

Merrill Ashley displays her virtuosity in *Ballo della Regina*, by George Balanchine.

School of American Ballet students reach for Merrill Ashley's mastery in *Ballo della Regina*.



passing the torch

George Balanchine's *Ballo della Regina* is only 18 minutes in length—but for the dancers, it feels longer. According to Merrill Ashley, the former New York City Ballet principal for whom *Ballo* was created, this challenging ballet packs 45 minutes of steps into its short running time. When *Ballo* premiered in 1978, Ashley was at the height of her career. It was the first ballet that Balanchine created on her. "He said, 'I'm going to do a virtuoso ballet for you,'" she recalls. "I thought, 'If he's saying it's going to be a virtuoso ballet, oh, my word! I'm going to be pushed to the nth degree.'"

While choreographing the ballet—for a principal couple, four female soloists and a corps—Balanchine took his time creating the buildup, using simple movements in fast motion. The principals and each of the four soloists' parts increased in difficulty and, to finish, Ashley returned for a quick-tempo finale. "I think by the time it was done, by the time we'd rehearsed it and people watched me do the solos and were left with their mouths hanging open, I thought, 'Yep, this is good,'" she says.

By Jocelyn Anderson

School of American Ballet students perform *Ballo* at the annual workshop.

Now Ashley, who also owns the rights to *Ballo*, restages the ballet for other companies. (She has coached portions of it for Royal Winnipeg Ballet, San Francisco Ballet and Ballet Nacional de Cuba.) Most recently she taught *Ballo* to students at the School of American Ballet for the annual workshop performance in June. This marked the first time she had staged the ballet in its entirety—something she had really been looking forward to doing.

But before agreeing to take on such an assignment, Ashley had one requirement: "I said if I agree to do it, there [should be] more than one girl that I think can do it," Ashley says. She watched and taught classes at SAB and found three students up to the challenge of learning the principal role that crowned Ashley's career. "You have to have speed," she says. "You need musicality. And you need a joyful spirit. It's also about stamina."

The SAB cast had about three months to learn and master their roles, while at the same time contending with homework, ballet class and rehearsals for other ballets in the workshop. (The

performances also included Damian Woetzel's première of *Copland Portrait*, the full production of Peter Martins' *Les Gentilhommes* and Suki Schorer's staging of part of Balanchine's *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*.) "It's one thing to have one ballet like *Ballo*," Ashley says. "That's hard enough. I know what you feel like after you've done a run-through of *Ballo*. You don't want to do anything else the rest of the day."

Once rehearsals got started, Ashley wanted to instill in the cast what Balanchine had taught her. "Whatever little tidbits that I remembered, whether it was my part or some other part, I really wanted to try and pass on," she says. For example, certain themes that Balanchine concocted, independent of the story of the Verdi opera *Don Carlos*, from which the music is taken, have helped her make sense of the ballet. "There's a fisherman searching for the perfect pearl and [Balanchine] wanted an underwater look on the backdrop," Ashley says. "So there are little motifs here and there of water and swimming and waves of people coming on that I think are

interesting. For me, I think it makes it easier to figure out the steps, if you are imagining those things."

That's where any sense of narrative ends. In this ballet, Ashley stresses, it's all about subtlety. "He would hate it if he thought I was getting them to act," she says of Balanchine. "He would be very mad at me." While he had created these motifs, Balanchine wanted the focus to be solely on the physicality of the movements.

of the three dancers in the principal role—Megan Fairchild (now a NYCB corps member), Jessica Flynn (now a NYCB apprentice) and Ana Sophia Scheller—as charming, fluid and authoritative. Ashley agrees, saying each was able to find her individuality. "I thought they did a superb job," she says. "They were all very different, which was what I was hoping for. I didn't want them to look like clones of me. They have to be themselves."

And certainly, *Ballo* is unlike any ballet

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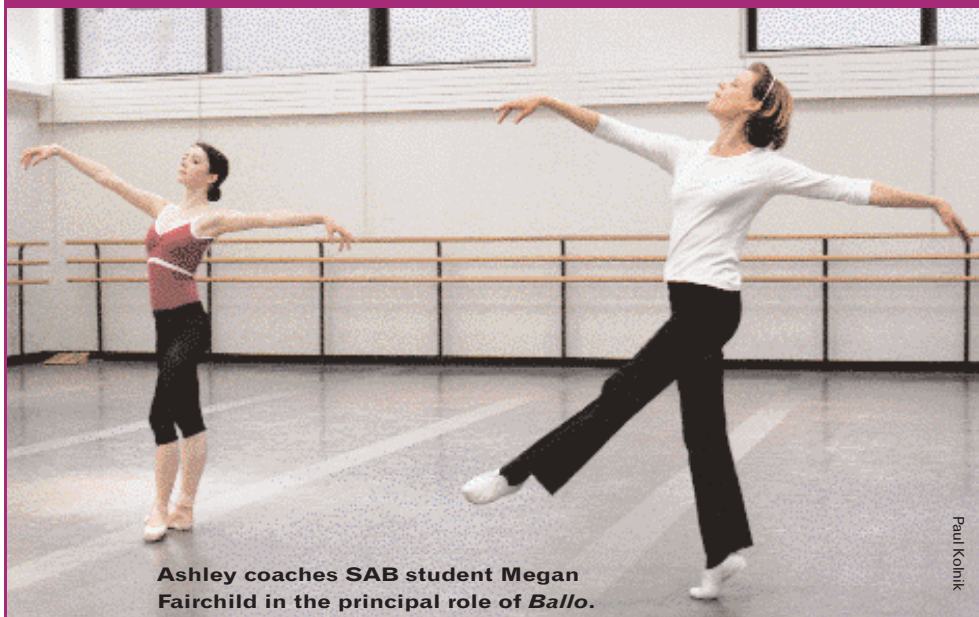
Videotapes of historical performances, such as PBS' *Dance in America* series, also helped Ashley demonstrate these lessons. She didn't want to show the students the videos until they knew the choreography because some of it was modified for television. In the end, watching allowed the students to understand the piece as a whole. "I think a couple of times it has helped, just in [showing] how much space I cover," she says. "Like the exit—piqué turn and kick and kick and travel—I mean, I flew. 'Nobody can do that,' they said. But I said, 'Proof! Proof!'"

New York audiences saw the final result when the SAB students took to the stage in June. *The New York Times* praised each

these dancers have ever done before. In addition to the fabulous training opportunity (working with Merrill Ashley, need we say more?), they can now put the Mount Everest of ballets on their résumés. "*Ballo* is a fantastic curtain-raiser," Ashley says. "It just brings people in off the street. [When people are] tired or preoccupied and that music starts, all this life and energy and fun just perks people up. They know they are seeing something virtuoso."

Merrill Ashley restages *Ballo della Regina* this season for...

- San Francisco Ballet
February 4-5, 7, 9, 20, 22
- Boston Ballet March 27-April 6



Ashley coaches SAB student Megan Fairchild in the principal role of *Ballo*.

Paul Kolnik