

# The EVOLUTION of a Ballerina

*The American Ballet Theatre's principal dancer Michele Wiles talks about finally finding happiness in her own success.* By Liz Wagner

**AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE PRINCIPAL DANCER MICHELE WILES FOUND HERSELF** performing for an unusual audience one October morning—a small group of pot-bellied, frizzy-haired little girls in pink tights, at the Bedford-Stuyvesant YMCA. Wiles, 30, taught the “Tiny Toes” class how to execute a chaînés without getting dizzy. She showed the girls how to look at a fixed point in the mirror for as long as possible before whipping their bodies around, and encouraged them to try it with her. They concentrated, but wobbled like zombies, spinning in circles. Wiles—Amy Adam’s blonder, thinner dop-pelgänger—evaluated their attempts, nodding and smiling politely. “Very good,” she finally pronounced.

After the children made a few passes across the room she demonstrated what the turns could look like after some practice. She placed her hands on her slender hips and catapulted into motion, spinning like a dreidel on ice, impossibly fast yet utterly composed. The girls burst into applause, and when Wiles stopped, she erupted with laughter. She got a kick out of them getting a kick out of her. She was happy.

“I’m not stuck anymore,” she said later referring to her new attitude toward ballet, which took years of self-evaluation to acquire. She is among the most experienced ballerinas in the world today and has spent 13 years—nearly her entire adult life—at the American Ballet Theatre, which Mikhail Baryshnikov made famous in the 1980s.

Wiles, a Pasadena, Maryland, native, joined the corps de ballet at age 18. Two years later she moved up to soloist. And at age 25, she was promoted principal dancer—the highest rank in the ballet world. Since then she’s toured the globe dancing countless lead roles, and has secured a spot among New York City’s artistic elite.

Currently, she is rehearsing the part of Kitri in *Don Quixote*, which she will perform at the Met in May. She is also prepping for her latest turn in *Swan Lake*, where she will yet again dance the part of angel-and-devil twins Odette and Odile—the same role Natalie Portman’s character, dancer Nina Sayers, portrayed in the movie *Black Swan*.

Wiles is all too familiar with the film’s theme of self-induced pressure, though she has yet to experience a psychotic metamorphosis from ethereal ballerina to paranoid demon-bird. But she recently went on her own transformative journey. All she ever wanted was to become the ultimate ballet dancer—but

didn’t expect to be completely confused when she succeeded.

“I thought that balloons were going to drop from the sky,” she said. “I thought that the white horses would come in. Actually quite the opposite. I went through these crazy emotional outpourings after I was promoted. For so long, it was like, I want to be principal. [I was] promoted and then years of emotional backup came pouring out. I was forced to take a look at myself.”

A few days after her YMCA appearance, Wiles spent the morning at the Manhattan Movement & Arts Center on the Upper West Side, rehearsing her part in *Theme and Variations*, which she performed last November in Cuba.

She left the practice studio pink-faced and flushed, red Lycra leotard stained with sweat below her breasts, blond hairs sticking out of her once-tight French twist. Still, she looked stunning, tall—she’s 5-foot-8—lean, muscled yet delicate, porcelain skin. She untied her size-8 Pointe shoes, slipped on a pair of black boots and wrapped a knitted sweater around her shoulders. Susan Jaffe, one of Wiles’ ballet coaches—and retired ABT principal dancer and Baryshnikov’s former protégé—followed Wiles out of the studio. Jaffe seemed to appreciate that Wiles was in the throes of dissecting her life.

“She is searching to be a real artist,” Jaffe said, “an artist with depth.”

When Jaffe left, Wiles headed for the center’s cafe and grabbed a coffee and sesame bagel with cream cheese (yes, dancers do eat; they have to, to replenish the massive amounts of calories lost, Wiles said), plopped down on a chair and began to retrace her personal odyssey.

She recalls her parents taking her to the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., to watch the Royal Ballet’s production of *Swan Lake* with Darcey Bussell dancing the lead.

“I fell in love with the ballet and I fell in love with her,” Wiles said. “I thought it was so beautiful and elegant and magical and a world I thought I wanted to be in.”

Her father, a home builder, constructed a ballet studio in the basement of their house, which she rarely left. She agonized over missed steps and—perhaps channeling Nina Sayers—practiced until she was nearly perfect. She dismissed her parents’ demands to go to sleep in favor of staying up late to study ballet tapes and rehash routines she learned in class.

“She was relentless with it,” Larry Wiles said of his >

Michele Wiles as Kitri  
in *Don Quixote*.





Wiles as Myrta in *Giselle*.

daughter during a phone conversation. “She would come home and practice at night what she learned for hours.”

She convinced her parents to enroll her at the Kirov Academy of Ballet in D.C., a school specializing in classical Russian techniques. She received a full scholarship to attend, which obliged her to board full time at the institution—at age 10.

