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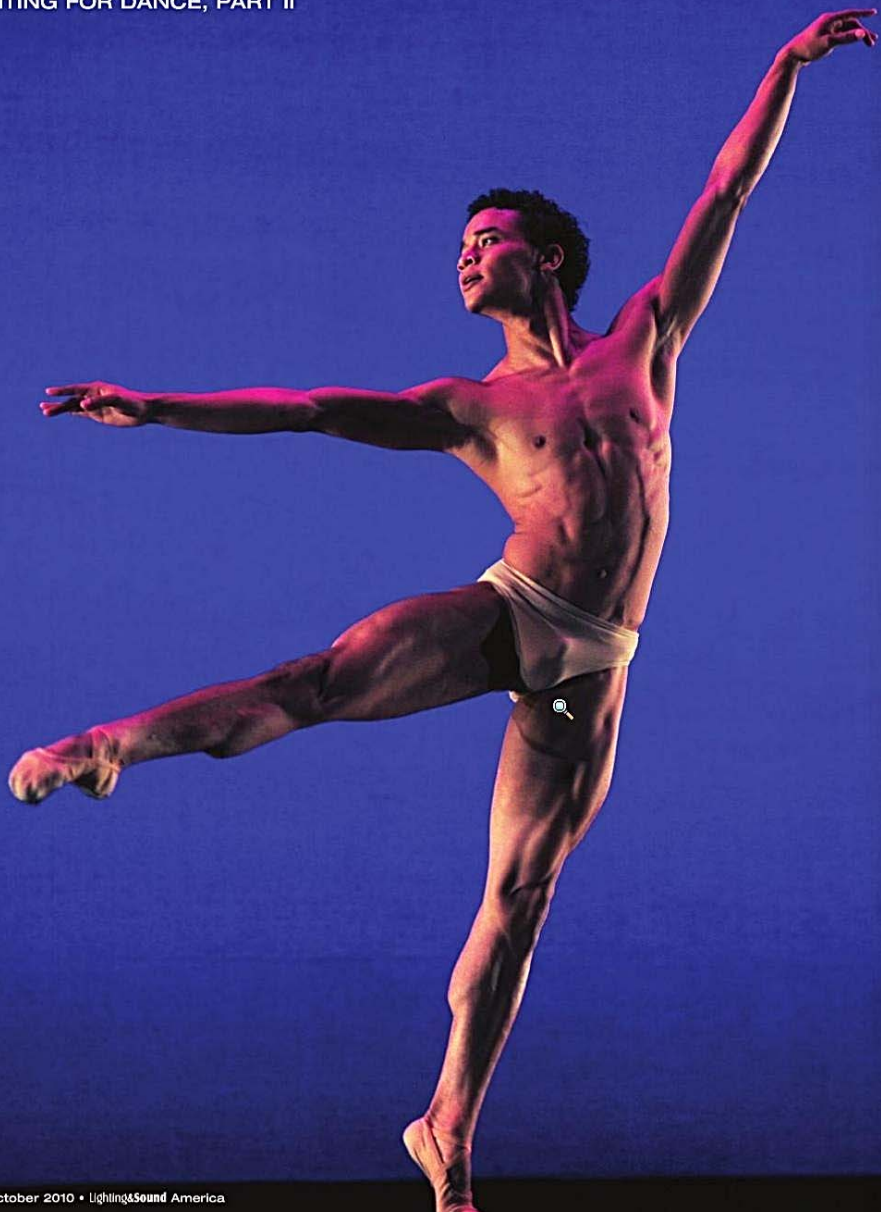
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Grace Under Pressure

Lighting the **USA International Ballet Competition** is a unique—and highly stressful—experience

By: David Barbour

Let us think, in these days of *So You Think You Can Dance* and other entertainments, that dance competitions are a new concept, let us bring your attention to the USA International Ballet Competition, a long-running event that arguably plays an important role in maintaining the vitality of dance in this country. (*The New York Times* has called it “the most important competition in North America.”) It’s also an event that poses stunning challenges for its lighting design team.

