

Ballet Virtuoso



by Nadine Lavi



Herman Cornejo and Kazuko Omori
in Corella Ballet's *La Bayadère*
Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

Herman Cornejo, principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, with his superlative technique and flair for characterization, defies traditional expectations. Comparisons to Nijinsky and Baryshnikov abound, but Cornejo is no mere copy, he is an original.



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Herman Cornejo was born in San Luis, Argentina, and began studying ballet when he was eight years old at the Superior Institute of Art at the Teatro Colón, and from the beginning he embraced a gruelling schedule. He would go to the studio at 7 a.m. for five hours, then to school, returning to the studio at 5 p.m. to work until 10 p.m. every night. He won several South American competitions, studied at the School of American Ballet and joined Julio Bocca's Ballet Argentino at the age of 14, alternating with Bocca in all principal dancer roles. At 16, he won the gold medal at the International Dance Competition in Moscow and joined American Ballet Theatre II. At 17, he joined American Ballet Theatre. In 2000, he became a soloist and, in 2003, principal dancer.

"From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to be a professional dancer," he says. "Somehow for me it was easy to do steps. When I started at eight, my teacher said, 'Do double tours,' and I just did it. I don't know how." Cornejo credits his first teacher, Wasil Tupin, with giving him the base for jumping and turning, and Colón principal Raoul Candal for helping him co-ordinate his arms.

Films of Cornejo as a child show his remarkable facility for remaining in the air and a precise technical approach — qualities with which he continues to dazzle audiences. But it is the acting in classical and contemporary roles that excites Cornejo. "You work on technique every day in class to clean it, but being onstage and interpreting a role, that's the base," he says. "It's important to really feel the role, to be honest onstage."

In Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*, his dancing is energetic and clean. As the Bluebird in Gelsey Kirkland's *Sleeping Beauty*, his airborne qualities are showcased. In *Fancy Free*, his sailor's pirouettes and leaps have a flirtatious bent. "For me, the audience is everything. You try to be perfect, then forget about the steps and just enjoy being onstage. But what makes me happy is to interpret a role, to dance a full-length ballet, to make the audience laugh."

Last year, Cornejo made his debut in some challenging roles. In rehearsal for *Sleeping Beauty* at the MET, his Prince was gentle but masculine. He did 11 pirouettes, then launched into a series of bold jetés around the stage with abandon. Cornejo sustained a knee injury at the time. "I was trying to keep up with Twyla Tharp in rehearsals; she has so much energy, and I overdid it." The next day, in rehearsal for *Beauty* with Sarah Lane, he did double tours with ease. At a *Giselle* rehearsal, wearing a black T-shirt that read, appropriately enough, "To Hell With Gravity," over his light grey tights, Cornejo dances Albrecht's final variation with hope and buoyancy, leaping into the air with ease for triple tours.

Cornejo's genius lies not just in technique, but in that he is stylistically pure according to the artistic integrity of each ballet. He gives a full characterization, establishing the character right away with the expression on his face, his manner and the steps. "Some dancers focus on a few moments in a ballet, and I think of the whole ballet from the beginning to the end; it's like a movie, every detail counts."

His remorse as Albrecht makes partner Xiomara Reyes' arabesques more poignant; he tries to catch her as she moves fleetingly away from him across the stage. Their pas de deux afterward is very tender, almost as if there had been no betrayal. When she bids him farewell, he awakens from this "dream" to resume a life marked by loss.

While all of his dancing is compelling, tours en l'air are a signature step for Cornejo. In *Le Spectre de la rose*, his tours en l'air are effortless. With no seeming preparation, he leaps high into the air, and with three complete, perfect revolutions each time, he lands soundlessly in a generous plié only to take off for the next set. One never sees a stark technique;

there is no coldness of execution, but a richness of movement to everything he does.

In *Don Q*, he is tall, commanding the stage; his pirouettes are bolder than usual, and his tours en l'air are the stuff of bravado — they seem to get more fiery as the ballet progresses as he blasts into the air with panache, springing up from bouncy pliés.

In *Giselle*, the same step is surprisingly tender; the luxurious pliés that follow suggest hope and forgiveness. These tours show a kind of resilience, a burst of energy and the recollection of their love. "Albrecht just wanted to escape from royalty for a moment, to be free; he never had the intention to be bad," he says. "And [when *Giselle* dies] he's going to carry that guilt on his conscience until he dies. It's one of the hardest ballets to do, to make that transition from the first to the second act, to go from flirting to being totally in pain so quickly."

