

Bold steps

LD MARILYN LOWEY BRINGS MOVING-LIGHT TECHNOLOGY TO THE CLEVELAND SAN JOSE BALLET

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ALL PHOTOS EXCEPT MAIN ONE: JONAS GERBERT

“If you had told me two years ago that I’d be designing ballet, I wouldn’t have believed it,” says Marilyn Lowey, best known for her work in live television productions, industrials, and with celebrities like Neil Diamond and Bette Midler. “I guess I’m at a point in my life where I really appreciate the music, and I appreciate the art form.”

Marilyn Lowey’s first professional encounter with the art form of ballet came in August 1996 when Cleveland San Jose Ballet (CSJB) artistic director Dennis Nahat approached her to design the lighting for *Blue Suede Shoes*, an evening-length modern ballet work based around Elvis Presley songs. Lowey remembers, “For *Blue Suede Shoes*, Dennis knew he needed something different, and once we started working together it was an education for both of us—I learned more about dance and he learned more about lighting, and now he knows what it can do.”

This year, Nahat decided to present a rotating repertory season comprising a wide range of dance and music.

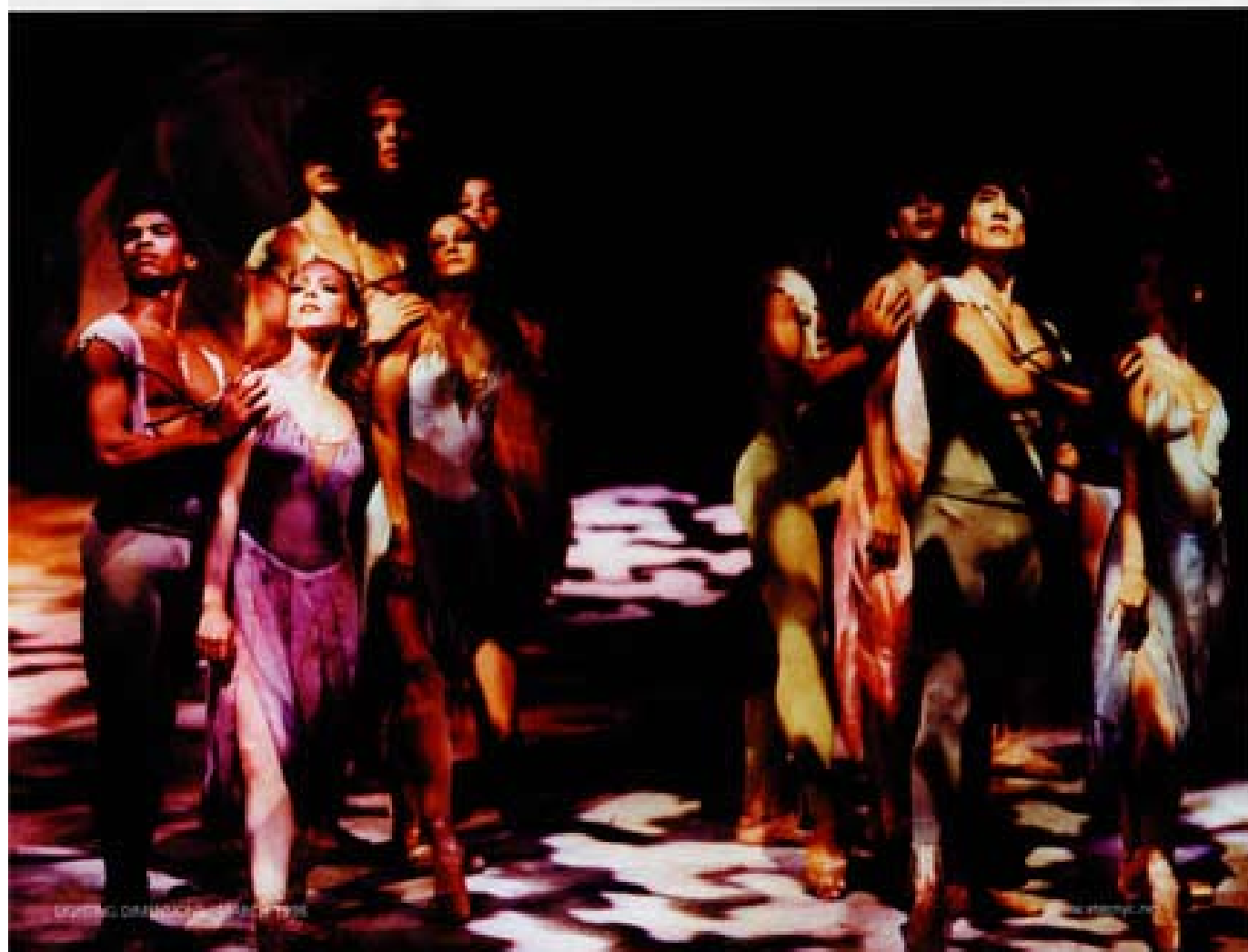
styles, including world premieres of his new choreography: *Carmina Burana*, set to Carl Orff's dramatic, operatic score, and *Marilyn*, the story of the rise and fall of Marilyn Monroe, danced to several Ella Fitzgerald songs. Other works were *Ozone Hour*, a ballet covering the history of rock and roll from ska-hop to disco, Balanchine's *Serenade* and *Theme and Variations*, Nahat's *Coppelia*, Agnes de Mille's *Three Virgins and a Devil*, plus *The Nutcracker*. Nahat invited Lowey back to design all these works from scratch using moving lights.