Founded in 1978 by Thalia Mara, a dancer, educator, and writer, the IBC is held every four years in Jackson, Mississippi. (Earlier in its history, it rotated between Jackson, Moscow, Tokyo, and Varna, Bulgaria, but these days Jackson is its permanent home.) It draws dozens of young dancers who compete for gold, silver, and bronze medals, as well as scholarships and jobs. It’s a brilliant opportunity for a young talent to audition in front of an international audience of professionals, and it has been used by many dancers to jump-start their careers. (Most of the winners of the last competition, in 2006, have been placed in various major dance companies.)

In addition to being an important cultural event, the IBC has become an embedded in the life of its host city. “All of Jackson looks forward to it,” says Jared A. Sayeg, one of the lighting designers involved in the 2010 IBC, which was held June 12-27. “When one competition ends, the city gets busy, getting ready for the next one,” he adds.

Each quadrennial event showcases approximately 100 dancers. Each is assigned a number by a lottery process; they perform in numerical order over the course of three rounds. In Round I, everyone performs a classic piece from a pre-selected repertoire. The semi-finalists in Round II offer a contemporary piece. Round III consists of both classic and contemporary dances.

Do the math: Obviously, the lighting design demands of this event are staggering. Bill Kickbush, a Los Angeles-based lighting designer specializing in opera and dance, has been lighting the IBC since 1990. (In 1986, he worked as an assistant lighting designer on the competition.) Having done it all for nearly two decades, this year Kickbush brought on Sayeg, another LA-based designer, who divides his time among theatre, dance, and opera projects. (Both are members of United Scenic Artists Local 829.) The plan is for Sayeg to take over the competition in the years to come.

Both designers are clear about one thing: The IBC is a unique project, which must be handled on its own terms, or not at all. “There’s no planning in advance,” says Sayeg. “You’re throwing away everything you’ve known about lighting design in terms of planning. This project requires a rig that’s as flexible as possible, because you’re doing it on the fly and need to deliver in the moment.”

“It was worse years ago, when there was no dark day between the rounds,” recalls Kickbush. “In those days, there was also a qualifying round to weed out some of the US applications, which meant even more work; we also

had shorter rehearsal periods." Today, he adds, the first culling of applicants is done via video submissions, thus simplifying the process for everyone. Also, he says, "I begged for a dark day between rounds, for both us and the dancers. In those days, they were up late, then had an 8am rehearsal the next day," a schedule that left everyone—dancers, designers, and tech staff—permanently frazzled.

Still, it's not an easy gig. Sayeg lays out the basic terms of their task: "We start with 100 dancers, all of whom perform in Round One, which is completely classical. We see all the great repertory ballets in this session: *Coppelia*, *Don Quixote*, *Swan Lake*, *Esmeralda*, *Paquita*, *Flower Festival*, *Le Corsair*, *Flames of Paris*, *La Bayadère*. This year, we saw dozens of *Don Quixotes* and *Swan Lakes*." The IBC also supplies the music for this round.

Given these parameters, the action is fast and furious. "Our first day of tech was all day, with no performances," says Sayeg, "and we lit 68 classical pieces in a single day." The second day, we lit about 35 pieces, and the next day, we did about ten; we had matinee and evening competitions, then went back into tech. After that, we had Round Two, which cuts the number of dancers down approximately by half. In this round, they can do whatever piece they want, and they can select the music. The third round cuts the number again approximately by half.



Above: Ji Young Chae and Ki-Min Kim. Previous spread: Miguel Montoya.

Soloists must perform two classical and one contemporary piece, and those participating in *pas de deux* must perform one of each. They have to be all-new, not pieces they've done earlier in the competition. They can select their own contemporary piece, and there's a list of classical dances to choose from.

"At the end of Round Three, the judges make their decision, and we go into the closing ceremonies, where the contestants repeat one of their pieces as chosen by the jury. In addition, we have guest companies that also perform; this year, they were Philadanco and Rasta Thomas and his Bad Boyz of Dance, as well as five regional companies."

