onstage are human beings dancing."

This is also reflected in *Death in Venice*. Based on the novella by Thomas Mann, the story tells of obsession from afar. Faced with waning creativity in his professional life, the central character, Gustav von Aschenbach, visits Venice, becomes fascinated by a beautiful adolescent boy and dies in anguish in the midst of a cholera epidemic.

"Rather than saying it's a story ballet, John's gone one step further and almost made it a poetry ballet," says Hamburg principal Lloyd Riggins, who created the role of Aschenbach. "It's never about the character going here and then there."

Holger Badekow



That's kind of the framework, but what's happening onstage is what they were feeling when they did that."

Heather Jurgensen, a Hamburg principal who joined the company in 1989, cautions that miming and affectation do not have a place in Neumeier's work. When he says he wants dancers to express something, "it could be misinterpreted as histrionics or something put on," she says, "but I think he wants everything to just be simple: Find the drama within what's already there."

He has often reinterpreted the standard works in his style. His *Sleeping Beauty*, told from Prince Desiré's point of view, is dreamed by a boy in blue jeans. "I am always careful not to do things because they were always done that way," says Neumeier. For dancers, this can be daunting but also quite challenging.

Massimo Murru, an étoile with Italy's La Scala Ballet, danced Neumeier's *Romeo and Juliet* with Hamburg Ballet at the Teatro Lirico in Cagliari, Italy, in January 2006 and again in Hamburg in July 2006. Though he had already danced other versions of the Shakespearean masterwork, Neumeier's adaptation required another approach.

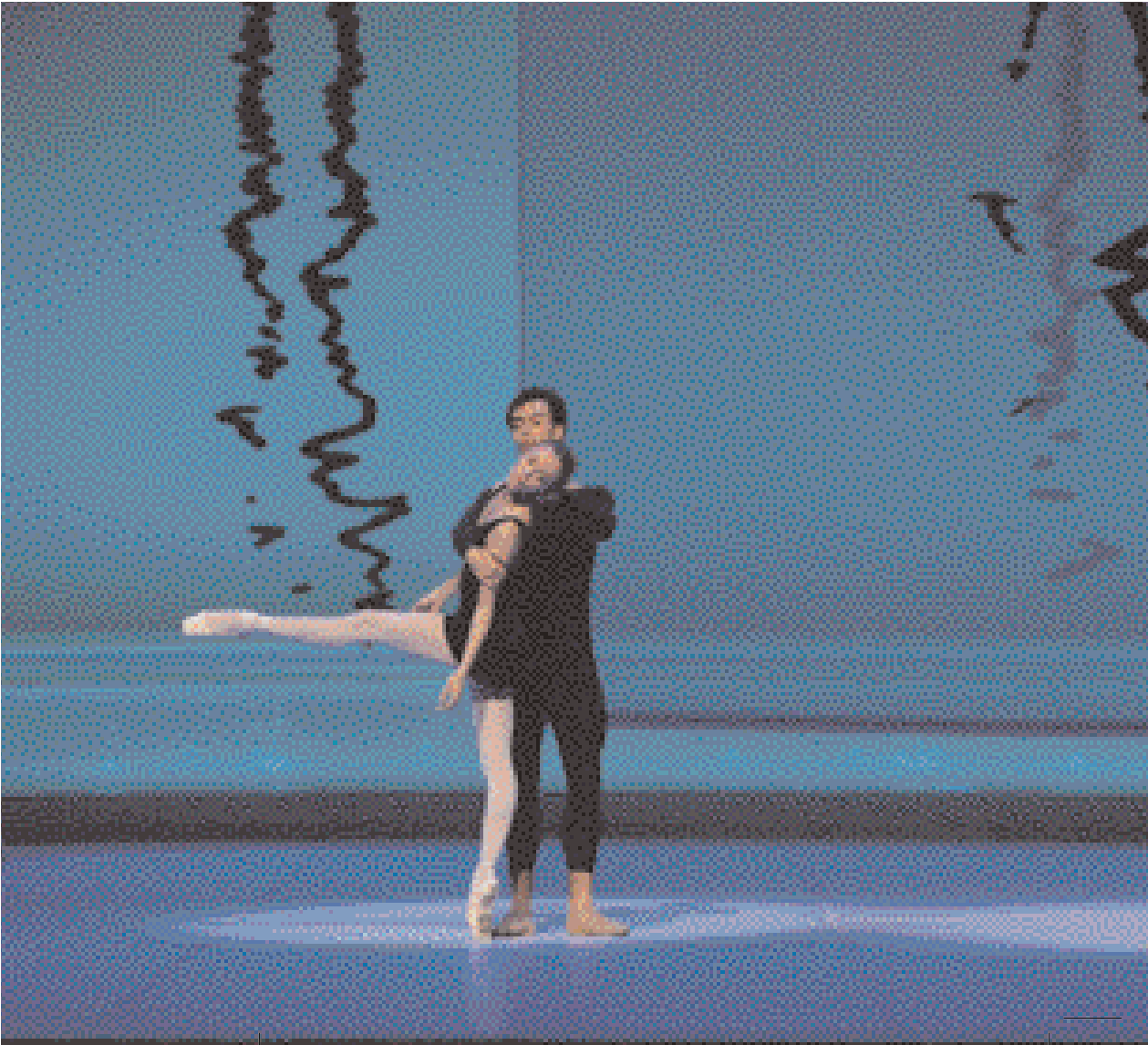
"It was completely different than the Romeo of MacMillan or Cranko," says Murru. "It was a bit scary for me in the beginning

