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The talent and grace of American ballerina **ISABELLA BOYLSTON**

IN THE

Photographed by *Sharon Radisch* Styled by *Bárbara Vélez* Interview by *Alison Engstrom*

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With a tireless dedication and grace, ballerina Isabella Boylston has risen through the ranks of the American Ballet Theater. She began her professional career dancing as a junior member of the prestigious company and through hard work, achieved the esteemed ranking of principal dancer. Over the years, she has earned accolades including the Princess Grace Award and her repertoire has consisted of performances in *Swan Lake* and *Désir*. This spring, she will star in *Harlequinade* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. We talked to the Idaho native about her beginnings, overcoming mental and physical barriers and her belief in the power of dance to change a person's life.

"The past couple of years I feel like I have entered my prime and I'm really trying to enjoy every moment."

DIANA LECOMPTE EARRINGS, available at leffrontee.nyc



How did you first get into ballet?

My mom signed me up for classes at the local rec center when I was three. I think she ultimately wanted my brother and me to have as many opportunities as possible, so she signed me up for ice skating, skiing and ballet, which was the one that I totally fell in love with. She grew up in a poor part of rural Sweden, but she was the first person in her family to graduate from college; she studied at one of the best universities and became an engineer.

Do you remember the moment you realized that you loved dancing?

I always loved it, the musicality and the expressiveness of it, but it wasn't until I was 11 when I went away to a ballet summer intensive program in Washington D.C., which is basically ballet boot camp that all serious students attend. My teacher suggested that I audition. No one in my family knew anything about ballet at that point, but I tried out and they saw a lot of potential in me. I ended up attending and I was the youngest dancer there. I had this really intense Russian training and we danced for maybe eight hours a day. I came home and I knew I had improved so much. It made me feel like I was the best, or at least the best at something. After that, I sought out more serious training; I transferred to a more professional school, where I was not the best (*laughs*). Those experiences whet my appetite for more. I'm a naturally competitive person and I wanted to master what I was doing.

Anyone who has practiced and perfected something for an extended period of time has to make the decision if they should take it to the next level. When did you realize that you wanted to go from ballet being a hobby to a full-on career?

I think I became, for a lack of a better word, obsessed with ballet and I was constantly trying to improve. I got to a point after that summer intensive program, where I told myself that I was always going to do this—I couldn't imagine my life without dancing. I had to find a way to do it, no matter what. When I figured out that I could also get paid to do it, it was an added bonus. It was never a factor in my mind of how am I going to make it, I was like, I will do this. I also think that another thing that contributed to me moving into it so wholeheartedly, and at such a young age, was that my parents were getting a divorce. It was

quite traumatic for me. It was my refuge during that time—being in the studio, listening to music and being so in-tuned to my body and mind, it was like meditation. Ballet has always been there for me during difficult times. I attach myself to it. It's great to find a flow that's different than your everyday reality.

How were you scouted by the American Ballet Theater?

I attended a boarding school in Florida on scholarship, which was great because ballet can be very expensive. I had an amazing teacher, Victoria Schneider, who I still keep in touch with. She taught me so much about dancing. I did another summer intensive program with the ABT in NYC. The first day there you do a placement class to decide which level you should be in. The director of the junior company saw me that day and the next morning offered me a contract, but my parents wouldn't let me participate since I had one year left of high school. I eventually came back to New York and I got really lucky because I skipped the audition process that everyone else had to go through, it was a stroke of luck.

Rising to the top of anything is very hard and takes a lot of work and perseverance. What did you have to overcome, physically or emotionally, to arrive at where you are today?

Injuries are definitely part of it; I've sprained my left ankle many times while performing, rehearsing or walking on the street. Every single day you are dealing with some level of pain in your body, but I have also been pretty fortunate that I have never had any debilitating injuries that put me out for a year. Emotionally speaking, I have had to overcome my own insecurities. It is such a fine line as a dancer because you have to grow up absorbing a ton of criticism regarding your technique, or how you look; it's basically finding a way through and having maturity and self-confidence. You have to believe in yourself to go out there in front of a large crowd and do a great show.

Who or what gave you the confidence to move forward when you struggled with your confidence?

My mom and dad would always say that I could do whatever I wanted—they were holistically nurturing. I was lucky that my parents gave me that grounded foundation. I also got incredible mentors after I joined the ABT. Susan Jaffe approached me, she was Mikhail Baryshnikov's protégé and an incredible American

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ballerina. My other coach is Irina Kolpakova, who is 86; she was one of the great ballerinas of her time. She grew up in major hardship in the Soviet Union and it is amazing to work with her. I know this is major ballet insider information but her teacher was this woman named Agrippina Vaganova, who revolutionized ballet techniques in the early 1900s. I believe Irina is the last living student of hers.

Have they offered you any advice that you have keyed into as you have advanced in your career?

One thing that Susan told me that has stuck with me was that you shouldn't sweat the small stuff. There are so many disappointments that you'll deal with like you didn't get cast in that part you really wanted, or you received a bad review. She told me that when she looks back on the things she used to worry about, she realized how insignificant they actually were. You just have to keep going forward. Irina talks about how it's just ballet, and that you should live your life, have dinner with your husband and enjoy a glass of wine!

Can you describe the feeling of performing at the Met?

I get really nervous before shows. It's a mixture of adrenaline, anxiety and dread, but it's a good thing because it shows that I still care—all dancers feel that way about their performances. It has also gotten to the point where I have done so many shows that I know it's all part of the drill. During a performance, once you are out there and find your flow, you are in the moment. It's the most incredible transcendent feeling, almost like a religious experience. I don't think there will be anything that can compare to it. It's one thing that I will miss when my career is over.

You do a lot of charity work with the National Dance Institute and are the founder of the Ballet Sun Valley. Why is it so important for you to give back?

I wouldn't be here without all of the scholarships and financial aid that I received. I wanted to give back and I truly believe in the power of dance, art and the way it can change a child's life—it empowers and gives them

confidence. There can be kids who might not be thriving in a typical school environment but put them in an art or dance school and they completely transform. Right now, the arts are not being supported by the government and I think it's more important than ever to do what I can to help. I love the National Dance Institute; they are a charity based here in New York who partners with public schools to give free dance classes to millions of kids. I have taught there, done charity performances and go there just to visit with the kids.

Do you think about what your life will look like beyond dance?

I want to have a family while I am still dancing, which many ballerinas do today. Last semester, I did this class at Harvard Business School called 'Crossover into Business for Professional Athletes'. It started out with only NBA players but they eventually opened it up to other athletes, including dancers. It was cool being there in a class with people like Kyrie Irving, the star player from the Boston Celtics. After doing that class, I got really inspired and I think I want to start my own business one day. I don't know what that will look like yet, but maybe I'll be an entrepreneur.

I read that you said you need to put out into the universe what you want to happen. I love that and completely agree. What dreams are you putting out into the world right now?

When I was a little kid, my mom used to make me write down my goals, it's a practice that I have continued today. I'm really excited about a collaboration that I did last year with Rozzi, a talented pop star. She reached out for me to be in her music video. We got along so well that we collaborated again and did a live performance in my hometown of Sun Valley, in a beautiful new performing art center called The Arguros. We performed two sold-out shows that we directed. It was so cool to do something that we had full creative control over, it was very rewarding. I am finally at the point in my career where that is the type of thing that I want to be doing.

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