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Dance Is Not My Career: A Lesson in Longevity from Prima Ballerina Assoluta, Alessandra Ferri



Lar Lubovitch Dance Company's *Artemis*. Pictured: Guest artist Alessandra Ferri and Lar Lubovitch Company dancer Tobin Del Cuore. Photo by: NYC Dance Project



By A. Nia Austin-Edwards (ANAE)
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Published on October 14, 2014
Courtesy of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

As She Prepares to Perform with Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

Lar Lubovitch Dance Company presents the world premiere of *The Black Rose* and a new production of Lubovitch's *Artemis* featuring guest artist Alessandra Ferri October 15-19, 2014, at The Joyce Theater
For ticket information, go to [The Joyce Theater website](#).

Dance is often perceived as a career without longevity. Endless tales of body aches or hip and knee replacements find most believing that dance artists can't move much beyond the age of 25. Those of us in the field know otherwise. The legendary [Mikhail Baryshnikov](#) made his mark as ballet dancer before turning his prodigious talents to modern dance with White Oak Dance Project and acting on stage and screen. We look to artists such as [Carmen de Lavallade](#), [Dudley Williams](#) and [Gus Solomons Jr.](#), who after stellar careers in their youth -- as founding principal dancers with pioneering artists [Lester Horton](#), [Alvin Ailey](#), [Martha Graham](#) and [Merce Cunningham](#) -- together established the ensemble PARADIGM to acknowledge the eloquence of seasoned performers. Today, at 83, de Lavallade, a dancer, actress, and muse to her husband [Geoffrey Holder](#), the recently deceased visual artist, performer, and theatrical designer, continues to wow audiences as she tours

her solo performance *As I Remember It*, a retrospective of her life in the arts. One cannot help but admire dancers who have pushed the envelope, sustaining careers well past anyone's expectation.

Prima ballerina assoluta, Alessandra Ferri, is another great to add to the band of remarkable dance artists who continue to defy expectation. Born in 1963, Ferri at 51, could be seen as past that "assumed" age when one's dance career ends, but as I soon learn when we begin our phone interview, she is a woman who speaks with distinct clarity on this topic. "I think I have to point out something," Ferri stops me mid-sentence to assert, "I don't think of dance as my career, so don't use that word with me. It's not my career; it's my life. A career is something that you do as a job. You can be passionate about it, but it's your job. And dance is not my job. It's my life. It's who I am."



Alessandra Ferri. Copyright: Fabrizio Ferri

Young dancers spend a great deal of time in the studio where they begin their training. They build relationships that become familial and cherish these early experiences as the groundwork for their artistry. Ferri is no different. She began her training at Milan's La Scala Theatre Ballet School, then transferred to the Royal Ballet's upper school before joining that company. "We were all very nurtured," she remembers, "everybody knew each other and it was a very protected environment."

Suddenly at the age of 21, Mikhail Baryshnikov invited the young ballerina to jump across the pond and join the American Ballet Theatre. "It was a very unique, wonderful opportunity," Ferri reflects.

She made the move from London's Royal Ballet, a company she loved and was familiar with, to the gritty streets of 1980s New York. Luckily Ferri's mentor and "artistic father," Sir Kenneth MacMillan who was working as an Artistic Associate at ABT after a seven-year tenure as Director of The Royal Ballet, helped smooth her transition. "You had to look out for yourself a bit more," Ferri recalls, "I felt very lonely in the city, and I felt a lot of pressure because I came in as a principal, but I was only 21."



Rehearsal for *Artemis*. Pictured: Alessandra Ferri and Tobin Del Cuore, Courtesy of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

Kenneth MacMillan created many roles for Ferri, constantly challenging her to bring theatricality into her performance. Every movement had to translate a glimpse of reality. “He forged who I am, even now, as an artist. He made me aware of dramatic abilities that I wasn’t aware of. He initiated a creative process that I continue today.... where you find truth in the acting through dance, rather than just superficial pantomime. He helped me to dig in each role like an actor would do in a play.”

