

OVATIONS

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Gillian Murphy

2009 PRINCESS GRACE STATUE AWARD

1998 DANCE FELLOWSHIP

Raised in Florence, South Carolina, Gillian Murphy began her ballet training at the age of three in Belgium and continued her ballet classes at the age of five in South Carolina. After training in South Carolina as a member of Columbia City Ballet, she continued her studies at the North Carolina School of the Arts, under the tutelage of Melissa Hayden. Ms. Murphy has appeared as a guest artist in Japan, Mexico, Germany, Italy, Canada, and throughout the United States.

She made her debut with the Kirov Ballet in March 2008, dancing Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake*. Ms. Murphy joined American Ballet Theatre as a member of the corps de ballet in August 1996, was promoted to Soloist in 1999, and Principal Dancer in 2002. Her repertoire with the Company includes Polyhymnia in *Apollo*, Nikiya and Gamzatti in *La Bayadère*, Cinderella in *Cinderella*, Swanilda in *Coppélia*, Medora and Gulnare in *Le Corsaire*, Kitri in *Don Quixote*, Titania in *The Dream*, The Accused in *Fall River Legend*, Second Girl in *Fancy Free*, Lise in *La Fille Mal Gardée*, the pas de deux in *Flames of Paris*, *Grand Pas Classique*, Myrta in *Giselle*, His Memory and His Experiences in *HereAfter*, the Queen of Hearts in *Jeu de Cartes*, Lescaut's Mistress in *Manon*, the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, Desdemona in *Othello*, Hagar in *Pillar of Fire*, Raymonda in *Raymonda*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet (Romeo's Farewell to Juliet)*, Princess Aurora and the Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*, Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake*, Sylvia in *Sylvia*, the first and third movements in *Symphony in C*, *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, and the ballerina in *Theme and Variations*. She created leading roles in *Glow-Stop*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Rabbit and Rogue*, and *Within You Without You: A Tribute to George Harrison*. Ms. Murphy danced Odette-Odile in the ABT telecast of *Swan Lake* and also appeared in the ABT telecast of *Le Corsaire*. She was seen in the feature film *Center Stage* and its sequel, *Center Stage 2*. Ms. Murphy is a charter member of Stiefel & Stars and directed a training program for young dancers, Dreamcatchers, on Martha's Vineyard.



Sylvia: Gillian with Maxim Beloserkovsky ©Rosalie O'Connor

GILLIAN MURPHY

RAISING THE STAKES

As you were training as a ballet dancer, what did you learn from studying with Melissa Hayden at North Carolina School of the Arts?

Oh, my goodness. I learned so much. She was a mentor to me, and we connected not only in the studio. She took me under her wing and I got to spend time with her at her house. She would make the most incredible meals and tell stories. I learned so much about technique, about determining the dynamic that's required for every movement. More than that, I learned from her about being an artist, about giving every moment 110% and exceeding your own expectations.

Who are your favorite choreographers?

So many. If I had to choose three: George Balanchine, Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor. Each has completely unique ways of attaching choreography to music. Tudor is focused on human character—the person, rather than a dancer—and there's psychological intention with every moment. Ashton is particularly famous for the expansive bending and sweep of the upper body. That freedom is connected to a strong and classical lower body. His choreography often has a lot of humor in it. Balanchine is famously musical and dynamic. It's hard to describe Balanchine—he had so much genius. He is very different from the straightforward classical style that has a controlled and slower approach. I love moving quickly, and his ballets require solid technique so that everything is precise. My other favorites include Jerome Robbins, Agnes deMille, Kenneth MacMillan, and Jiri Kylian... I also love working with Lar Lubovitch and

Twyla Tharp and Mark Morris. I've only done one piece by Christopher Wheeldon, but I think he's got a lot going on. I'm most excited about the next generation of choreographers. I look forward to the choreographers that are being discovered as we speak.

What roles are most exciting to dance?

I love dancing Titania in *The Dream*. She is a proud fairy queen, but she has softer side that comes out with Oberon. A number of the Balanchine roles are pure joy; you're expressing yourself through the music. My other love is to express a character's emotional intention through movement, as with Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake* and Kitri in *Don Quixote*—with Kitri I get to be flirtatious and sassy. It's a blast. I've also done Hagar in *Pillar of Fire*, who is deeply troubled and introverted, and bubbling up inside with angst.



