

THE DANCE GOODBYE

A film by Ron Steinman & Eileen Douglas

56 min / English / 2014 / Color / USA / Digital



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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Synopsis

Prima Merrill Ashley, a reigning ballerina of the New York City Ballet, retired in November, 1997, after 30 years with the company. Ashley was famed for her speed, energy and devotion to the purity of Balanchine's steps. Today she is revered as the last living link to Balanchine, who was inspired to create his final ballets for her. But her life is forever changed.

The dancer is an artist. Their instrument is their body. The body does not last. Singers can sing. Painters can paint. Writers can write. Even into old age. A dancer is the only major type of artist whose instrument is lost, and while they are still young. *THE DANCE GOODBYE* is a documentary portrait of a dancer's life when the dance is done and the steps she has taken into a new day. The film is a rare glimpse behind the scenes into the reality of a dancer's life when their performing days have ended and a major career is over.

What happens when a dancer can no longer dance? What happens to a prima ballerina when, despite all her efforts and against all her wishes, the music stops? How does an internationally acclaimed star of the dance world find her way to a new life when her defining passion, not to mention artistic outlet, is gone? What passion, if any, will replace the love of performance? Most dancers from childhood, Merrill included, have so centered their lives around the demands of dance that little thought and less preparation have been given to another way of working and being in the world. More deeply, whether dancer or athlete or downsized middle manager, Merrill's story is also the story of anyone who is forced by time or circumstances to say goodbye to their heart's desire. And begin again.

The filmmakers were there as Merrill Ashley fresh in the quandary of confronting these difficult questions following her farewell performance, and we remained there over more than a 12 year period through her struggles as she found her way to a new life—coaching and teaching Balanchine to major companies around the world.

Ashley extended her complete cooperation--opening her daily life to us as she made the rounds of doctors, health club workouts, hip operations, summers in Saratoga, and as she took up teaching duties. We have been with her at home, backstage at the New York City ballet, in session with young hopeful dancers, on travels to Cuba and abroad, and alone folding her ballet slippers back into her locker after instructing a rising star with the company in a role she once performed.

Ashley granted filmmakers Eileen Douglas and Ron Steinman extraordinary access to her inner life, thoughts, and feelings during this difficult time. In interviews which are touching and candid, Ashley is articulate, moving, intelligent, open, and revealing as she shares her thoughts on what dance means to her, what it was like to create with Balanchine, and the impact of performing's loss, when, for the first time in her life, she admits for a long time she did not know which way to turn.

The filmmakers also have been given access to a treasure trove of archival materials, including personal photographs, performance photos and videos, programs, rehearsal videos, gathered along the way as Ashley rose to stardom at the highest order in the arts world.

For Merrill Ashley, retiring from the stage where every moment with the music was heaven, the most creative act she has faced has been creating a new way to step through life. The dance goodbye.

Filmmaker Biographies

Ron Steinman worked with NBC News for 35 years. He was a writer on the Huntley-Brinkley Show in New York and Washington, covered politics and space, and worked on documentaries before going to Saigon as bureau chief in 1966. He covered the war in Vietnam for almost three years before moving to Hong Kong where he served as South East Asia bureau chief and then to London as bureau chief. He was general manager of special programs during Watergate, was Washington producer for the Today Show and held other senior positions on Today, Early Today and in the news division. Steinman then spent 7 years at ABC News Productions producing documentaries for various cable channels. He is currently a partner, producer and writer at Douglas/Steinman Productions where he directed and co-wrote the documentaries, *Luboml: My Heart Remembers* and *The Dance Goodbye* and directed and co-produced *My Grandfather's House*. He is the author of several books including "The Soldiers' Story," "A Saigon Journal: Inside Television's First War," "Women in Vietnam," a memoir, "The Notebooks," and a novel, "Death in Saigon." Formerly executive editor of "The Digital Journalist" and "The Digital Filmmaker", he also has served as a judge for the Emmys. Among his many awards, he has a Peabody, one from the International Documentary Association, two from Women in Radio and Television, the National Press Club, a Chris Award and five Emmy nominations, including one for his coverage of the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Eileen Douglas is a broadcast journalist turned independent documentary filmmaker. A founding partner in Douglas/Steinman Productions, before that she spent 17 years at WINS, New York's All News Radio Station, first as writer/editor and then as anchor/reporter, and later was a correspondent on ABC-TV's Lifetime Magazine. She has also been a reporter for Channel 5 WNEW-TV and an anchor for the ABC Radio network. Douglas began her career as a newspaper and television reporter in her hometown, Syracuse, New York. Before coming to New York, where she has lived for 40 years, she was one of the country's first women news directors at WKLO, and also co-hosted a television program on WHAS-TV, both in Louisville, Kentucky.

