Edward Villella (1936 -)
by Lisa Traiger

Probably the most-celebrated American-born male ballet dancer, Edward Villella was a prime reason that a public, wedded to the idea that dancing, particularly ballet, was for women, came to not only accept but idolize male ballet dancers. Villella, virile and uncompromising in his persona onstage and off, spent his career dancing for George Balanchine and his celebrated New York City Ballet, where he was a company member from 1957 through 1981. Although a long-term hip injury side-lined him for good as a performer, he never left the dance field. In 1986, with $1 million in seed money, 19 dancers, and rehearsal space in an empty storefront, Villella founded one of the foremost Balanchine-based ballet companies in the U.S.: Miami City Ballet. The company shot to fame, helping to launch the south Florida region as a go-to arts destination, not merely a retirement haven. Today the company has 45 dancers, a $14.5 million budget, a state-of-the-art studio theater and a thriving dance school. Villella’s first-hand, intimate experience with the Balanchine repertory and his drive for excellence made MCB one of the country’s most important ballet institutions.

Born into a first-generation working-class Italian-American family in Bayside, Queens, Villella followed his older sister into ballet class: it was the only way his mother could get him to behave. With his quick, athletic body and high energy, he excelled. By age 10 he was on scholarship at the School of American Ballet, although his truck driver father objected to the idea of his son becoming a dancer. “Ballet had structure for me, technique, an alphabet and vocabulary,” Villella said in a 2001 interview about what intrigued him to pursue the form seriously. “It was fascinating to learn a new physical language that related to so many other things – music, stage presence – wow, it was so far beyond physical” (Traiger, 5/10/01).

Picked on by the neighborhood kids who thought ballet was for sissies, Villella fought back to prove it wasn’t. Later his father insisted that he attend college, so he matriculated at Maritime College of SUNY, where he studied mechanics, math, naval science, and navigation, a subject that had the students join European cruises during the summers. At the regimented, military-based campus, Villella found ways to sneak out, evade curfew, and earn money in order to take ballet classes at night. He was also a welterweight boxing champ and played varsity baseball during his college years. But he was still a street kid at heart and continued getting into brawls: the worst left him with a concussion, a broken nose, some memory loss and a months-long recovery, sidelining him from both sports and ballet.

While still a college student he was invited to join the corps of New York City Ballet, which Villella did, against his parents’ wishes. They wanted to see him complete college, which he was able to do two years later. “I gave my degree to my father and said I’m going to be a dancer,” Villella said in 2001. After just two short years, Balanchine named Villella a principal dancer. Among his iconic roles he was acclaimed for his portrayal of the title role in Balanchine’s 1929 masterpiece The Prodigal Son, probably his most beloved role for audiences and critics alike. While the company’s women were most often the choreographer’s muses, Villella’s explosive technique and dark-haired, mysterious good looks inspired Balanchine to create notable male leads for him in ballets including Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux, Tarantella, Oberon in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and “Rubies” from Jewels. In 1969, Jerome Robbins began his critically acclaimed Dances at a Gathering with “the brown boy,” a role he crafted for Villella. Three years later Robbins created Watermill on the dancer. With its roots in Japanese, Tibetan, African and other rituals, its stylized sex scenes and Japanese-influenced score, the ballet was lambasted for ignoring Villella’s technical gifts and presenting him in minimalist fashion: New York Times critic Anna Kisselgoff wrote in 1990 that the dancer spent most of his time “reclining magnificently
in Michelangelesque poses and observing the pictures of life lived.”

Over the course of his NYCB career, Villella’s many accolades included being the first American male dancer to perform with the Royal Danish Ballet, and being the only American ever invited to dance an encore at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. He danced at President Kennedy’s inaugural as well as for Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Ford. He served as producer/director for the PBS series “Dance in America” and received an Emmy Award for his CBS production of Harlequinade. He appeared on the “Ed Sullivan Show” often, becoming a household name and bringing a masculine sensibility that changed ballet’s then often feminized reputation in the U.S. In 1973, Villella played himself in an episode of “The Odd Couple,” and a decade later made an appearance on the soap opera “Guiding Light.”

Prior to founding MCB, Villella was artistic coordinator of Eglevsky Ballet from 1979-84, and director of Ballet Oklahoma from 1983-85. In 1992, his autobiography, Prodigal Son: Dancing for Balanchine in a World of Pain and Magic, written with Larry Kaplan, was published.

His wife, the former Linda Carbonetto, was an Olympic figure skater. As the founding director of the Miami City Ballet School, she oversees curriculum and manages the pre-professional program. She and Villella have two daughters, Lauren and Crista. Villella also has a son, Roddy, with his first wife, Janet Greschler, a former NYCB dancer.

As iconic as his dancing was during his career, Wall Street Journal theater critic Terry Teachout told the Miami Herald that Villella’s greatest contribution may well be founding Miami City Ballet. “That is a priceless achievement I and of itself, one which in the long run I suspect that Villella will be remembered for even longer than for his dancing career.”

The company has been lauded as the most authentic exemplar of Balanchine’s works, and credit goes to the way Villella inculcates not only the technique and style, but also individuality in the dancers he coaches. “It’s an art form of body to body, mind to mind,” he said in 2001. “When I coach the roles I danced, I don’t expect people to imitate me. You can’t just dance it, you have to dance in a manner and style that doesn’t imitate or diminish [the dance] but exudes confidence and style.”

Villella noted a few reasons for the company’s early and continued success. Even in the MCB’s first year, touring was considered a must, and the repertory Villella settled on was what he knew best – Balanchine. “Balanchine wasn’t known in the hinterlands back then,” he said. “I focused on authenticity and gave them to the best of my ability the specificity of being an expert.” The tours then focused on Florida and other Southern states. By 1995, the company was invited to perform at the Kennedy Center, while its New York debut waited until 2009, and a three-week sold-out tour to the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris was completed in the summer of 2011.

At the start of the fall 2011-12 season, Villella announced his retirement at the end of the 2012-13 season, following reported internal friction with some members of the company board.

NOTE: Some material for this article was drawn from a telephone interview with Edward Villella, conducted by Lisa Traiger, 5/10/01.
An independent arts journalist, **Lisa Traiger**
writes on dance for *The Washington Post*
Weekend section and *Dance, Dance Teacher,*
*Washington Jewish Week* and *The Forward.* She
edits *From the Green Room,* Dance/USA’s online
eJournal. In 2003, Traiger was a New York Times
Fellow in the Institute for Dance Criticism at the
American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C. She
holds an M.F.A. in choreography from
University of Maryland, College Park, and
taught dance appreciation at UMCP and
Montgomery College, Rockville, Md. Traiger
served on the Dance Critics Association Board of
Directors from 1991-93, returned to the board
in 2005, and served as co-president in 2006-07.
She was on the advisory board of the Dance
Notation Bureau from 2008-09.