Sylvia ©Gene Schiavone, *Pillar of Fire* ©Martyr Sohl, *La Bayadère*: Gillian with David Hallberg (2002 Dance Fellowship) ©Gene Schiavone

How has being a company member at American Ballet Theatre helped you develop into the dancer you are today?

First of all, I'm inspired on a daily basis by my friends and colleagues. Of course, our repertoire is vast and exceptional; we do everything from full length classical ballets like *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Giselle* to modern masterpieces such as *Fancy Free* and *Meadow*.

You have been praised for your astounding technique, especially your turns. What balance do you strike between technique and creativity in your dancing?

I try to focus on technique in class and in rehearsal so there's no question about that in performance. The technique is there as the language in which to speak. The quality of the conversation is evident in performance. On stage I try to move on from any focus on technique so I can be absolutely invested in the music, movement, and character, and also be involved with my partner. You can't forget about technique entirely, but if you've worked it out in the rehearsal process and the daily conditioning of class, technique is the platform to leap off of. Technique is essential, but the end goal is artistry. Technique facilitates the emotional experience for the dancer and the audience.

What do you bring to the stage that is unique?

I bring myself. We're so exposed as dancers that personality is evident. I think it's important to have my unique take on each role. I rely on good coaches who help guide a portion of the process; I'm grateful to them. At the end of the rehearsal process I start to develop my own ideas about what's special about this character and how to bring her to life in performance. You can't express through imitation, it has to be from the heart and soul. In classical ballet the form is so defined. There is discipline and beauty inherent in its boundaries. But particularly now, I have to push the boundaries so the form speaks to a modern audience. The intention must be to bring yourself to the performance, rather than being focused on what has been done in the past—even though we honor it.

Can you talk about dancing the role of The Accused (Lizzie Borden) in the revival of Fall River Legend by Agnes de Mille?

A picture from the photo shoot has me holding an axe, and one of my brothers called to tell me he loved it, but thought it was really scary. He was excited to see his little sister, who is usually pretty laid back and balanced, playing a murderer. I approached the role with the understanding that I would have to go to uncomfortable places. Lizzie Borden has to be intense, and not necessarily flattering. It also has to be scary so it's not ridiculous. Since Lizzie Borden is a historical figure, I was able to do research. I enjoyed digging into her story. I'm not by nature angry or vindictive, but everyone has their moments. To find that anger I took the tiniest moment within myself and exaggerated it by a hundred-fold. A villain doesn't have to be one-dimensional; they have layers and there can be reasons for their behavior. Lizzie just couldn't take it anymore. Her step-mother and father are condescending, unbearable; she gets driven over the edge.

How are you able to dance repertoire from such a wide breadth of times and styles?

In one recent season, our week two included *Theme and Variations*, one of Balanchine's most demanding ballets, requiring a lot of turn out. The next

day we danced Martha Graham's *Diversion of Angels*, which has a completely different sensibility: turned in with contractions and bare feet. It's demanding to be switching gears. We've also done new choreography by Jorma Elo, William Forsythe, Benjamin Millepied and the next day we're doing *The Sleeping Beauty*. I relish the challenge; it has developed me more fully as a dancer. Dancers have to be versatile. There are very few companies where you're going to be involved in only one particular style.

Do you like working on new ballets? What is the collaboration like in the rehearsal room with the choreographer?

It's different for each choreographer. One of the only drawbacks at ABT is that we don't always have a lot of time to work on a new creation. The process moves along quickly, maybe sometimes at an uncomfortably fast pace for a choreographer. We can't take five weeks to focus on one new piece. We're doing so many pieces all at once leading up to performance. Certainly I always look forward to participating in the collaborative process. It is vital to a dancer's development. We need to do more.



**“Technique is essential,
but the end goal is artistry.”**

What are some of the challenges of touring and performing internationally?

At this point I'm really used to it. I joined ABT on August 19, 1996, and two days later we left for Rio de Janeiro, and then to São Paulo, and then back to New York City and then off to Korea. From the first few weeks with the company I was on the road. We move into the theater on the day of the show, so that day you're getting your bearings on the new stage, understanding the dimensions of the theater. You have to adjust quickly to the new environment, and you have to adjust more quickly than is completely possible. The disorientation from jet lag and traveling is the hardest part...dancing in Japan when your brain is twelve hours behind. I also do a lot of guesting with companies, most recently, dancing *Swan Lake* with the Kirov Ballet. For that experience, I went a few days ahead of time and worked with the company and my partner.

