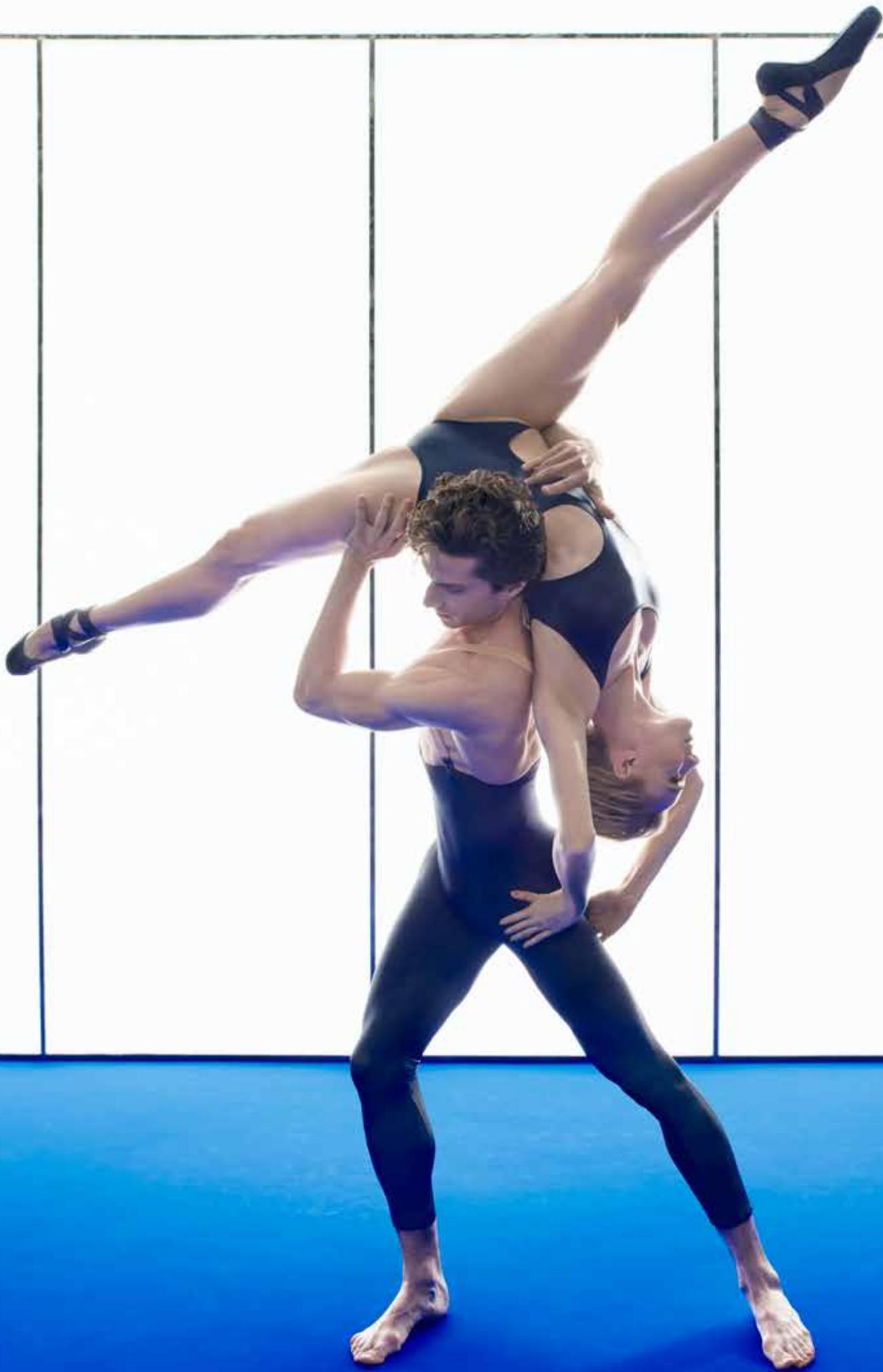


Sara Mearns

When watching her idols Natalia Makarova and José Manuel Carreño as a child, SARA MEARNS had no idea becoming part of the prestigious New York City Ballet was her destiny. Two decades later, she is still shocked that at nineteen, the company's Ballet Master in Chief, Peter Martins, cast her as *Swan Lake's* famed Odette/Odile—with just three weeks to learn it.

