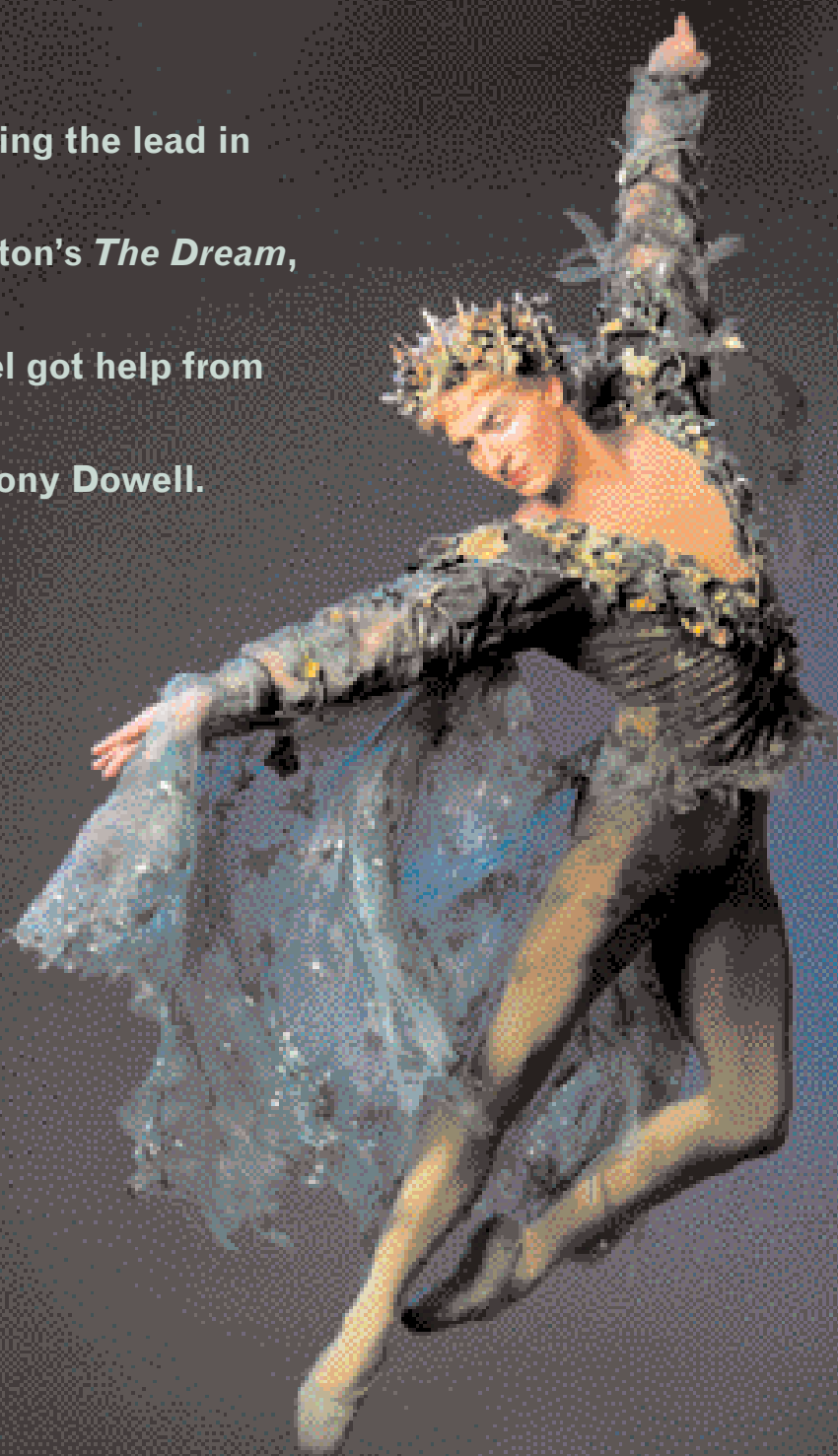


■ Performance

Ethan Stiefel's

When tackling the lead in
Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*,
Ethan Stiefel got help from
Sir Anthony Dowell.

Marty Schi/Thirteen-WNET



Ethan Stiefel as Oberon in
Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*

Dream Role

When Frederick Ashton choreographed *The Dream* for the Royal Ballet back in 1964, he put most of Oberon's technical challenges near the end. Then-principal Anthony Dowell, who originated the role, soon realized he would have to build up his stamina to make it through a strenuous scherzo section that transitions into a demanding pas de deux.

