CLEVELAND BALLET

INSIGHTS INTO CLEVELAND BALLET'S DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES: A Q&A WITH MELISSA MITCHELL-WULFF, COMPANY MANAGER



Melissa performing in *Romeo and Juliet*, 1988
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YOU JOINED CLEVELAND BALLET AS COMPANY MANAGER IN JULY 2024. WHAT DOES YOUR ROLE ENCOMPASS AND WHAT ARE YOUR KEY RESPONSIBILITIES?

My job as company manager has two very important aspects: First, to support and serve the dancers and our Artistic Director, Timour, both logistically and artistically. And second, to facilitate clear communication and the coordination of information and activities between all the departments within the organization.

YOU HAVE THE PERFECT BACKGROUND FOR THIS ROLE - HOW ARE YOU USING YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A FORMER PROFESSIONAL DANCER IN YOUR ROLE AS COMPANY MANAGER?

I rose up through the ranks in two companies. In Pennsylvania Ballet (now the Philadelphia Ballet) I started out as an apprentice, became a full company member and had the opportunity to dance corps, soloist, and even several principal roles in a short period of time. In the Cleveland Ballet during the 80s and early 90s, I started out as a Can-Can girl in *Gaité Parisienne* and finished dancing the lead in Balanchine's *Theme & Variations* and everything in-between. I know what it is like to wait for a role, to go after a role, to get a role, to not get a role, to not understand why I didn't get a role, and then to get another role I did not expect. I know what it is like to get up every day and take class, rehearse all day, go home, sew pointe shoes, eat but not eat, not have a huge social life, watch videos (VHS back then!) of other dancers in other companies doing the same role I was doing to see their interpretation. And I know how it feels to think that you are only as good as your last performance.

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YOU HAVE THE PERFECT BACKGROUND FOR THIS ROLE - HOW ARE YOU USING YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A FORMER PROFESSIONAL DANCER IN YOUR ROLE AS COMPANY MANAGER? (CONT.)

The audience only sees the show, they do not see the daily rehearsals. They do not know that the turn you fell out of in last night's performance, you were doing triples in rehearsal. In other words, I have literally been in all the dancers' shoes. I see each of them as individual artists with all the hopes and aspirations I had when I was their age. All of this helps me to see, hear, and appreciate each of the company members and trainees. I tell them my door is always open. I feel empathy is very important, and my experience of having been a professional dancer allows me to act from empathy.

Also, I know how much time dancers need to get ready (including travel time). That really helps when scheduling rehearsals, performances, etc. Dancers are people and need time to eat, rest, read, talk on the phone, text, whatever. The goal, after all, is to make art and it is the dancers who make that art come to life. Without them, there would be no us.

NOW THAT THE DANCERS HAVE RETURNED FROM THEIR WINTER BREAK, CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ROLE IN HELPING THEM PREPARE FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE SEASON'S PERFORMANCES?

I do a lot of "mechanical" duties as far as making sure the rehearsal schedules are posted in a timely manner along with the daily sign-in sheets, upcoming performances and the connected logistics, costume fittings, special events such as the pointe shoe fittings coming up on February 24 (a representative from BLOCH pointe shoes is coming in to professionally fit the ladies interested in this brand of pointe shoes), the upcoming performance on March 14 in Gartner Auditorium at The Cleveland Museum of Art celebrating Picasso, and many more things of the like. I am very excited about *Romeo and Juliet*, having been a former Juliet myself. It is a very special role for any dancer. It is not because there are 32 fouettés or a huge pas de deux full of difficult steps (and there are no tutus in *Romeo & Juliet*!) but because the acting is a crucial part of the role. You are playing a "real" person, not a swan or a princess. A very choice role for any dancer in any genre.

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CAN YOU SHARE THE CASTING PROCESS AND HOW YOU WORK WITH THE ARTISTIC STAFF TO FINALIZE THE CAST LIST AND INFORM THE ARTISTS OF THEIR ROLES?

There are many different aspects to casting. On the most basic level there is simply how many people do we need to fill all the costumes that need to be out on the stage at any given moment in a ballet. Then there is what size are the costumes and who do they fit? These are the objective aspects of casting. Then there is the subjective aspect of casting. Who is best suited to which part? What does the part require of the dancer and who fits that requirement? What type of dancer does the choreographer (or whoever is the authorized agent to cast and teach the ballet) want in the role? Which dancer is ready to take on a new role? Timour or the guest choreographer have the final say in casting - always. For example, with *Romeo & Juliet* it starts with a list of the parts, then names start to get filled in. Timour always knows the leading roles before the list starts. Then, the featured roles get cast. Lastly, the corps roles. Names get moved around several times to accommodate those who will be doing multiple roles in a single performance. Then a second cast is put together. Same list, same names, but in different parts. Every part requires two people to learn it, whether or not two people get to perform it. Redundancy is key in any profession where injuries are common. Whether a dancer is part of the corps or doing a leading role, they are all important because they are part of the finished product, which is a work of art.

Casting is also important just to know as soon as possible when rehearsals begin. Important for the dancers and staff for many reasons. Dancers, so they know what they are doing every day. For staff in marketing, education, wardrobe, and production, the casting is important in promoting the performance as well as knowing who can support patron events and education. And then for the audience, they have their favorites and purchase tickets accordingly