Douglas is a co-producer of the film *Luboml: My Heart Remembers*, which was broadcast on public television in New York. Her personal documentary *My Grandfather's House* aired on the Documentary Channel and TJC, The Jewish Channel and was selected by the Library of Congress for the motion picture division's permanent collection. A past columnist for "The Digital Journalist" and "The Digital Filmmaker", among her books is the children's work "Rachel and the Upside Down Heart." She also has served as a judge for the Emmys.

The New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/arts/dance/merrill-ashley-is-in-focus-at-the-dance-on-camera-festival.html?ref=movies>

By GIA KOURLAS

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Merrill Ashley was in her kitchen cooking when she found herself rocking her hips, ever so gently, from side to side. This was in 2001, after the first of two hip replacements.

“I burst into tears,” she said in an interview at her apartment a few blocks north of Lincoln Center, where she had danced with New York City Ballet for 30 years. “I hadn’t been able to do that for years. It was like being reborn.”

When Ms. Ashley retired from City Ballet as a principal in 1997 at the age of 46, she faced the problem nearly all ballet dancers face: How would she remake her life? That issue is addressed in **“The Dance Goodbye,”** a documentary by Ron Steinman and Eileen Douglas that will be shown this weekend as part of the 44th **Dance on Camera Festival**. After the screening on Sunday, Ms. Ashley will participate in a discussion about the film and her career.

Another celebrated ballerina, Natalia Makarova, will appear on Saturday after a showing of “Body and Soul,” the first segment of the four-part documentary “Ballerina” (1987). But the festival, presented by Dance Films Association and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, isn’t devoted only to ballet. “The Flight Fantastic” explores the world of trapeze and the famed Flying Gaonas, while “Our Last Tango” spotlights the tango dancers María Nieves Rego and Juan Carlos Copes. The festival concludes Tuesday with Jack Walsh’s “Feelings Are Facts: The Life of Yvonne Rainer.”

Ms. Ashley, a ballerina of sparkling musicality and crystalline technique — attributes showcased in “Ballo della Regina,” a ballet George Balanchine created for her in 1978 — held on as a dancer as long as she could but battled injuries for decades. “My whole life was taking care of my body,” she said.

“The Dance Goodbye” follows Ms. Ashley, now 65, for roughly 10 years after her farewell performance as she deals with innumerable injuries, including one from 1974 that severely affected her left bunion, which would dislocate when she went up and down on point. “My hip surgeon looks at my bunions and says, ‘Can’t we just cut those off?’” she said. “The foot guy says that’s a Pandora’s box, and he doesn’t want to touch it. And if he’s saying that, I think I’d better listen. Surgeons always want to do something, and when they’re saying ‘No’? Oh my lord. You’re in trouble.”

Her ankles are, in her word, “terrible.” And as for her back? “I can’t remember how many herniated discs I’ve got,” she said, scrunching her face. “Fourteen? It’s a lot.”

After Ms. Ashley's retirement and a severe ankle sprain, she discovered Igor N. Burdenko, who specializes in rehabilitation in the water. "I put him on the level of Balanchine," she said. "I learned all these exercises in the pool and on land, and that's what I've continued to do."

As Ms. Ashley — articulate, strong-willed, sensitive — spoke about her transition away from dancing, she observed how traumatic it is to step away from the stage. "Dance lovers don't really recognize that," she said, acknowledging that she's in a better position than most. "But if you're a corps de ballet dancer," she said, "what are you going to do? How are you going to earn a living? You're in a fantastic but insular world, and to find something else gratifying and financially viable to do with your life is really difficult and scary. You feel like you were accomplished, and now you're nothing."