Macmillan was one of many memorable collaborators. Ferri also treasures her long-time relationship and partnership with Julio Bocca, the renowned Argentinian soloist who similarly danced for The Royal Ballet and then ABT by a personal invitation from Baryshnikov. Ferri and Bocca danced together during pivotal times in their artistic lives. Not only were they inspired by each other’s movement, but they were also motivated by one another’s humanity.

When thinking of collaborators, Ferri makes it clear that these important relationships are about more than movement and ballet. “It’s not enough to work with somebody who is good,” she shares, “It has to be a wonderful experience on a human level. It has to be a real exchange.”

Ferri also values her rehearsal processes with Roland Petit, founder of the Ballets des Champs-Élysées, the Ballets de Paris, and the Ballet National de Marseille. She was quoted in Milan’s [Corriere](#)

della Sera saying, “Petit forced me to bring out the tiger that was inside me...he hated submissive women, for him women are the force that makes the world turn!”

Interaction with Petit, Bocca, and Macmillan are defined in Ferri’s memory by their intensity. While she cannot choose favorite ballets or performances, it is these and other intense moments that remain ingrained in her psyche:

“I remember the first time I stepped out on the Royal Opera House stage in a leading role in *Mayerling*. I remember that feeling. I remember distinctively my last performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Met. I remember Roland Petit and how he stretched me.”



Lar Lubovitch Dance Company's *Artemis*. Pictured: Guest artist Alessandra Ferri and Lar Lubovitch Company dancer Tobin Del Cuore. Photo by: NYC Dance Project

In this life of dance, Ferri has no intention of slowing down anytime soon. This week, she will be performing the title role in Lar Lubovitch’s new production of *Artemis* along side Lubovitch Company dancer Tobin Del Cuore. She met Lubovitch during her last season at ABT, when they performed his *Othello*, and has maintained a connection, reverence, and understanding of his work ever since. “I really love Lar,” she shares with a tangible smile in her voice, “He’s a very sensitive man and every time I work with him I get enriched.”

In November, she will continue the tour of Martha Clarke’s acclaimed work *Chéri* with ABT principal Herman Cornejo in Buenos Aires. She and Cornejo have also been commissioned to present an evening of their own work later this Fall. She will return to The Royal Ballet in the spring for Resident

Choreographer Wayne McGregor's first full-length ballet for the Company, *Wolf Works*. And in June, she will join Hamburg Ballet in the world premier of John Neumeier's newest creation *Tatiana*. Needless to say, Ferri takes care of her body. Her regimen includes Pilates, Gyrotonics, ballet class, physical therapy, and more. "I consider my body a race car that I have to really keep completely tuned and in shape," she reveals. "My body is an object that enables my soul to drive it."

Ferri understands her talent is a gift that comes with great responsibility and deserves immense respect. With this understanding as her foundation, she continues creating, acting, dancing, and living. As she declares, "A career has a beginning and an end. So does life, but who I am is not going to end whether I'm on stage or not."

Alessandra Ferri is one of the most famous ballerinas of the late twentieth century. She was born in Milan, Italy, where she studied at the Teatro alla Scala until the age of 15. She then attended the Royal Ballet School, and in 1980 she won one of the three Prix de Lausanne, allowing her to continue studying at the Royal Ballet School on scholarship. She joined the Royal Ballet in 1980 and was made a Principal Dancer in 1984. In 1985 she was invited to join as a Principal Dancer the American Ballet Theater by Mikhail Baryshnikov who was then its Artistic Director. Ferri appeared with the Ballet National de Marseille in the summer of 1989, where she danced in Roland Petit's *Le Diable Amoureux*, which Petit created especially for her. Her guest appearances have also included dancing the role of Juliet in John Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* with the National Ballet of Canada, the title roles in Roland Petit's *Carmen* and *Notre-Dame de Paris* with the Paris Opera Ballet, Pierre Lacotte's *La Sylphide* with the Ballet National de Nancy and The Tokyo Ballet, John Neumeier's *A Streetcar Named Desire* with the Stuttgart Ballet and the title role of Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* with the Kirov Ballet at the Marinsky Theatre.