

Masters of the Balletverse

Houston Ballet News' recurring series "A Day in the Life" kicks off with the day-to-day regimen of Houston Ballet's ballet masters

By Nichelle Suzanne

RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DAILY REGIMEN of company classes and rehearsals, and critical to the success of productions, ballet masters Steven Woodgate, Amy Fote and Ian Casady are the linchpins of Houston Ballet's artistic workflow.

Ever one step ahead, preparation for the ballet masters' day to come often begins in the evening or early morning prior. Depending on the schedule, a nine o'clock meeting kicks off their day twice a week and can last up to two hours. Directly after, Company class begins at 10 a.m. and following class, a short break is used to go over the rehearsal plan before the ballet masters conduct multiple rehearsals over the next three hours to set, clean, or review choreography. They'll have a late lunch and launch into another three-hour round of rehearsals until almost 7 p.m. before they go home to eat dinner and to prepare, sometimes well into the night, for doing it all over again the following day.

Though the framework of their day to day can be captured in a few sentences, the multilayered role of a ballet master is far from simple. In addition to teaching and rehearsal duties, they coordinate schedules for multiple casts, assist choreographers or staggers, coach dancers, facilitate casting changes when dancers are sick or injured, attend performances to note any problems that should be addressed, act as a liaison between the dancers and the Artistic Director, and many other duties as needed. "Our work day is very dense," says ▶▶



▶▶ Former Philly pal dancer turned ballet master Ian Casady (left) lifts former Philly pal dancer Amy Fote (right) during the 2021-22 season. Photo by Lawrence Elizabeth Knox





Ballet Master Steven Woodgate took the lead in rehearsing La Sylphide last season. Photo by Lawrence Elizabeth Knox.

► Fote, "so I feel like I have more miles on me now doing this job than I did as a dancer."

First taking some time to consider her future following retirement from a professional dance career of over 20 years that began at Milwaukee Ballet and concluded at Houston Ballet, Fote accepted a position as ballet master with Ballet San Antonio. "While a dancer, it had never dawned on me to do that but I did feel most comfortable and at home in the studio," she reflects.

After serving as a ballet master in San Antonio for two years, Fote returned to Houston, where she was first invited to teach in the Houston Ballet Academy and then transitioned to ballet master in 2018.

Casady was a dancer with Houston Ballet for 22 years before joining the artistic staff during a very unusual, mostly virtual season in 2020. As a result, he still feels the intensified challenge of working with the Company in this new capacity. "I'm

bringing all the dancing experience with me but being the one in charge, directing and keeping things moving is a different kind of stress and energy output," he explains.

Not long from celebrating his 20th season as a ballet master at Houston Ballet, Woodgate began teaching company warmup and staging works early in his development as a dancer. Woodgate says he became a ballet master two weeks after dancing professionally for nearly 20 years. "I really loved staging things and seeing the full show come together like a jigsaw puzzle. It's satisfying in the end, and I enjoy the process."

"The biggest puzzle," Casady remarks of the duties he shares with Fote and Woodgate, "is putting the schedule together, especially when you do as many ballets as we do."

"And with as many casts," Fote adds, explaining that the artistic staff cast up to four levels deep for many productions last season, a practice that paid off noticeably during

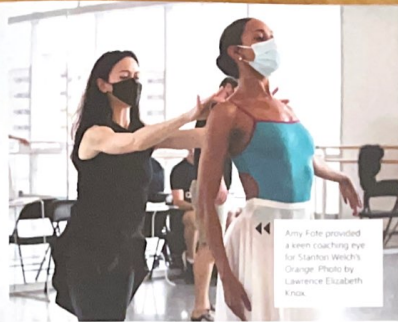
inevitable strikes of illness due to COVID-19 and a wave of dancer injuries.

"As a dancer, you generally looked out for yourself," says Fote. "As a ballet master, you are looking after 60-plus people and then some with the Academy students."

In the case of a full-length production, one of the ballet masters will take the lead while the others have roles or sections they oversee.

Woodgate says he is excited and a bit nervous to manage Artistic Director Stanton Welch's *Romeo and Juliet* in the 2022-23 season. "It'll be very exciting when all the sword fights work for me," he predicts. Casady, who has previously danced in all of the season's ballets except for its world premieres, is looking forward to being at the helm of Trey McIntyre's theatrical and whimsical *Peter Pan*.

Fote will take charge of the epic *Swan Lake*, which is being prepared in advance for the Company's first-



Amy Fote provided a keen coaching eye for Stanton Welch's *Orange*. Photo by Lawrence Elizabeth Knox.

ever tour to Japan this fall. She has discovered she rather enjoys tidying the details of choreography with a large corps. "Having 24 swans trying to feel the same thing, listen and move in unison will be a beautiful challenge."

Fote also notes that she'll be working with the dancers cast as Juliet. "It's always a special role but I've never danced this version, so there will be extra video watching for me, but the music is stunning," she remarks.

Fote, Casady and Woodgate will also each be responsible for either staging or assisting the répétiteur on the season's various one acts. In addition, there's *The Nutcracker*, gala performance, touring, plus the ballet masters may also be "on" meaning in rehearsal and on stage for character roles, at times.

"Preparation is key to a successful and quick putting on of a ballet," Woodgate emphasizes.

He has shelves and closets filled with binders of handwritten notes on the ballets he's staged and returns to these frequently as he prepares to conduct rehearsals with an expectant room of dancers each day. Though video is an increasingly helpful tool for dancers to personally review movement and staging, the ballet masters spend much of their own time looking back at video and notation in order to teach choreography and direct the

Company members in the studio.

While mapping out and delegating tasks among this team of three has the potential to play out like a "Who's on First" comedy sketch, and perhaps may even feel that way to its internal players at times, Houston Ballet is a highly organized company stocked with dancers who are quick when stepping into roles and who frequently step up in helpful ways during rehearsals. The ballet masters also have each other to lean on for support.

"You laugh and cry together. Sometimes argue about things," says Woodgate. "The other ballet masters often become your best friends."

Within every facet of a ballet master's skill set they must be prepared to function relentlessly with a high level of attention and accuracy. Far from the image of a dour, aging individual, leaning on a cane amid a gaggle of youthful but bored-looking dancers, à la the artist Degas' depiction of French ballet master Jules Perrot, Houston Ballet's ballet masters juggle the daily duties of their role with positive enthusiasm and encouragement.

Despite the many challenges of their job, it's not hard to picture this trio taking charge as the action horses of the Company's universe all while remaining, as Woodgate describes it in his litig Australian accent, "charming, happy and lovely all day!" ■

MEET THE MASTERS

Get to know Houston Ballet's elite ballet masters



IAN CASADY

JOINED: 2020

California native Ian Casady danced with Houston Ballet for 22 years before retiring from his Principal role to join the artistic staff.



AMY FOTE

JOINED: 2018

Amy Fote danced with Milwaukee Ballet for 14 years and Houston Ballet for eight seasons. Before joining Houston Ballet as a ballet master, Fote worked with Ballet San Antonio.



STEVEN WOODGATE

JOINED: 2004

Steven Woodgate graduated from The Australian Ballet School in 1985 and danced with The Australian Ballet for over ten years before joining Houston Ballet.