

20 Questions With...Jenifer Ringer

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Jenifer Ringer

Principal Dancer

New York City Ballet

Jenifer Ringer was born in New Bern, North Carolina, and was raised in Summerville, South Carolina, where she began her dance training at age 10 with local teachers. At age 12 she entered the Washington School of Ballet, where she studied for two years. After attending a summer session at the School of American Ballet (SAB), the official school of New York City Ballet, Ms. Ringer was invited to enter the winter session at the School on a full scholarship. She became an apprentice with New York City Ballet in October 1989 and a member of the corps de ballet in January 1990. She was promoted to soloist in January 1995 and to principal dancer in spring 2000.

1. When did you first know you wanted to dance?

For my entire life, I have always loved to dance. As a child, I would shut myself in my room with my record player blaring, and just dance around in seclusion for hours on end. But it wasn't until I was attending the Washington School of Ballet where I had the opportunity to perform in Balanchine's *Serenade* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC that I knew I wanted to dance professionally.

2. When did you first know you had the right stuff?

That came early on, but not in the form of an epiphany or any such great moment of inner-realization. Basically, my first teacher, a tough, South Carolinian lady, told me I had talent. She also told me I was lazy and needed to work a lot harder if that talent was ever going to show. To this day, I am grateful for her honesty.

3. What was your greatest moment as a dancer?

That actually occurred rather recently. I had always been wary of dancing Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* and had resisted doing so throughout my career. To me, I felt it was a part I just wasn't suited for. Well, I finally summoned up my courage and took the plunge (pun intended). It turned out to be such a joyous event for me, and gave me a wonderful sense of personal accomplishment. So, I guess my greatest moment as a dancer came not so much for receiving praise, but for overcoming my own insecurities.

4. What was your worst moment as a dancer?

For several years I battled depression, which caused weight problems, which in turn made me more depressed. It was a horrible time in which I completely lost my love of dance. Fortunately, I rebounded.

5. If you hadn't chose dance as your profession, what career would you have liked to attempt?

Hmmm, I love animals and I love to write. So, I'd have to say either veterinarian or writer. At this point in my life, though, veterinary school is probably not realistic, but one day I'd like to try my hand at writing.

6. Who most inspired you to become a dancer?

During my darkest days, two people in particular urged me to keep dancing: my boyfriend (later to be my husband) James Fayette, and my ballet teacher, Nancy Bielski, who had me to come to her class no matter how uncomfortable I was with my own appearance at the time.

7. What do you do to mentally prepare before a performance?

Two things: First, I remind myself what a wonderful blessing it is to have the opportunity to dance on stage. Secondly, I focus on the importance of transporting my audience into another world.

8. What do you do to keep a performance fresh during a long run?

Again, two things: I remind myself that just over the footlights there is a new audience out there every night. Also, I listen very closely to the music—there always seems to be something new in the music for me every time I hear it, and I feel those unique moments translate to a fresh perspective in every one of my performances.

9. Do you have any rituals you perform, or superstitions you indulge, before going on stage?

I pray, lifting the performance up to God.

10. How do you unwind after a big performance?

Dinner, a glass of wine, and some conversation with my husband. Works every time.

11. What are your thoughts on the future of ballet in America?

For a while, there seemed to be a movement towards more athleticism with an emphasis on technical prowess over artistry, but I feel that development has started to subside. I sense that a lot of the younger dancers are searching for something more than the traditional, so a new trend could take hold at any time.

12. Is it easier or harder to become a professional dancer today, or when you started?

It seems harder to break in today, simply because current economic conditions have led to fewer positions being offered.

13. If you could have a moment with any dancer in history, who would you choose and what would you ask him/her?

I would love to have met Jerome Robbins, especially when he was embarking on his career as a choreographer. I'm not sure what I would ask him; just to be in his presence and watch him at work would probably best answer any question I could ever have asked.

14. In your opinion, who is the greatest dancer in your lifetime?

Easily, Wendy Whelan. There are a lot of great, great dancers out there, but just a rare few whose extraordinary talents, like hers, that have actually altered the world of dance itself.

15. What is the greatest piece of advice you received as a dancer?

Just relax. Everything goes so much more easily when I'm relaxed. When I perform in a relaxed state, I feel like I'm dancing *with* the floor rather than skittering over the top of it. If I step out onstage worried that I am going to mess up out there, there's a good chance I will. But, when I allow myself to relax and enjoy myself up there, I feel that this energy transfers directly to my audience, which makes the performance joyful for us both.

16. What do you do to help the development of the next generation of dancers?

As dancers, we are constantly criticized and have even taught ourselves to be severely self-critical every time we look in the mirror or watch a tape of our performances. So, what I like to do with young dancers is laud praise on them for all they have done well, simply because we so often overlook the good and focus on the "bad."

17. What special tips do you use for breaking in your shoes?

With the shoes still inside, I step on the boxes to flatten them out and then whack the shoe tips on a concrete surface 20 or more times! I know, it seems horrible to be so violent towards something that was so beautifully handmade, but it's the only way I can make them "soundproof." (I hate noisy shoes when I dance.)

18. What is the most important advice given to you (and by whom)?

"Be a servant to others." I don't remember who actually said it, but I do remember hearing it in a sermon. That instantly resonated with me and has stayed with me ever since.

19. If you were stranded on a desert island, what one thing would you want with you, and why?

In the past, I had always thought that if asked this question, I would say "a helicopter, because then I could get off the darn island", but now I have to say it would be my husband. I know he is not a "thing", but I just can't be apart from him.

20. Other than dance, what really excites you?

My family, science fiction books, writing, romantic movies, the ocean...and peanut butter!