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## Mariaelena RUIZ

works her magic  
at Cary Ballet  
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# Raising the Stakes in North Carolina

Mariaelena Ruiz leads a new professional training program at Cary Ballet Conservatory.

BY CANDICE THOMPSON • PHOTOS BY BROOKE MEYER

On a Wednesday afternoon in December, the Cary Ballet Conservatory's students are onstage for a run-through of their Youth America Grand Prix solos and ensemble dances. Newly appointed director Mariaelena Ruiz sits in the audience, announcing the name, age and hometown for each competitor on the microphone, mimicking the tone and setting of the real competition. The fifth positions and use of épaulement are as impressive as the multiple pirouettes and grand fouettés. There is also a surprising maturity on display, evident in how the students maintain their stage presence and stay musical even with a stumble here or hiccup there, without any feedback or encouragement from Ruiz. This is clearly a practice performance that they are prepared for, a luxury and an experience pre-professional students rarely get. Any notes will be given at the end, just as in a professional company.

It is hard to believe the Professional Training Program is only a year and a half in the making, a result of Ruiz's arrival at CBC. Having made a name for herself at The Rock School in Philadelphia as the go-to coach if you want to win competitions and



land a spot in a ballet company, she was hired to bring her magic formula for developing versatile, stunning dancers to this close-knit community in Cary, North Carolina. Now, with Ruiz confidently at the helm and a gorgeous six-studio facility, CBC is on track to become the next big regional training destination for serious students, on par with Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet in Carlisle, PA, as well as taking its place as a point of pride for the local community.

But the job of building a program from the ground up has called for more than exceptional coaching skills.



"You knew regardless of how hard Mariaelena pushed you that there was love under every correction."

—Gabe Stone Shayer, former Rock School student, now corps de ballet member, American Ballet Theatre



ADC International Ballet Competition named Ruiz outstanding teacher in 2016.

“Setting up development and marketing, being involved in the whole business side of an organization, takes a massive amount of time outside the studio,” says Ruiz. “We are competing for talent with big programs that have endowments, like Houston and Boston, and it takes money to support talent.” Ruiz now finds herself working 12-hour days, managing a full load of teaching with all the new tasks of upper management. Her ambition remains the one constant in her new setting. A force unto itself, it has propelled her and her students this far.

Ruiz began her ballet career young, training in her native Caracas, Venezuela, under former Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo prima ballerina Nina Novak. When Ruiz was 8 years old, her mother went in to the studio to pay the monthly tuition and was surprised to hear that Ruiz had not shown up for her classes in weeks. “I had actually been there every single day. I had just fooled everyone and made my way into the level above,” Ruiz explains with a grin. “I was always the youngest and tallest, and nothing was ever easy. My father preached about hard

work, and so I don’t believe in victims or laziness, and I am always on the lookout for the underdog.”

Ruiz was just that when she went to IBC Jackson at 15 for “experience” and ended up winning third place. The awards piled up from there, and she went on to study on full scholarship at the School of American Ballet and dance with several companies, including San Francisco Ballet and the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. She rose from faculty member to ballet mistress over her 15 years at The Rock School, where she trained notable dancers such as Beckanne Sisk and Michaela DePrince. During Ruiz’s final years there, she was featured in the documentary *First Position*. She counts world-renowned ballet mistress Olga Kostritzky among her many mentors, a list that also includes Suzanne Farrell and her colleagues from Rock. There have been times during the past 18 months when Ruiz has had to reach out for support: “Every time I have had doubts about what I am doing, Olga has said, ‘You are on the right track; don’t give up.’”

Like all superheroes, the quality that has made Ruiz so successful—namely her relentless

“I still use her combinations from pointe and technique class to keep me strong.”