Are you tired yet? Clearly, in even the best-case scenario, there's more than enough for two designers to do, working with a schedule that inevitably leaves them scrambling to keep up. In Round One, dealing with strictly limited program of dances, Kickbush says, "We have a classic dance plot. We pre-record a bunch of cues and store them. Then, when the dancers come in, we bring the cues up, and tailor them to the specific dancers—for example, we change the cues to work with the colors of each dancer's costumes."

In Round Two, says Sayeg, "A dancer comes in, sometimes alone and sometimes with a coach, a choreographer, or a translator." With contestants from South Korea, Portugal, and Belarus, among other locations,



Maki Onuki was a bronze medal winner. Sayeg notes that he and Kickbush work with many dancers through interpreters.

translators often play a key role in the proceedings. "It's interesting," the designer adds. "Sometimes the language of lighting is universal and sometimes you convey something with a hand gesture." In any event, he adds, "We run the chosen piece in work light, and then we have a brief discussion. After that, we quickly throw something together, mold it, and run it a few times.

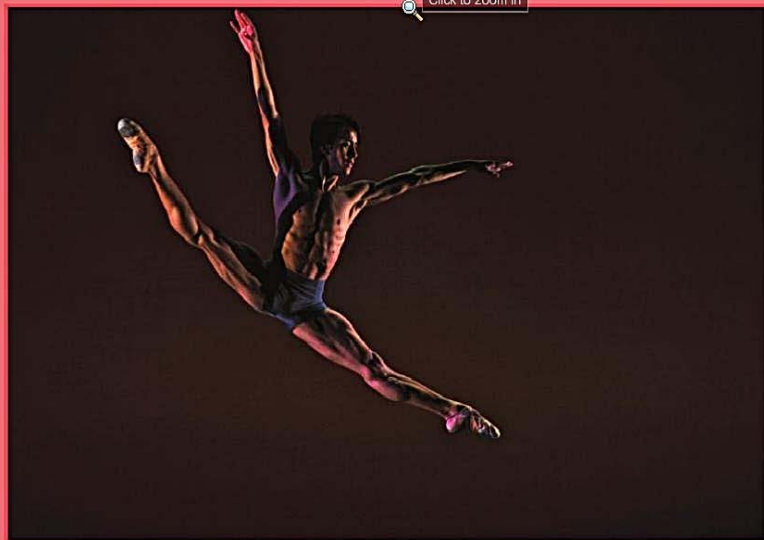
Of course, says Kickbush, "Some dancers know what they want, and some don't. Sometimes the coaches or choreographers have ideas about the lighting. Sometimes, it's really bizarre. One year, a dancer had a watercolor of what she wanted the stage to look like. This year, one of Jared's dancers has something all typed out in Excel, complete with pictures." Over the years, Kickbush adds, he has learned that different ethnic groups have different notions about lighting. "Asians tend to want a really light-colored cyc—almost white—and I often have to convince them that it's not necessarily a good idea. Russians can't stand shin busters, for some reason. I don't want to make anyone nervous, so I try to accommodate them all, to make them comfortable. But there's a lot of back and forth going on."

Sayeg says, "Some of them will say, 'Do whatever you want, but keep the sidelight dim.' Others come in with the paperwork of an archived design. Others will want to

explore different possibilities. We have to be prepared to work however they want to work. I might ask them why they want full downlight or why the specific music was chosen. Sometimes, the costume tells everything you need to know. We're searching for any information that will give us some kind of visual direction."

Unless they have specific ideas," says Kickbush, "we have them run the piece in work light; we make notes and use a stop watch to time the cues. We run it more than once, if there's time. Of course, we try not to get to cue-happy. The bottom line is, the jury has to be able to see the dancers." This is one case, Sayeg adds, where two designers are better than one: "We split up the schedule. Bill did the early morning tech session and I would handle the late morning session. This gave us an incubation period, to reflect on what we were doing." Of course, he adds, "This is a case where good note-taking is really important. You have a full day of lighting dances and you're never going to be able to remember them all."

