

## WHERE THE BOYS ARE

### *SAB's Boys Program Celebrates Tenth Anniversary*

Late afternoon visitors to SAB usually find the hallways teeming with young girls and boys, a colorful scene that more often than not leads newcomers to spontaneously exclaim, "There are so many boys!" The sight of young boys pursuing ballet in large numbers may still be unexpected to some, but at SAB it has become the norm—the result of a decade-long effort to increase the School's male enrollment and ultimately to bolster the number of young men pursuing professional ballet careers.

Just over 10 years ago, an internal review of SAB's programs pointed up what Chairman of Faculty Peter Martins believed was a major weakness: a longstanding dearth of male students in the Children's Division. The consequences of this deficit were clear: with a low number of boys moving up from the Children's Division to train with students from around the country in SAB's Intermediate and Advanced Men's levels, the pool of new talent available to replenish both New York City Ballet's male ranks and the rosters of other companies around the U.S. was far too shallow. While SAB's lopsided enrollment favoring girls reflected larger societal patterns, Martins believed that with the proper attention, it would be possible to turn the tide.

The resulting Boys Program was launched in December 1991 with a special boys-only audition at SAB. Of the 35 boys between the ages of 8 and 12 who responded to New York-area newspaper ads and in-school flyers, Martins accepted 20. He enlisted Olga Kostritzky to teach, and a few weeks later, 17 boys enrolled in Boys I class—the first ever, all male beginner's class—and took their first barre.

The Boys Program revolutionized SAB's Children's Division. All boys who enrolled would now take classes free of tuition until they reached the Intermediate level. And, whereas children's classes had been co-ed for most of SAB's history, there were now enough boys to populate an entire class. As the inaugural group of Boys Program students progressed and fresh groups of 8 to 10-year-olds continued to audition, new class levels were created. Kostritzky's first Boys I led to Boys II, III, and finally in 2000, Boys IV was established.

The phenomenon of all-boys classes has had an enormous impact on the success of the training, says SAB alumnus and current faculty member Peter Boal, who has

vivid memories of his early years at SAB, dutifully coming to class every afternoon to hang out with . . . girls. "At that age, you want camaraderie. I missed it. The boys today are psyched to come here to be with their pals. And it's much more inspiring for them when their classes can include learning how to do multiple pirouettes and double tours. That's what they see Damian Woetzel and Ethan Stiefel doing. That's what's going to inspire them to continue with ballet. The co-ed children's classes when I was a kid were much more focused on the girls—on barre work and preparing to dance *en pointe*."

As the Boys Program enters its eleventh year, it has tallied 216 participants, including 57 who are still working their way through the Children's Division. Thirty-six of those 216 made the next step into Intermediate Men, and 18 graduated into the Advanced Division. Eleven Boys Program alumni have gone on to dance professionally at eight different companies: New York City Ballet, ABT Studio Company, England's Royal Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Arizona Ballet, Carolina Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet, and Kansas City Ballet.

Closer to home, the Boys Program has literally changed the face of *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker* at New York City Ballet. Although the production includes only eight boy roles—including the Nutcracker prince—never in the ballet's history had there been enough boys of the right age and size enrolled at SAB to play every one of those parts in the two alternating children's casts. For years, an unlucky band of little girls had been cast in the ballet as "party scene boys," pinning up their hair, covering their heads with berets and donning dress jackets and knickers. Garielle Whittle, SAB faculty member and NYCB Children's Ballet Mistress since 1983, "used to panic" when it came time to cast *The Nutcracker*. But thanks to the Boys Program, there is an added air of authenticity in the horseplay between the sexes in the ballet's party scene. Now Whittle has the luxury of choice when casting the boys roles, and the berets have long since been thrown out.

With the boys enrollment booming, SAB has returned to placing young men in co-ed classes for their first year at SAB, when the focus is on fundamentals. Olga Kostritzky and Peter Boal subsequently undertake the training of students enrolled in Boys II, III, and IV. Kostritzky, who has been the program's principal teacher for a decade,

*Pictured above:* Boys Program participant Amar Ramasar at SAB in 1999. Ramasar is now a member of New York City Ballet. Photo © Rosalie O'Connor

recalls Peter Martins telling her at the beginning, "Olga, I don't want to lose any of these boys." The Russian-born



Photo © Steven Caras

Olga Kostritzky teaching Paul Qualben (rear left) and other Boys Program participants in 2000.