Now, as a stager of *The Dream*, Dowell stresses the stamina issue to those who follow in his footsteps, such as American Ballet Theatre principal Ethan Stiefel, who took on the role when ABT added the ballet to its repertoire in 2002.

ABT's production of *The Dream*, based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, airs on April 21, when PBS presents Dance In America on *Great Performances* (check local listings). Alessandra Ferri as Titania and Herman Cornejo as Puck are Stiefel's co-stars in this 52-minute ballet.

Stiefel had previously worked with Dowell. Four years earlier, Dowell, who was artistic director of the Royal Ballet at the time, invited him to dance as a guest artist, which he did many times. "I would say that we are comfortable working with each other," Stiefel says. "Subsequently, I think that we have become friends. But when you get in the studio, when you have that kind of dynamic, I'll always be the student."

While he didn't ask for advice per se, Stiefel tried to get as much firsthand knowledge as possible. "This is his ballet, really," he says. "He knows the ins and outs and he was there in the process. It's as close as I can get, as far as a direct line, to Ashton."

When they got down to work, Dowell and Stiefel focused on the two major elements of the role: characterization and the technicalities of movement.

As far as building the stamina for the tough ending, Dowell was direct: "He just said, 'Right here, you're going to be feeling [as if] you're going to throw up,'" Stiefel says. "It's one of those things where you just have to rehearse it and run it and make sure you have gotten through it in rehearsal. He recognizes that it's brutal."

Stiefel also understood that creating the character was as important as executing the steps. "You need to be able to set the tone immediately about who you are," he says. "Ashton created this ballet in a way that in one act everything is clear and you get it."

This required producing an "other-worldly feel." In the story, fairyland king Oberon creates havoc among lovers for his own amusement. "Right away people have to realize that you are a powerful being that comes from another place," Stiefel says. "Also, Oberon realizes the power he has is mischievous. I wouldn't say [he's] maniacal, because at the end you do see that he has a sensitive side."

In the 1960s, Dowell's Oberon was a tour de force of power and drama. Although Stiefel's performance recalls similar

elements, he asserts that Dowell gave him license to personalize the role.

"He understood completely who I am and that I'm a dancer that does things differently," Stiefel says. "He gives you room to develop things on your own, even though he's very thorough and directs your actions every step of the way. He wouldn't say, 'Do this like I did it.'"

And in fact, the theatricality and flow of the ballet make it good for television. "Every moment of the ballet means something to the telling of the story," says Stiefel, "so that I think it keeps people involved and interested the whole way through."

Still, Stiefel says he didn't feel the pressure of being taped. (The ballet was recorded live onstage in July 2003 and compiled from a couple of performances and a dress rehearsal.)

"Certainly, the realization that this is going to be saved on film forever does [add a] certain amount of pressure, but at the same time, it was done in live performances," he says. "I still have to give a performance for the people in the audience."

Stiefel also felt compelled to give the performance of his life for Dowell. "You want to please him because you know that this ballet does have that much meaning to him," he says. "You want to live up to his standards and recreate what he felt."

So how does he think it turned out? After admitting he hasn't seen the finished product yet, Stiefel reveals, "I guess if I was going to replay it in my mind, I think at the time I had been very focused and prepared the best that I could. There's always room for tougher preparation, but I think I'll be pleased in the sense that I really did feel that I gave some of my best work."

Ashton Vs. Balanchine

In addition to Ashton's *The Dream*, Ethan Stiefel has also danced Oberon in Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While both ballets are based on the same story, Stiefel notes a few differences: "In the Ashton version, Oberon really has more [interactions] with Titania and the confrontations [between the lovers]. In the Balanchine version, Oberon doesn't have a pas de deux."

Ballet	<i>The Dream</i>	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
Choreographer	Frederick Ashton (1904-1988)	George Balanchine (1904-1983)
Company	The Royal Ballet	New York City Ballet
Première	1964	1962
Length	One Act	Full Length
Music	Felix Mendelssohn	Felix Mendelssohn
Original Oberon	Anthony Dowell	Edward Villella
Original Titania	Antoinette Sibley	Melissa Hayden

By Jocelyn Anderson