The competition is held in Thalia Mara Hall, formerly known as Jackson Municipal Auditorium. "It's the city's union touring house and it has one of the most phenomenal IA crews I've ever worked with," says Sayeg, referring to IATSE Local 589. Kickbush adds that the auditorium seats 2,400. "It has a 60' proscenium and we



Carlos Hopuy. Sayeg says that he and Kickbush work with a "massive sidelight package" to light the dances.

“There’s no planning in advance. You’re throwing away everything you’ve known about lighting design in terms of planning. The project requires a rig that’s as flexible as possible, because you’re doing it on the fly and need to deliver in the moment.” — Sayeg

used 35' of the stage depth," he notes. "We had a nice sprung floor on loan from American Harlequin."

For the lighting rig, Kickbush says, "I started with a basic dance plot and, every year, I've adapted and tweaked it. I've had automation for the last four competitions; last time, I had more, but I didn't use them. This time, I wish we had more of them."

"There's a massive sidelight package," says Sayeg, unsurprisingly. "We have ten 20' dance towers, packed to the seams with an all-[ETC] Source Four rig, and about a dozen electrics overhead. Everything is focused to each panel of the Marley and it's all channeled and broken up for complete flexibility." In terms of automated gear, he says, "We added a set of [Philips Vari*Lite] VL500s for our backlight system. We chose them because we wanted to keep to the tungsten world, in order to be complementary to the dancers' skin tones. We also have a set of Wybron CXI color mixers for the sidelight package, and several VL1000 Arcs to serve as specials. Looking at Bill's plots

from previous years, which feature numerous ground rows and far cycs, and which require tons of dimmers, we decided to explore using LED units. We went with [Philips Color Kinetics] ColorBlazes, using them for the entire cyc and ground rows." Kickbush adds, "We loved the ColorBlazes. We have a bounce drop with an RP in front of it, and the Blazes cut through it perfectly." The gear was rented from TLS (Theatrical Lighting Systems). "They have an office in Jackson, and it's nice to deal with a local company for something like this," says Kickbush.

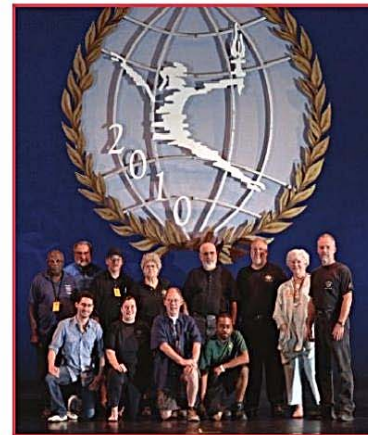
Interestingly, the designers decided to forego the use of followspots. "We had a big discussion about that," says Sayeg, "and we decided it was better to do without them, mainly because we had so little rehearsal time. Especially in a competition situation, dancers will change what they're doing on stage, in performance," making the use of followspots especially perilous.

The lighting was controlled by an ETC Ion console. "I'm a huge Eos fan," says Sayeg, naming the Ion's big

brother. "We were going to go with an Eos, but the Ion was big enough to handle the rig. Also, the board had to move every day—sometimes twice a day—from the middle of the house to backstage." Under these circumstances, he says, "The Ion was fantastic. It could achieve each round's session of cueing; also we'd get the guest companies' plots and hookups; they could send their imported show files and the Ion handled them fantastically. It imported files beautifully even from Expressions and Obsessions, and even with complicated cue structures."

Despite the stress and the time pressures, both designers seem almost exhilarated by the event. "You're working with incredible dancers, some of the best in the world," says Kickbush. Sayeg, who was introduced to the theatre through his sister, a ballet dancer, says, "Watching some of the world's most talented dancers perform on the same stage is nothing short of breathtaking. It's absolutely incredible and a great honor to be part of." It also provides them with an exciting test of their lighting design skills.

The next USA International Ballet Competition will be held in June 2014.



The designers and their crew. Top row: Carrol Evans, Bill Kickbush, Chris Payne, Jill Lucas, Bill Kuriger, Gary Robbins, Freda Spell, Allen Harrison. Bottom row: Jared Sayeg, Leighton Strong, C.B.Carrroll, M.J. Bradley.



Patricia Zhou. The designers adjust their color palettes to fit each dancer's individual needs.