Ms. Ashley spent several years as the teaching associate at City Ballet, where she taught company class and coached dancers until 2008. After that, on a freelance basis from 2009 to 2012, she served as a guest teacher. One takeaway: Teaching company class wasn't for her.

"I knew what I wanted to work on, but to find combinations that I liked and thought would be palatable," she said, with a pause. "Some were not so palatable."

Her classes, in other words, were rigorous.

In her day, she said, "If Balanchine gave it, we did it." But she wasn't Balanchine. "They didn't want to work hard," she added, "and I didn't want to just give them pablum."

She left City Ballet, in part, because of family issues. But Ms. Ashley said she also felt she would make a bigger contribution at other companies, coaching principals in Balanchine ballets. She's found her niche. Recently, she worked with dancers at Miami City Ballet in "La Source," and she also has formed steady relationships with the Houston Ballet and Semperoper Ballett in Dresden.

"To me, that's what was so fun and so gratifying," she said of finding the nuances of a role. "To take something and polish every little roughness and try and understand the mood and try and solve that technical problem and to bring something of your own personality to it."

As blunt as Ms. Ashley can be, she said that giving a dancer criticism could be difficult. At the same time, she added, "it doesn't do any good to pat somebody on the back and say, 'good job' when it wasn't a good job."

Finding the right tone can be hard, too. "I don't want to be hurtful," she said. "I know that when my husband would correct me, he would tell me some pretty devastating things, but he always managed to say it in a way that I found acceptable."

Her husband, Kibbe Fitzpatrick, formerly a simultaneous interpreter at the United Nations, was a fan of City Ballet and started attending performances in 1972 but knew little about the intricacies of ballet technique. He would tell her things like: "'You look awkward there. You have this frozen expression on your face. Why are you doing that?'"

She half-laughed and moaned. "He wanted me to look good," she said. "He wanted to sit back and enjoy me, and he wasn't. So I feel when I'm saying critical things to people, I'm trying to make it seem like it's coming from love. I admire them, I appreciate their skills, but this needs fixing."

Praise for THE DANCE GOODBYE

“★★★★★ An excellent documentary on Merrill Ashley's career and her goodbye... Bravo! Bravo!”
- **Jacques d'Amboise, Former Principal Dancer, NYCB & Founder, National Dance Institute**

“In this delicate exploration of artistic tradition, a Balanchine dancer facing retirement transforms herself from muse into keeper of the flame.” - **Jan Huttner, FF2 Media**

“When a dancer wakes up one morning and is no longer a part of the dance community, it's an incredible loss that is devastating. Yet, transition from a dance career into another career is a journey of rediscovering who you are. 'The Dance Goodbye' beautifully shows how that journey plays out by following ballerina Merrill Ashley in a documentary that offers a rare look inside the dancer's life when the dance, but not life itself, is finished.” - **Alexander J. Dubé, President, Career Transition For Dancers**

“I've always been a huge fan of New York City Ballet ballerina Merrill Ashley, and her transition story will touch the heart of every lover of dance and, more importantly, every dancer who will face this challenge; it certainly touched mine. This project is a must see!” - **Chita Rivera, Tony Award Winner & Broadway Legend**

“The first woman I ever partnered on pointe with was Merrill Ashley; the passion emanating from her dancing is something I will never forget. To work with someone who has experienced so much with her soul and body was a revelation. This film will inspire and educate artists. She has left a wonderful legacy.” - **David Parsons, Artistic Director, Parsons Dance**

“Offers both a realistic look at what it means to be a professional dancer, and the assurance that it is worth it. Ashley was a marvelous dancer, noted for her musicality and perfect technique, and seeing her in motion is a rare pleasure indeed.” - **Sarah Boslaugh, Playback STL**

“Nothing less than thrilling and inspiring.” - **Cinesource Magazine**

Selected Credits

A Douglas/Steinman Film

Director Ron Steinman

Produced by Ron Steinman and Eileen Douglas

Written by Ron Steinman and Eileen Douglas

Directors of Photography Cynthia Wade, Tim Cothren

Editors Gloria Pichhadze, Michael J. Sudyn

Post Production DuArt

Cover Photo Paul Kolnik

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