Words Stephanie Sporn
Photographer Sarah Silver



Bodysuit NORMA KAMALI
Male wears own tights throughout

“WHEN I COME OFF STAGE,
I’M LIKE, WHAT DID I JUST
DO? WHAT THE HELL DID I
JUST DO?”

—SARA MEARNS

Possessing the beauty and grace of a porcelain doll and the power of a bull seeing red, 29-year-old Mearns is now a force to be reckoned with. Mearns is the modern ballerina.

Born in Columbia, South Carolina, Mearns began dancing at three, and by seven and a half, she was already on pointe. Over several years, Mearns took summer programs at the School of American Ballet, the official NYCB training academy, where she enrolled full time in 2001. By 2008, in an unprecedented five-year whirlwind, Mearns progressed from NYCB apprentice to principal. On her *Swan Lake* opening night at Lincoln Center, the ballerina received deafening applause.

Epitomized by her dual role as Odette/Odile, Mearns is the ultimate dichotomy. Her dancing is both frantic and thrilling, edgy and refreshing, and undeniably authentic. She’s vulnerable, yet always in command. Controlled, but never restrained. At 5’7 ½, Mearns is considered tall for a ballerina, making her arabesque and extensions as expansive as her Balanchine musicality. “If you start with a great piece of music, you don’t have to work that hard to make it an amazing ballet,” Mearns recalls Balanchine’s famous philosophy: make the audience “see the music, hear the dance.” Prized for her technical precision and dramatic interpretation, Mearns does just that with every performance.

Although Balanchine preferred plotless ballets, Mearns remains inspired. “I always feel like when I go out on stage, I can somehow create a story from nothing with his ballets.” An admittedly emotional person, Mearns’ performance draws heavily from her personal life. As she matures, incidents like her debilitating back injuries make dancing less about the steps and more about the moment. The critics crave her fearless spontaneity, and Mearns tells me one even described her as “Martha Graham on acid,”—a review few could warrant. “I think it’s the fact that maybe I do work so hard in the studio, and that once the music starts,

once the orchestra starts playing, something just kind of happens, and I just go to that place,” she says, attempting to articulate the transcendental feeling of being on stage. “I just kind of go wild, and I can’t really contain it...When I come off stage, I’m like, what did I just do? What the hell did I just do?”

As depicted in her YouTube channel, Instagram, and interviews, Mearns’ humble nature and candidness attract countless collaborators. Before heading home to her boyfriend, Joshua Bergasse, an Emmy-award-winning Broadway choreographer, and their two dogs, Rocky and Ozzie, Mearns packs her ten-plus hour days with photo shoots and special projects, such as her Cole Haan ballet flat partnership. While dancing takes priority, Mearns considers fashion “the cherry on top.” After all, with Sarah Jessica Parker, whom Mearns calls “a blessing,” as Board Co-Vice Chairman, NYCB is arguably the most sartorially inclined company. A longtime friend of Martins, Parker conceived the NYCB Fall Gala, now in its fourth year, and was the executive producer for *city.ballet.*, a documentary-style AOL series following Mearns and other NYCB members.

Mearns will be in three of the five ballets NYCB will debut this fall, all of which will be fashioned by major designers, including Oscar de la Renta and Opening Ceremony. While Mearns could easily be in ten ballets a season, highlights for the upcoming months include *Swan Lake*, *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, and *Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes*, where Mearns takes the stage alongside fifteen men.

As Mearns enters her 11th year in NYCB, it’s clear the ballerina would not be anywhere else, nor doing anything else — ballet is in her blood. As for her career’s most rewarding aspect, Mearns says it’s the job itself. “I know when I walk into the theater every day that there are very few people in this world that get to do this, that have the chance to live this career, that get to experience the beauty and the struggle and the sacrifice and the discipline — the life that the art form brings.”





Dress LEKA





Dress KALMANOVICH



Dress KALMANOVICH

Producer TROY COVEY
Studio Manager JORDANA ABISDRIS
Makeup CAROLINA DALI for LA PRAIRE at THE WALL GROUP
Hair TONY KELLEY using PURELY PERFECT
Stylist ANNA KATSANIS
Manicurist RIWAKO KOBAYASHI
Photo Assistants ERIC MARTIN and LUCIEN SIMS
Digital Tech TOPHER SCOTT
BTS Photographer MENELIK PURYEAR
Intern BECKY LEUNG
Male ZACHARY CATAZARO
Female SARA MEARNIS