Above: Massimo Murru and Emanuela Montanari of La Scala Ballet in *The Lady of the Camellias*; right: Edvin Revazov and Kiran West in *Parzival*; below: Silvia Azzoni, Alexandre Riabko and Lloyd Riggins in *Death in Venice*

HAMBURG IN JULY

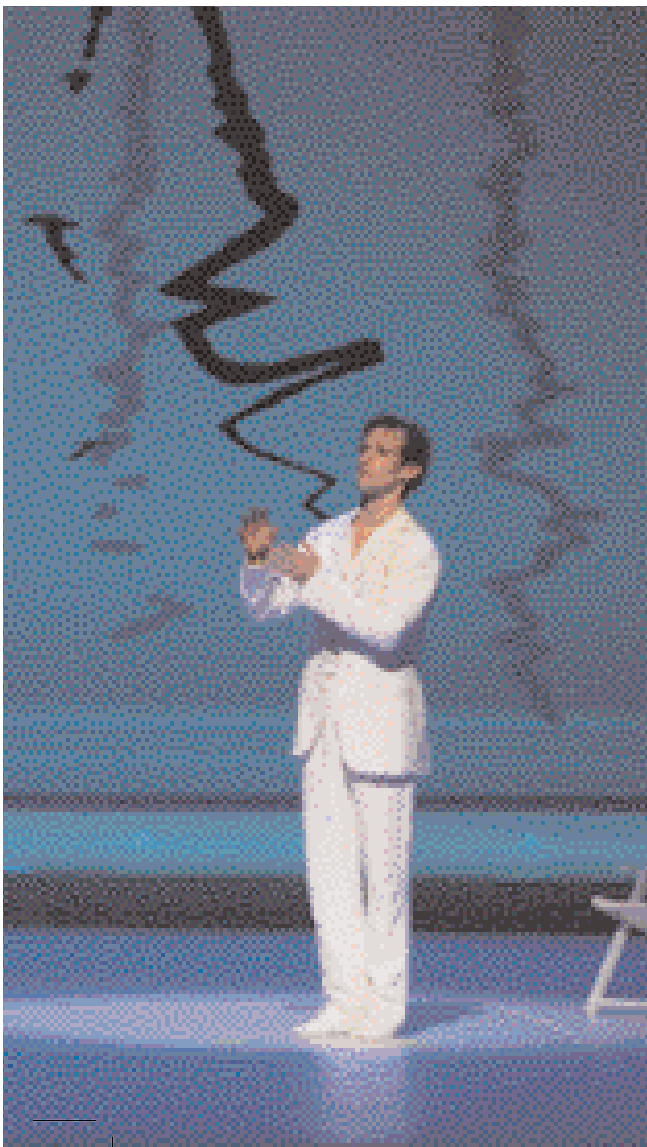
The 33rd annual Hamburg Ballet Days offers a summary of the company's work, ending with a gala on July 15. In addition to a celebration of Maurice Béjart's 80th birthday, a guest company performance and Hamburg Ballet in George Balanchine's *Jewels*, the company will present many John Neumeier works:

- The Little Mermaid* (July 1, 3, 13)
- A Cinderella Story* (July 14)
- Nijinsky* (July 5)
- The Sleeping Beauty* (July 7)
- Requiem* (July 8)
- Parzival—Episodes and Echo* (July 12)
- The Saga of King Arthur* (July 14)





Left: Marco Brescia; right and below: Holger Badekow



because I think, 'It's Romeo, a hero for passion.' But it's not like this for John. It's not romantic. It's just a guy."

After he understood this, he says, portraying Romeo became easier. "This is a key new vision of the character," Murru says. "Then you take something precious for next time when you have to do Romeo again."

Murru also danced Armand in *Camellias* for the first time in March, when La Scala presented the company première. But as Neumeier's work continues to enjoy great success in Europe, similar acclaim has so far eluded him in the U.S. His ballets have been in the repertoires of American Ballet Theatre and Ballet West, however, American audiences haven't completely warmed to his theatrical style, making the appearance at BAM in February (and showings at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in California the next week) even more significant.

"In 2004, when we came [to the U.S.] with the ballet *Nijinsky*, it was a very big success, but there was something that wasn't understood in the nature of the work," says Neumeier. "So I feel it's always

a challenge to communicate with your audience. I think it's important that the audience sees something of themselves in what they're seeing."

Overall, *Death in Venice* received favorable reviews on both coasts, with critics lauding it as a bold update to the 1912 story. *Camellias*, an instant crowd pleaser when it debuted at Stuttgart in 1978, also enjoyed an impressive West Coast première.

Among his many awards, Neumeier received the Nijinsky Award for lifetime achievement in December 2006. Though he appreciates the honor, he says he also tries to forget it because he has many creations still in his future. The prolific choreographer averages one or two new ballets each season. This December, Hamburg Ballet premieres another, *Christmas Oratorio*, in Vienna, Austria.

"I've been in Hamburg so long. I never thought, 'This is it forever,' because as an artist, you can never think that," he says. "But there is always something new going on. I feel in no way more easy about the whole thing. So I guess I'm still just on the way." ■