



Beyond Bravura

BY ASTRIDA WOODS

With a few majestic leaps Gillian Murphy, ideally cast as the chief huntress Sylvia, spans the vast Metropolitan Opera stage, heralding her arrival with a posse of nymphs who have sworn off love in pursuit of freedom—a kind of Greek mythology of women’s lib. Of course, after three acts of spectacular dancing and hair-trigger partnering, Ashton’s eponymous ballet ends with Sylvia surrendering to love with a good man.

Audiences have come to identify her with these virtuoso performances, and in the process overlooked Murphy’s flourishing talent as a dramatic actress. A pure classical ballerina, Murphy dances most of the leads in American Ballet Theatre’s extensive repertory of traditional three-act ballets. She started performing them early in her career and has been adding layers and nuances ever since. Technically nothing intimidates her, which allows Murphy the luxury to be free, bold, and spontaneous. “I have a great time onstage,” she says.

After an arduous day of rehearsing,

ABT’s Gillian Murphy finds a new dramatic dimension in her roles.



Murphy takes a breather in her Metropolitan Opera dressing room—normally occupied by opera stars such as Renée Fleming—and wearily glances at the wilting bouquets in tall vases, remnants of past triumphs. Then she shifts her focus as she talks about the challenges of becoming a dramatic ballerina. Serene, with a quiet charm and genteel glamour, the demure dancer describes her personality as “pretty low-key—a little bit introverted—and even-tempered,” character traits that don’t usually fit the temperament of a dramatic ballerina.

Nevertheless there has been an awakening, a deepening in her artistry that has caught up with her astonishing technique. As more emotionally charged roles come her way, Murphy has surprised many and drawn rave reviews for

her acting in ABT’s most somber and sinister ballets. As Hagar, the repressed middle sister in Tudor’s dour drama *Pillar of Fire*, Murphy is riveting. Her body and facial expressions are taut until her pent up passion erupts with the Stranger Next Door. Murphy’s ax-wielding Lizzie Borden (the Accused) in de Mille’s *Fall River Legend* skulks and rages, negotiating the emotional curves down to the essence. Her intensity shocked everyone—even herself.

On the opposite end of the dramatic spectrum, as Juliet in an excerpt dubbed “Romeo’s Farewell to Juliet” from Tudor’s one-act version, Murphy infuses the spare choreography with emotional depth through the plushness of her upper body soulfully yielding to her Romeo. By contrast, her Juliet in MacMillan’s

In costume for
Ashton's *Sylvia*

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photographed by Matthew Karas



Left: Gillian Murphy and David Hallberg in Tharp's *Rabbit and Rogue*. Above: With Ethan Stiefel in *Swan Lake*.

three-act version projects a youthful cool. As she whirls towards Romeo, she ignites with passion, exploding into a giant, arcing grand rond de jambe.

Endowed with a strong supple body, long sculpted legs, tapering feet and willowy arms, Murphy's a natural in the dance-till-you-drop roles. As Raymonda, the silky princess with too many suitors, and the flirty yet cunning Medora in *Le Corsaire*, she invests these damsels with a delicate femininity. In *Giselle*, as Myrta, Queen of the Wilis, Murphy imprints her glacial presence with soaring leaps and commanding arabesques.

Murphy was born 30 years ago in Wimbledon, England (where her father, then an accountant for an international corporation, briefly located), but raised in Florence, South Carolina. As a toddler, she was "toe-dancing in her sneakers," and at 5 she began ballet lessons. She then shifted to Columbia City, with William Starrett, teacher and director of Columbia City Ballet. Her English mom made those three-hour commutes to Columbia before the family moved there. That's where she first performed—at 11 years old!—32 fouettés. At 14, Murphy enrolled in the North Carolina School of the Arts, where Melissa Hayden, former New York City Ballet star, mentored her brilliant student, casting her as the lead in Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco* and *Theme and Variations*. At 15 she was a

finalist at the U.S.A. International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Mississippi. Before completing high school, she squeezed in two summers at the School of American Ballet. In August 1996 she accepted artistic director Kevin McKenzie's offer to join the corps of ABT. She was promoted to soloist in 1999, and to principal in 2002.

"What I've been discovering these past few years is that I need a very good coach, but I'm also participating in my own development in class and in rehearsals," say Murphy. Asked about her phenomenal turning ability Murphy advises a "solid preparation" and "squaring the shoulders." And, she adds, "If I pull up on my leg I can look a lot better."