Being an hour and a half away from her parents and older brother tore Wiles up, but the determination to dance won out over homesickness. “It was something inside of me making me do it.” She took normal academic courses for five hours in the morning, but the majority of the curriculum involved ballet: dance class from 2:30 p.m. to 7 p.m., individual rehearsal from 8:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Even at a school of exceptional dancers, Wiles stood out. “She was extremely outstanding when she was here,” John Dougherty, Wiles’ social studies teacher said via phone. “When she took an [dancing] exam everyone went to go watch her because she was better than everybody else. Her legs could go higher than anybody’s.” Wiles entered three dance competitions during her last year at Kirov and won awards at all three, including the Gold Medal prize at the prestigious International Ballet Competition in Varna, Bulgaria.

At 16, Wiles left Kirov Academy and headed straight to New York City to take on the American Ballet Theatre. But after a four-month apprenticeship with ABT, Wiles didn’t make the company. Instead she was placed in the studio company, a lesser ensemble, which groomed dancers who had potential.

“I came from a school where I was a star,” she said. “Prodigy. I got the attention. I came to [American Ballet Theatre] and I wasn’t really anybody here yet. It [was] like starting all over again.”

Her family believed in her talent and made sacrifices to nurture it—Wiles’ mother staying with her two weeks a month for about two years, her father sometimes sleeping in his car at the Vince Lombardi Service Area just north of the New Jersey Turnpike to rest during long treks back to Pasadena. But, as Larry Wiles puts it, “I felt totally energized because I was doing this for someone who wanted to do it so bad.”

Within a year, Wiles worked her way into the main company. She leapt into a manic rehearsal schedule, dancing up to 12 hours some days. Her body ached constantly. Since ABT is primarily a touring company—the New York season only lasts from May through July—Wiles quickly adapted to life on the road. She

will give performances in London, Washington, D.C., Miami, Los Angeles and parts of Japan this year, on top of class and rehearsal. She has graced the stage at the world’s most famous opera houses and has seen her name printed in international newspapers next to words such as “powerful,” “talented” and “impressive.”

Wiles’ current dance partner, Cory Stearns, said he was slightly intimidated by her star status when they began working together three years ago. He was 21 at the time, and still a soloist. (He was promoted to principal in January). Ballet became Wiles’ identity. Wiles was ballet. But soon she realized she wasn’t O.K. with that.

“I remember one day literally standing on the stage thinking, ‘What am I doing here?’” she said. “I think up until now I just went through this period of searching.” She described herself as an “automaton” ballerina who did everything for the ballet and said she often cried before performances to calm her nerves. “It was almost like I was searching for my soul in a way, you know?”

Her personal journey was played out on-stage, and critics took note. A big blow came after a March 2009 London performance of *Swan Lake*, the same ballet, ironically, that Wiles fell in love with as a girl. She danced Odette/Odile, which requires both mechanical and emotional commitment, as reinforced in spectacularly manic fashion in *Black Swan*. While nearly every review praised Wiles’ technical prowess they also panned her acting. *The Times* in London cited her lack of “striking dramatic personality.” A *Telegraph* reviewer wrote he didn’t “buy her” as delicate Odette or as flirtatious Odile. A critic from *The New York Times* penned that she had a “reluctance to carry the story” as if it were her own, also opining that she was “on the music but never in it.”

Wiles admits that it’s difficult to hear negative criticism, but concedes the London per-

formance was a bit hollow. She says the crisis of faith in her career was a big reason why. As Wiles plucked oversized bobby pins from her updo and let her thick hair fall just past her shoulders, she looked completely unaffected by that tough time in her life.

Bigger things have transpired since then. Primarily, James McCullough, her husband. Her “soulful businessman, *Jamessss*.” Wiles said, lingering on the “s” just a bit. The couple was set up by one of ABT’s board members.

McCullough, CEO of biotechnology company Exosome Diagnostics, said he knew Wiles was utterly dedicated to her career but was surprised to learn she had dimension beyond the ballet. On that first date, they discussed their shared love of history and philosophy.

“She’s a big thinker,” McCullough said on the phone.

After two years of dating, they wed in early October at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. They recently returned from their honeymoon road-tripping across northern Italy. Now it seems Wiles isn’t drowning in dance now that the marriage is her focus. She no longer obsesses over titles—corps member, soloist, principal, star.

She has also learned how to convert negative drivers—like the strife for perfection—into helpful energy. “That’s when you find your real confidence,” Wiles recently wrote in an email. “I like to ask myself how I want to feel and then I picture myself dancing in a positive way—this is a great technique to overcome pre-performance anxiety.”

McCullough noticed the maturity in his wife’s dancing when she reprised the role of Odette/Odile at the Met last June. Wiles noticed the change in herself as well.

“I feel like my dancing has flipped,” she said. “Like it’s coming from the inside out instead of the outside with nothing in.”

During an early scene in *Black Swan*, artistic director Thomas Leroy, played by Vincent Cassel, encourages high-strung Nina to take a chill-pill. “Perfection is not just about control,” he tells her. “It’s also about letting go.” Wiles recently had a similar revelation. She explained that she had heard someone say that if you clutch sand in your hand too tightly, it will slip away. She demonstrated, extending a graceful arm punctuated with a clenched fist. Wiles believes the same is true of the ballet. “If you can let it go,” she said, slowly opening her hand like a rosebud in bloom, “I think there’s something else that happens. You have space. Space to go to another dimension. Be an artist.” ●