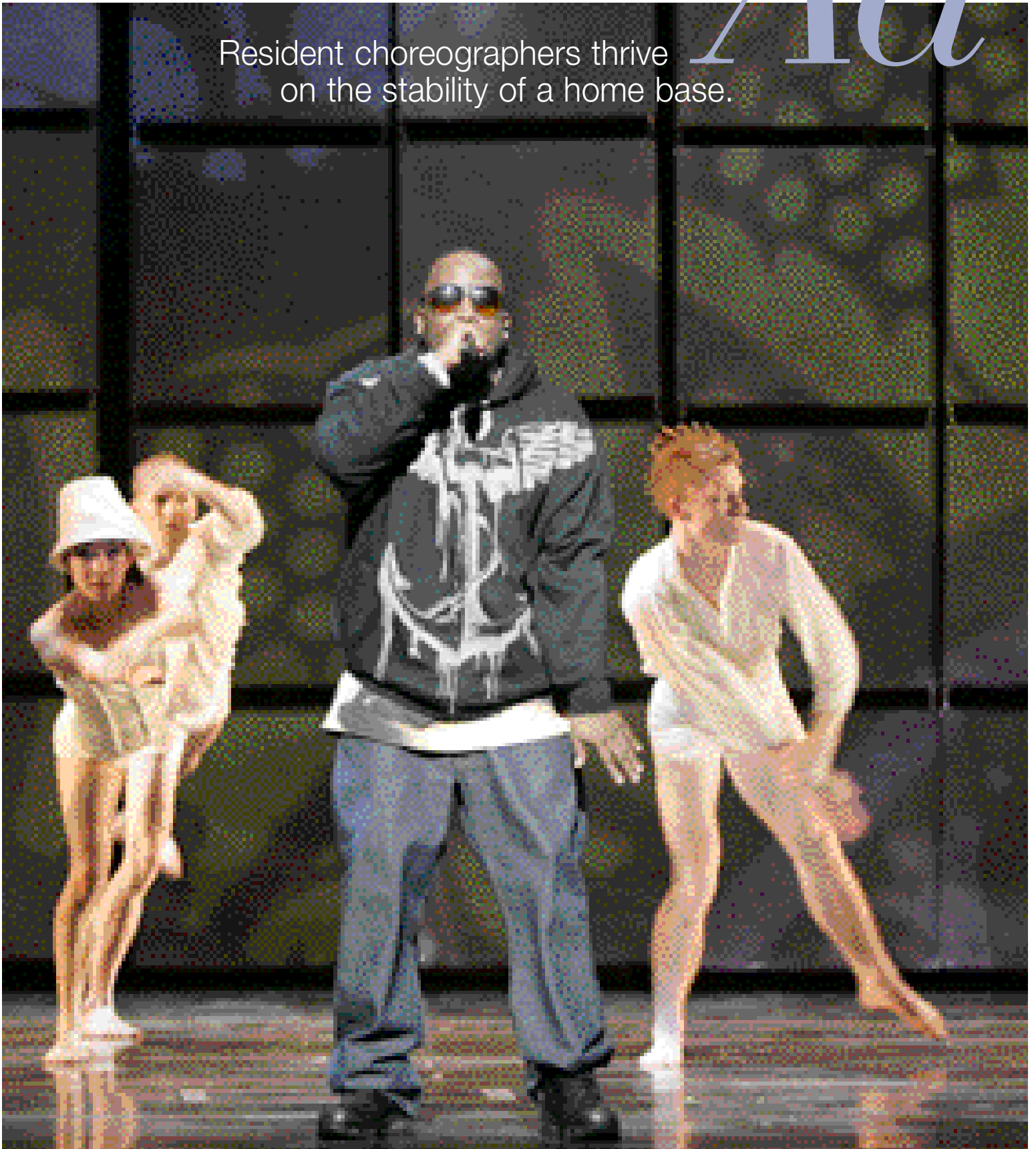


HOME FIELD *Ad*

Resident choreographers thrive
on the stability of a home base.



vantage

BY JOCELYN ANDERSON

Bootleg videos of Atlanta Ballet's new hit *big* are circulating on YouTube as if the work was a sold-out rock concert. Actually, it kind of was.

Lauri Stallings choreographed the hip-hop ballet, set to live music by Antwan "Big Boi" Patton of OutKast, for its première in April. She saw the project, which brought together 80 dancers, musicians and children onstage, as the perfect culmination of her three years as the company's resident choreographer.

"This work was such a handful," says Stallings, a former dancer with Ballet British Columbia and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. "Could I have done it not being resident choreographer? No. There is absolutely no way. It took too much trust."

European companies have been appointing resident choreographers for centuries. Nineteenth-century greats Marius Petipa at St. Petersburg's Imperial Theatre and August Bournonville at Copenhagen's Royal Danish Theatre are classic examples. Both created works that defined their companies' styles during more than 40 years of employment. Nowadays, such positions usually last three to five years, but the idea remains to give a choreographer the opportunity to work with a ballet company on a long-term basis, often presenting a world première each season.