No one appreciates Murphy's questioning mind more than McKenzie, who also coaches her. "Gillian is a very coordinated and intelligent person," he says. "If something doesn't feel natural to her, she has the ability to approach problems from both angles—physical and cerebral."

ABT's Georgina Parkinson, who saw

Murphy at a performance in North Carolina and brought her to the attention of McKenzie, is her most frequent coach. Parkinson talks to Murphy about "firing up her imagination and using all her assets." Parkinson says in an interview, "I don't know if Gillian appreciates how beautiful she is. I think that is something she should access; it would help her further develop the expressive side of her dancing."

Last summer Natalia Makarova, one of the greatest interpreters of Odette/Odile—coached Murphy in that dual role the week before she performed her only *Swan Lake* during ABT's Met season. "The timing was perfect," says Murphy, "I could work on *Swan Lake* all week with Natasha. Although we are completely different people and dancers, Natasha helped me find my own way of being poetic. She told me, 'Sing with your body, sing with your soul.' To me, that meant don't hold back, bring every feeling I have and let it show, let it out."

Makarova also worked on the physicality of how to express emotions. "She

Left: Gene Schiavone, Courtesy ABT. Right: Rosalie O'Connor, Courtesy ABT.



Left: With Stiefel in *Don Quixote*.
Above: In Tudor's *Pillar of Fire*.

clarified the coordination in my upper body—how the torso and chest lift, how the ribs expand and support the arms that then become like wings. And she helped me slow down in dramatic moments.”

A few nights later Murphy and superstar Angel Corella created magic onstage. With Murphy’s inspired Odette, and with more subtle bewitchery as Odile, the audience responded with tears and then cheers as Murphy whipped off double and triple pirouettes during the 32 fouettés, at the same time winging her arms as if about to take flight.

Corella, all sparkle and eyes, watched in amazement. “She is doing those fouettés and turning like crazy,” he said later. “I was trying to concentrate on what was coming next and I completely forgot that I have to do my à la seconde turns until the very last second,” he said. “When we rehearse we actually have to calm down, especially in *Black Swan*. Gillian has enough energy for three people.”

Her growing artistry also springs from her personal life with ABT luminary Ethan Stiefel. When they began dating 11

years ago, their careers were at opposite ends of the spectrum: She danced in the corps and he was a star (see Feb. 2005 cover story). Since then, Murphy’s had a steep and steady rise to the top while Ethan has endured multiple injuries and other setbacks. Although as a couple they keep a low profile, Gillian allows that their individual hardships do affect them both. “Whatever he is going through,” she says, “I’m going through it too.”

Things are back on track with Stiefel in his second year as dean of dance at the North Carolina School of the Arts, where Murphy returns to teach and coach whenever her schedule allows. Dancing together is their greatest pleasure, something they are doing a lot these days. Stiefel goes on the record that he would love to have Murphy as his Siren in *The Prodigal Son*. “She has the sensuality and sexuality for this role.”

Recently in a rehearsal of *Allegro Brillante*, and *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, Stiefel, a former principal with New York City Ballet, and Murphy, who relishes dancing as fast as she can, took to the blistering pace of Balanchine’s classics like

two ducks to water. A few nights later their brilliance and onstage chemistry thrilled the opening night crowd. “I love doing Balanchine,” Gillian says. “I love that musicality and the whole Balanchine technique.”

Murphy also excels in contemporary ballets, particularly those of Twyla Tharp, who created a sexy role for her in *Rabbit and Rogue* last year.

She’s guested in Japan, Canada, Europe, and across the U.S. Last year she performed Odette/Odile with the Kirov Ballet, and Gamzatti with Corella’s new company in Spain. Murphy and Corella’s performance of *Swan Lake* on PBS in June 2005 is available on DVD, and these days Murphy is very much a presence on the internet—YouTube and her own website with extensive links.

According to Stiefel, “Right now Gillian is hitting that sweet spot, and it will only go up.”

Astrida Woods, a former ballet dancer, contributes to Dance Magazine, Playbill, and Pointe, and is working on a book called Dancers Are People Too.

Left: Rosalie O'Connor, Courtesy ABT. Right: Mary Sahl, Courtesy ABT.