At 28, Cornejo says, "I've been in the company 10 years and had many roles created for me, by Twyla Tharp and Stanton Welch; it's amazing to have that opportunity." He has danced with Angel Corella's Stars of American Ballet, in galas the world over, at the Bolshoi, the Kirov and the Kremlin, and was nominated for the Benois de la Danse prize for *Le Spectre de la Rose* in 2004. In 2005, he was named Ballet Star of the XXI Century.

Now, with the inception of Angel Corella's Corella Ballet, Cornejo enjoys a career on two continents. In September, he made his debut as Solor in Natalia Makarova's staging of *La Bayadère* with the company in Madrid, winning the Prix les Étoiles de Ballet 2000 Cannes Festival award for his performance.

Married to Carmen Corella, former soloist with American Ballet Theatre, now principal dancer and assistant director of her brother Angel's, Corella Ballet, Cornejo says, "The American Ballet Theatre MET season is hard because I have to be here and she has to be there. We try to fly back and forth all the time. American Ballet Theatre was always my dream and it's great to have this new opportunity, but you have to balance family and career."

He gives high marks to the new company, its dancers, and Corella's direction and vision. "There is a good energy, and

Angel wants to bring in ballets that will suit the company. Spanish audiences are desperate to see full-length ballets they have not seen in 20 years; they give standing ovations and wait outside the theatre to mob the dancers."

On days off, Cornejo plays soccer — "we have a little team at American Ballet Theatre, all the Latinos," — sees movies, and spends time with family and friends. He does Gyrotonics — "you think it will make you tired but it gives you more energy" — is a certified teacher and he designs houses. "I have no formal training, but I draw something then give it to an architect, and Carmen decorates."

Cornejo still looks forward to every performance. "Every show is different. It's amazing to be onstage here and there," he says, adding that he looks forward to getting "more comfortable in the big roles." Future goals are to work with his idol, Vladimir Vasiliev, and to dance with Alina Cojocaru and the Royal Ballet. "The best part of the day is being onstage, but the show is two hours and then you have your life. You can never put one above the other; dance and family, they are both important. But no matter what you do, you need to really love it." ▼

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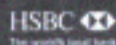
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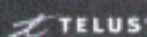
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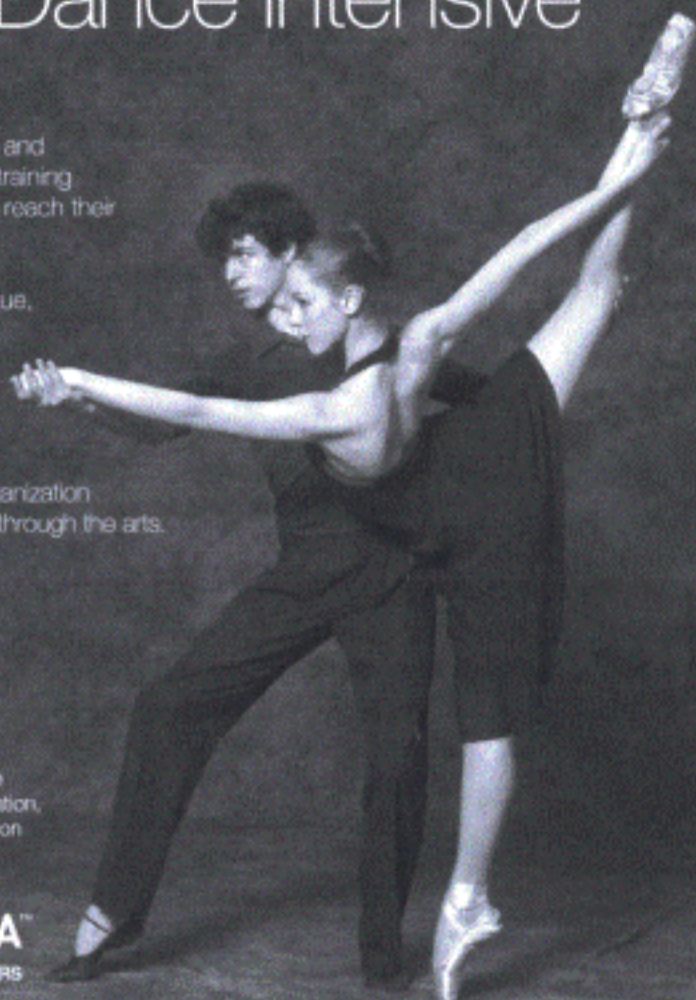
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