—Beckanne Sisk, former Rock School student, now principal, Ballet West

drive—can also, at times, be her kryptonite. The last two years have brought myriad changes for Ruiz both personally and professionally, from her recent marriage, to moving with her husband (a wildlife scientist who can often be found in the wings fixing set pieces during *The Nutcracker*), to taking on a leadership role with more responsibility than ever before. “We got married in May of 2015, sold our houses and moved to Cary in June,” says Ruiz. “This is an investment for both of us, and I feel responsible for us and the students. I am not holding anything back—everything that I know works, all my contacts, have been laid out on the table.”

For Heather Iler, CBC’s ballet program director, Ruiz has been a motivating friend and colleague. Iler credits Ruiz with helping her more fully realize her own goals by bringing the necessary exposure, integrity and strong artistic eye to the school. “Prior to her arrival, Mariaelena and I spoke for hours at a time about our visions for the future and the challenges ahead. I knew from our first conversation that she would always have the best interest of the dancers in mind in every decision she made,” says Iler. “When dancers work with her, there is no doubt that she holds herself accountable to the same principles that she expects from them. This honesty and truth resonates with students, and it contributes to not only the technical and artistic growth of each dancer, but to their character development as people.”

Yet as Ruiz and the faculty work furiously to bring up the quality of training for all CBC students, she is finding that patience is also required. “My biggest learning experience is that I have to give it time to grow, even when I know what works and I want that to work now,” Ruiz says in a reflective moment, ever on the mission to improve herself and her charges.

The 635 students of CBC, the administration, faculty and parents have all had to work through a big adjustment phase as well. For the 25 dancers enrolled



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Clockwise from left: Emily McAllister and Nik Zist in a CBC production of *The Nutcracker*; PTP students Ella Wassil and Cooper Everson; Emily Hall is an ADC/IBC 2016 gold medalist.

in the full-time Professional Training Program, the change has meant adjusting to a demanding 7:30 am to 5:30 pm workday, with academics in the morning, followed by technique classes, conditioning and rehearsals, where versatility between classical and contemporary is honed. Other students have had to let go of an à la carte style of picking and choosing classes in favor of the Studio Program, a three- to four-hour-a-day bridge program that takes place after school hours.

Along the way, Ruiz and her faculty have gotten rid of the perks of seniority in the student company in favor of a merit-based system of casting, and they have been diligent in bringing in a steady stream of contemporary choreographers and guest teachers to



expose the dancers to the biggest artistic range possible. “Mariaelena is demanding, and this can initially be intimidating,” explains Iler. “But the level of care and love she has for the students and faculty is deep and true.”

While she has met a little bit of resistance along the way, Ruiz has also been heartened by the support of the community in this difficult endeavor. “I try to balance being truthful with being supportive and empathetic,” says Ruiz, “and once students and parents see how committed I am, that I am on their side, that I can’t get results without them or their trust, then everyone is more willing to try this new approach.”

The results of this new approach are already



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evident with students from the first graduating year of the PTP joining professional companies (Dayton Ballet, Carolina Ballet and The Washington Ballet), sponsorships from both Capezio and Gaynor Minden, a strong showing at the 2016 YAGP and a 2016 outstanding teacher award for Ruiz from ADC International Ballet Competition.

Beyond all the accolades, the evidence of her method could also be seen onstage during a children’s show of *The Nutcracker*, where the cast lit up the stage with exquisite glissades, smooth partnering, quiet pointe shoes, sophisticated musicality and sparkling personalities. The sold-out audience was full of families, with babies and toddlers standing on laps in awe, being exposed not only to the enchantment of the show, but also a brief class demonstration and behind-the-scenes look at the show.

“My feeling is that dance is a life skill. You have to put in the hours and pass to get to the next level, and along the way you must learn the etiquette and discipline,” says Ruiz. “I think it is useful whether a student goes on to become a professional or the next CEO of Apple. You will know you have had good training when you know how to behave in a theater and are an educated supporter of the arts.” **DT**

*Candice Thompson danced with the Milwaukee Ballet and writes from Atlanta.*