Kostritzky, in return, has dedicated her professional life to instilling a passion for ballet in every boy who steps foot in her class.

Sixteen-year-old Paul Qualben's experience parallels that of many Boys Program participants. "My mother brought me to audition for SAB when I was 8, and I didn't really understand the concept of being a male dancer at all. When I found out I had been accepted, I

thought 'Oh no! I'm going to be a ballerina!'" But Kostritzky quickly turned things around for Qualben, and "after the first year," he remembers, "I couldn't let go."

"You have to make them fall in love with the profession and want it desperately," says Kostritzky. "A ballet dancer must have a brilliant mind," she reminds her "future superstars" regularly. "I tell them they must be quick and look handsome at the same time. They must be athletic but carry themselves with elegance and dignity. A great sense of imagination and creativity and discipline are required to be an artist. Not everyone can do it," she often warns in class, only guaranteeing that each and every boy she teaches will work even harder to become one of the few who succeed.

The success of SAB's Boys Program has been assured by generous gifts and grants over the years by the Ferriday Fund Charitable Trust, Charles H. Leach, II Foundation, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust. The Boys Program is also funded by income from an endowment established in 1993 by a special Challenge Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. A number of foundations, companies, and individuals provided major matching funds, including Booth Ferris Foundation, The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, The Hearst Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Newman's Own, and Mr. and Mrs. James W. Stevens. ❖

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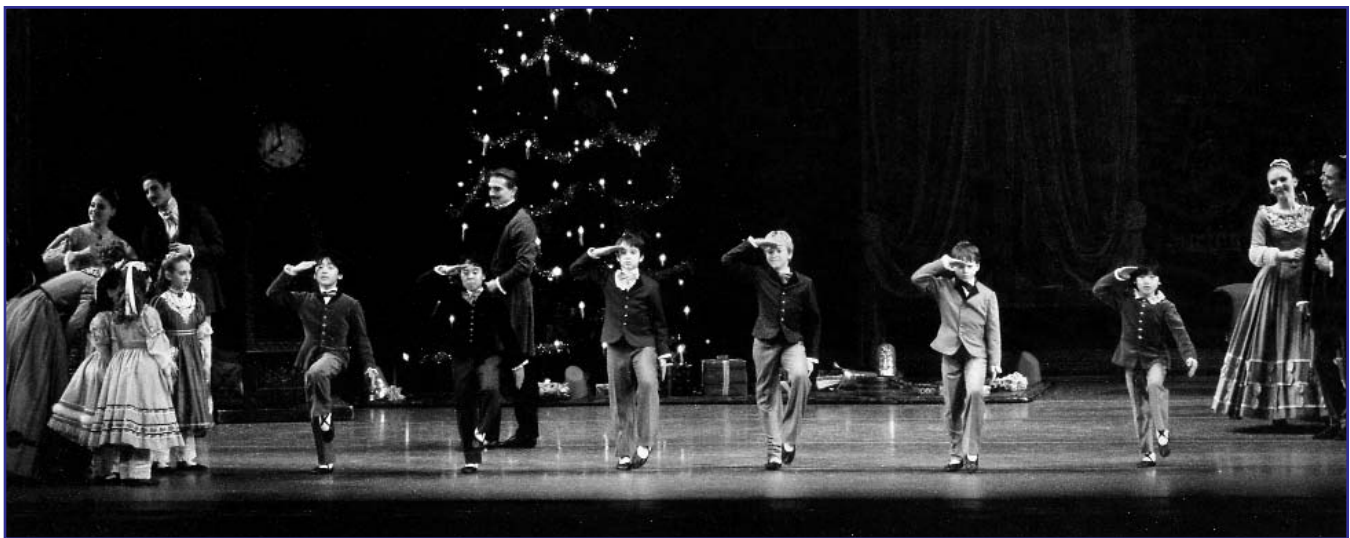


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Boys Program participants perform the first act "March" in NYCB's 2001 production of George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*. Pictured left to right: Shimon Ito, Rocky Smith, Eliot Calhoun, Adam Marks, Michael Robinov, and Amon Ito.