

## MCB's Simone Messmer - whatever it takes, Part I

As many know already after seeing Miami City Ballet's Program I, a new addition to this year's Miami City Ballet lineup is principal ballerina, Simone Messmer. Recently *Artburst* had the chance to sit down with Messmer relaxed but animated in white sweat pants and pale blue halter-top, arms crossed over as she smoke a cigarette, among the purple-pink on a muggy, Miami late October afternoon on Espagnola Way at *La Folie* café, French tourists beside us a reminder that the season had begun. It was difficult to take in at first that this was the same dancer whose body expanded the vertical so forcefully with arms raised in the gesture of wing movements during her dance as the Swan Queen.

Over the course of a two-hour talk topics ranged from her training at American Ballet Theater, her difficult year with the San Francisco ballet, and the methods she employs to break down the roles she danced in her debut with MCB during Program I. Interestingly our talk also touched themes that echoed recent *Artburst* interviews with MCB dancers, Jennifer Kronenberg and Rebecca King: the challenges social media, portable technologies and big donor money pose to ballet's artistic landscape, the causes for the emphasis of athleticism in ballet and how this trend threatens the dance as art.

*Artburst* will cover the interview with Messmer in three parts.

***Artburst:* Your fusion of technique with theatricality were remarkable during your performance as the Swan Queen [CHECK] in Balanchine's, Swan Lake, during Program I and even more so as one of the three girls the sailors compete for during, Robbins' Fancy Free.**

**Your theatricality in those roles was intense and evident but it was also clear that you relied on dance technique to communicate these roles. You didn't depend on exaggerated facial expressions or mime to communicate nuanced aspects of the role you danced. How do you approach the theater of your dance-craft when you come to a parts? How would you describe the relationship you see between theatricality and the technique of the dance?**

***Messmer:* It made my mother very nervous that I went toward ballet instead of being a professional swimmer. We didn't have the resources to take advantage of some of the ballet training opportunities many young dancers experience. So we did what we could do. She sent me to a children's theater in Minnesota that made me sing and act and partake in performances with a big group.**

**That group did *The 12 Dancing Princesses*. Initially, they cast me as one of the children; then they wanted me for the role of one of the adults. But I was only twelve, so from that point on I had to juggle school and this world. My beginnings were here - acting while dancing - I learned here dance technique as a way to tell a story. All the work I did at ABT was to have my technique be so strong and clear that it could say anything clearer than my word could**

without having to overly remote from my face or exaggerate a run to express being startled.

**Artburst:** During Program I it was effective. I remember one look you gave the audience when the three male dancers were competing for your attention during *Fancy Free*. You were sitting with Rebecca King, watching them perform then when Alston Chase stretched out at your feet, your head turned away, eyes went down, and your entire body made the shape of a bow that stretched away from him toward King, seated at your side. Moments like that transformed that Robbins piece for me.

**Messmer:** American Ballet Theater was versatile. I worked with Twyla, Taylor and MacMillan [check spelling], Anthony Tudor [check spelling] (*Dark Elegies*, *Pillar of Fire*, *Leaves are Fading*) – this gave me a very wide repertory. I wanted to do theme [explain this a little] and yet the person who has the most range gets left out.

Georgina Parkinson was my coach at ABT and I learned a ton from her; she picked me as her apprentice from day one. She coached me through *Nutcracker*. I remember that she made me learn makeup by literally taking me to the makeup department where they would make up half my face and I would make up the other half.

**Artburst:** Where there any other decisive turning points in developing your theatrical craft?

**Messmer:** A big turning point came for me when I began to work with Alexei Ratmansky. He was the first person to pick me for a ballet - *On the Dneiper*. It was [first name] Vishneva and [first name] Herrera [spelling] and me, and that by itself was a huge cast. After the first week of rehearsals I confessed to him that I did not understand it. He explained the stagecraft and the personality dynamics of that choreography. However, working with him on *Firebird* - that was a *big* game changer for me.

**Artburst:** How so?

**Messmer:** I was called to be the princess, the maiden, and usually in traditional *Firebirds* the maiden is a fluff role and she's not even in pointe [CHECK SPELLING] shoes. Ratmansky changed that. He made the maidens and the princess also dance the role of the monsters [CHECK SYNOPSIS]. That ballet was not so much about the *Firebird* – it was much more about the maiden. Ratmansky also did something else. He expressed a confidence in me that I had not experienced before. It was the first time someone looked at me and my partner, and said, “I don't like how this sequence works. I don't know what I want – you two go off and work something out”. Sometimes he liked what we brought back to him, sometimes he didn't. Still, I felt I wanted to be the best vessel for him to work with.

**One big problem I faced was that I did not have a big sponsor behind me – in 2008 ABT decided to impose the Star Strategy -- let's have guest artists come in, we don't have to pay their insurance.**

**Money, saving and bringing it in, was the bottom line here. With this strategy usually the principal dancers have negotiated contracts. The soloists and corps de ballet have sponsors so that their salaries do not come out of the company's money. This strategy was adopted by ABT, though not, so far, in other companies. I thought this strategy was very destructive of the artistic environment at ABT.**