The LD thought it was a great idea. "From a lighting point of view it makes perfect sense. We do one load-in and do a versatile plot, in combination with conventional lights. We would only need to call up different disks for each ballet," she explains. "It was a challenge, but the fact that I got to go to work every day and light something different was really wonderful and a great treat for a designer."

Lowey met with CSJB resident set/costume designer David Guthrie to work out the division of the overhead space. "He needed to come up with a hanging plot for all these ballets that would work in one venue, leaving more space than usual for lighting, because automated instruments are larger than conventional," Guthrie went for simple but striking set designs, such as raw, industrial scaffolding for *Ozone Hour*, chandeliers for the classical



"I've always wanted to light *Carmina Burana*. I've always loved the music," comments LD Marilyn Lowey. "I have one CD playing in the car, I have a CD for the gym; the music is just fabulous. It was fun dealing with a choir and dancers onstage, to have all of your senses working at the same time. I loved working on it everyday, and the audience reaction was spectacular." The LD composed memorable images, accentuating the music and the stage action. Festal lighting and costumes plus foliage templates equals Spring (below). The devil made them do it: Monks in the tavern (facing page, bottom) succumb to the sin of gluttony and roast a Swan (above); then slaughter it (facing page, top) and feast on it.



Theme and Variations, and a sexy scarlet Corvette of a couch for *Marilyn*. *Carmina Burana* called for a more elaborate and gothic setting, including a round platform center stage and choir pews on the sides.

"David had never used moving lights or the technology that exists in lighting right now, so he was a little unsure about what we were going to create, but he was very pleased with the look and the crispness of it," comments Lowey. "The technology and the quality of light really gives some of these traditional pieces a whole new look, and that's very exciting. The blues are brighter and crisper, costumes where they have little sequins on them punch out in a quite beautiful way."

As to choice of instruments, the LD feels that "there's a place in the market for every fixture, and all the moving lights have their own individual intensity." For a soft but bright look she chose High End Systems Studio Colors®, and High End Cyberlights® for their sharp beams and effects capabilities. "These were the right fixtures for the right jobs; it's just kind of a gut thing," she continues. "On other projects I would use all Vari®Lites and Coemar NATs, but this project couldn't afford it."

Once the plot had been laid out and the instruments chosen, the real fun began. "Every day Dennis would come in and sit down with us and we would go through each scene of the ballet and light it accordingly. And we would run it that night; sometimes we'd have an orchestra rehearsal with the choir at the same time, and that was exciting. When you're first starting to work with a new plot you know what to expect, but there are also a lot of surprises, so it was fun seeing that."

A case in point was *Theme and Variations* on opening night. Since Lowey and Company had programmed all the pieces from the balcony, that was her first chance to see her work up close. She recalls, "We had used the Cyberlights as sidelight, and I had an abundance of sidelight to begin with, and the Cybers just cut through in such a wonderful manner that I stood there and tears came to my eyes."

The pièce de résistance of the season was *Carmina Burana*, which featured the Robert Page Cleveland Singers and Ohio Boychoir. Orff's classic score is based on decidedly non-sacred 13th-century manuscripts discovered in a Bavarian monastery, so Guthrie's set design is made to look like stone with carvings of medieval arches and pagan symbols. Says Lowey, "David just said to me, 'I'm leaving it gray so that you can paint.'" Which the LD did, not just with



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