You have a physically demanding schedule. How do you keep yourself healthy?

I believe in a lot of sleep and daily conditioning. If you keep your body conditioned, it's just more sustainable. I do believe in at least one day off a week to let your body and mind relax and revitalize. And eating healthy is important. As my partner Ethan Stiefel says, "It's important to work well, not just work hard." I'm careful not to abuse my muscles, so that they're strong but not overworked. That's hard because as a dancer you are constantly pushing yourself to the threshold, but there is a line where your body will rebel. I have been very lucky so far in terms of injuries. I've strained some muscles, a calf pull a year ago that lasted for a while. I was able to dance through it, but it made me miss a couple shows. I've been really lucky. I'm grateful. Nothing has been intensely traumatizing.



Pillar of Fire: Gillian with Marcelo Gomes ©Gene Schiavone

You have recently begun teaching. What led you to this?

I started a program for younger kids, ages twelve to fourteen, that ran for a few weeks over three summers. I really enjoy working with that age group. They can learn so much so quickly. It feels good to give back to the next generation, to give them the tools so they can realize their passion.

Do you feel a responsibility to pass on what you have learned?

Certainly. When I have taught master classes, it's been spur of the moment, and with my schedule, I don't have time to focus on the art of teaching. I want to develop a sustainable teaching method. I'm spending this week watching classes and starting to understand how little kids begin to learn the fundamentals of ballet.

How have you developed as an artist since receiving your first Princess Grace Award eleven years ago?

First of all, simply the process of creating the video to submit to the Princess Grace Foundation-USA was an incredible experience for me. The company had decided that I was the person they wanted to submit to the Foundation, which is already an honor. The next step was working on a few variations with Georgina Parkinson, a Ballet Mistress at ABT and mentor to me, and Kevin McKenzie, the Artistic Director. The first year or two with the company is all about ensemble work, the corps de ballet. I got to have the soloist experience. And the honor of receiving the Award was enormous. It was a huge boost for my confidence, and gave the company confidence in me as their representative. Since then I feel I've developed as a person; I've grown into a woman. I'm still developing my own point of view and the individuality I bring to the stage, even with the familiarity of the form—starting with the soloist roles I got after the PGF-USA Award, moving into ballerina roles of *Swan Lake*, right up to Lizzie Borden.

What are you working on now as a dancer?

I'm thinking about how to pass it on and how to develop further as an artist. I want to have authenticity of emotion, but also the dramatic expression that connects to audiences.



Sylvia ©Rosalie O'Connor

What roles do you still hope to dance, or dance again?

Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin*, that's a wonderful role. On a personal level I can relate to her because she starts out reading, she's more of a bookworm, like me. Then she's a person falling in love and becomes a dramatic ballerina. *Other Dances* by Jerome Robbins was on my list for a while, and I know I'll be doing it this fall. Robbins created it on Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova. It's breathtakingly beautiful: they're real people enjoying playing with movement and with each other. I have always loved the piece. I've been quite fortunate in my progression in that it's been gradual but consistent. New choreography is the next step. Choreographers need to be fostered and developed; hopefully as a dancer I can be part of that.

How did you feel upon receiving the news about the Statue Award?

I was overwhelmed and so honored. It's incredible that the Princess Grace Foundation not only fosters young talent who have potential, but that they stay connected with artists as they develop and honor people who are further along in their process but still value that recognition. I'm really thrilled. The Statue Award reminds me more than ever that I have to look beyond myself and be a true leader in the field. That's been my intention all along. But if there was ever any question, the Statue Award is a clear affirmation. It's not only about personal gratification, or the sheer joy of dance, which is certainly important, but it's also about bringing dance along, not only honoring the past, but moving towards the future.

What advice do you have for a young dancer?

Get the best training you can. There is a window of opportunity for a young dancer. My experience at North Carolina School of the Arts was essential to give me the polish I needed to join ABT when I was 17. Completing at least a high school education is very important. Opening your eyes to the world outside of dance is one of the greatest things you can do. You can't live only in the ballet studio.