

*Lord of the*  
**DANCE**

American Ballet Theatre star  
**Roberto Bolle** is transforming  
the world of ballet

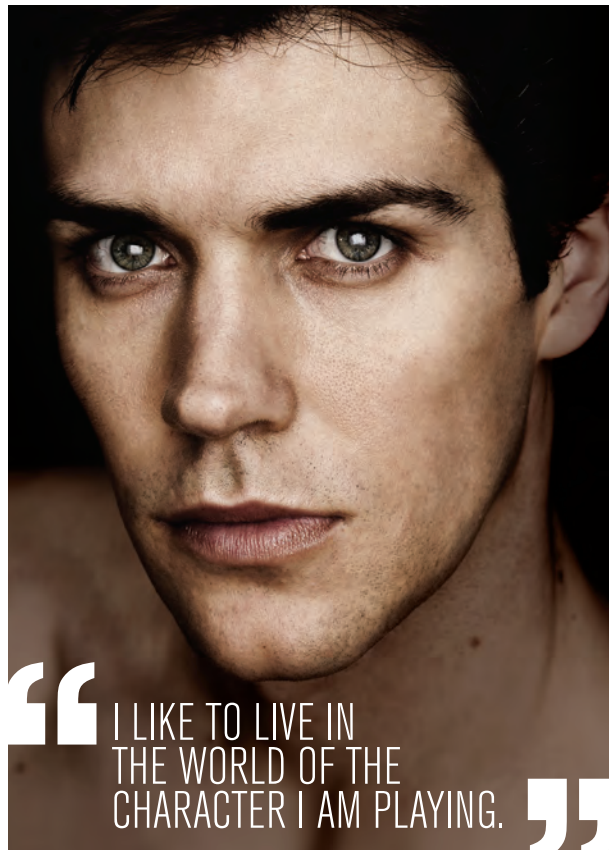
In Shakespeare's masterpiece, Juliet famously asks, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" When Roberto Bolle appears onstage in the namesake role of Prokofiev's ballet—or simply walks into a room—you know you've found him. Tall enough to lift a maiden from a balcony, swooningly beautiful, and able to dance *en pointe*, the 38-year-old Bolle is anyone's ideal of the bard's romantic leading man.

"Romeo is one of my favorite roles in ballet," says the Italian-born Bolle, a principal dancer of American Ballet Theatre who has also performed with the English National Ballet, The Royal Ballet, Munich Ballet, and The National Ballet of Canada, among other leading companies. "I always prefer intense roles, ones where you can play with that emotion, where you can give a lot of yourself. A simple gesture with the hand, a certain glance, and you can create a character. That's something special to me. I like to live in the world of the character I am playing."

One of the first characters for which Bolle was coveted was that of Tadzio in the ballet version of *Death in Venice*. It was while at La Scala Theatre Ballet School, where he had been a student since the age of 11, that Rudolf Nureyev spotted the-then-teenaged Bolle and cast him in the part, opposite himself. "Nureyev was already ill, but still dancing," Bolle recalls. Although Bolle was not able to leave the school to ultimately take on the role of the seductive boy to an older—and dying—Aschenbach, the fact that Nureyev had noticed him lingered for Bolle. "Just having him take notice of me like that was something really incredible in my life."

The real-life character of Bolle that appears to the public—as well as to the likes of the queen during her Golden

Jubilee and Pope John Paul II—is one who is adored for his grace and emotive powers onstage as well as for his sheer physical beauty (he has appeared in ads for Ferragamo). His star power is such that he was able to found Roberto Bolle and Friends, an ever-shifting group of *étoiles*, or star dancers, whom he picks to perform with him in venues around the world. He also continues in his 14-year role as goodwill ambassador for UNICEF,



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having taken trips to South Sudan and the Central African Republic. "In our world, we give so much importance to having certain things and when you go to these places you see that the people don't have anything," he says. "You can give the people you meet there so little and they are happy for it. You can change their lives and they change yours."

Bolle says he knew he was a dancer when he was as young as 7. His parents, owners of a car-repair garage in the

Italian town of Casale Monferrato, had no affiliation with ballet, but Bolle says, "When I was very young I always wanted to move with the music I heard on the television, to express with movements my emotions." Upon visiting a local ballet school, Bolle was smitten with the idea of spending hours a day at the barre. "At the beginning, I was a bit disappointed," he says, "because I was the only boy in the class and also because the movements we were taught were classical ballet. The movements were very academic and I liked to move on my own. But I started going to class more and more and liking it."

His mother, recognizing her son's talent, decided to send him to La Scala school in Milan. "My mom understood how important it was to get a secure base in what you want to do in life," says Bolle, "especially in ballet. It was really, really clever and smart of her to do this for me and I thank her all of the time. It was not easy for me to go to Milan—I was by myself and lonely and it was not easy for them to send me to the city, but she was right to do so."

The young dancer jeté and arabesqued to success there and was promoted at 21 to principal dancer. Although such credentials guaranteed him lifetime security and starring roles, Bolle resigned to become, instead, a resident artist with other companies. "That was very risky, but I wanted to go to other theaters in the world, to have different experiences as a dancer, work with other choreographers and partners." His dance card filled fast with invitations, and he has been firmly and gorgeously on both feet ever since.

— David Masello

Roberto Bolle's upcoming appearances include performances of *Histoire de Manon* at Milan's Teatro alla Scala on Dec. 14, 17, 19 and 20 as well as Jan. 2, 4 and 5. robertobolle.com