While some U.S. companies employ resident choreographers, the practice is more common in Europe. Forming such a partnership with one individual involves major artistic and financial risks for companies, which must make a firm commitment to someone without knowing exactly what will come of the collaboration. In the U.S., many directors are dance-makers themselves and therefore can

Charlie McCullers

Antwan "Big Boi" Patton
and Atlanta Ballet in Lauri
Stallings's *big*



**Boston Ballet's Reynieris Reyes
and Larissa Ponomarenko in
Jorma Elo's *In on Blue***

be considered their company's unofficial resident choreographer. But those who have them say the benefits extend to everyone involved—the organization, dancers, choreographer and audiences.

"Having a resident choreographer gives an individual voice for the company," says Boston Ballet Artistic Director Mikko Nissinen, who appointed former Nederlands Dans Theater dancer Jorma Elo as Boston's resident choreographer in 2005. "Also, I have found that Jorma creates dancers. His work supports the whole organization's mission to develop dancers."

Tulsa Ballet's artistic director, Marcello Angelini, has found similar advantages. That's why his company has two resident choreographers: Val Caniparoli and Ma Cong. "They, better than anybody else, know the company and the individual dancers," says Angelini. "There's no one better than either of them at tailoring a work meant to stretch the dancers' technical, stylistic and emotional range. The by-product of this partnership is growth for the company."

Some artistic directors go for up-and-coming dancemakers, others want more established choreographers.

Atlanta Ballet Artistic Director John McFall choreographs for his company on occasion, however he says he is also aware of his own limitations. "I'm always open to learning more," says McFall, who looks to a resident choreographer to

bring fresh ideas. "Most of the creative stuff is on the fringe. I'm so interested in the street and the kids, because that's where it's happening in the moment."

Angelini looks for the boost an in-house choreographer can bring to his company's repertoire: "I look for a resident choreographer who can create great works. Artists who are hit or miss are not necessarily people I would want to work closely with the company, even though I would take the risk of commissioning a work from them every now and then."

Resident choreographers say the stability that comes with having a home base opens the door to artistic freedom. "Artistically you can dare to take more risks," says Elo. "Freelance choreographers go to places and it can be exciting, but your working environment is not always optimal. It's tough to take a jump into the unknown, but if you know where you are going, you can jump more easily."

Many also appreciate the value of relationships created over time. "There's a familiarity with the dancers, and you're able to communicate better with them," says Caniparoli, who has also been resident choreographer at San Francisco Ballet and Ballet West.

Similarly, an artistic director gets to know the choreographer and can urge a move outside his or her comfort zone. "I like working with him because he always pushes me in directions I haven't explored or am afraid of," says Elo of



Tulsa Ballet in Val Caniparoli's
Prawn Watching

Nissinen. "He always asks for things that he thinks are difficult for me or that would activate my mind."

Sometimes the risks involve innovation, such as Elo's recent work for Boston Ballet, *In on Blue*, in which the costumes, floor, backdrop and wings are all blue. But sometimes the risks are stylistic. "The most successful works I've done in Tulsa have been abstract neoclassical ones, and I rarely do them anywhere else, which is odd, but he's pushing me in a different direction," says Caniparoli of Angelini. "It makes me a stronger choreographer because I'm doing works there that I wouldn't be able to do anywhere else."

Of course, the regular paycheck is also a boon for choreographers who are accustomed to working project to project. "You never know in this job if you will get any working opportunities," says Elo. "Going back to the same company gives you a little financial calm and the feeling that there will be something after two years."

Still, such posts are hard to come by, especially in the U.S. "Residencies are so rare, and there are so few of them," says Stallings. "Directors who commit to them are to be commended highly." Now, after three years with Atlanta Ballet, Stallings feels prepared to work as a freelancer for other companies, where the creative process can be condensed to a period of just a couple of weeks for creation and rehearsals. "I'm thrilled to get out and see how I can use that accumulated knowledge and put it to the test in a more expedited process," she says. "It's going to be interesting to see."

Along with such liberating perks as

scheduled studio space, staff musicians and a choice of dancers, having their work seen by the same audiences from year to year allows choreographers to build their reputations. Most do not actually live in the same town as their company, so they are free to work with other troupes as time permits. If a residency results in successful ballets, choreographers may find they are sought after all over the world. This season alone, Elo has world premières scheduled at the Norwegian National Ballet, Göteborg Opera Ballet and Finnish National Ballet, among others. Nissinen has extended his contract with Boston Ballet through 2014, and this season Elo will try his hand at *Le Sacre du Printemps* for the company's celebration of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (see page 40). SFB, Milwaukee Ballet and Louisville Ballet are all performing ballets by Caniparoli for the 2008–09 season. He will create a new work for Tulsa Ballet's "Mediterranea" program in May. And Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre kicks off its season with Stallings's *The Great Gatsby*, a co-creation with McFall.

Though talks continue about taking *big* on a national tour, Stallings's position at Atlanta Ballet has come to a close, and McFall has started a search for a new resident choreographer. "It's about a relationship, so I'm in no hurry," he says. "It's really trying to identify a process where you are getting connected with what's going on in the world of dance." ■

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