



The Dance Goodbye

A documentary on Merrill Ashley's career transition

“Clearly, dance has been the passion of my life,” said Merrill Ashley just months after ending her 31-year career with New York City Ballet. “What I hope is that I can find something else that will stimulate the same kind of drive and passion that dance did. At the moment, I have no idea what that will be.”

Fifteen years after her retirement in 1997, Ashley has found her way, and director-producer team Ron Steinman and Eileen Douglas have profiled her emotional journey in a documentary film, *The Dance Goodbye*.

The idea arose years ago when Douglas produced a special radio program about dancers' transitions in conjunction with the launch of Career Transition For Dancers. The poignancy of the topic struck Douglas. She thought, “It’s so visual. It was wonderful on the radio. Imagine what it could be on film.”

As fate would have it, she met Ashley at the gym around the time of Ashley’s retirement. Though the original idea was for *The Dance Goodbye* to follow multiple dancers at different stages in their careers, that changed once Ashley stepped in front of the camera. “She was so good that we



Ashley, taking her final curtain call with NYCB; (inset) Teaching and performing post retirement.



said, ‘we don’t need anyone else to tell the story. We’ll tell the story through her,’ ” says Douglas.

The film captures Ashley in both personal and public realms—browsing old dance photos with her parents, talking candidly about the future with her husband in Saratoga Springs, NY, coaching a Sugar Plum Fairy variation—and it features candid interviews one, two-and-a-half, three and ten years after her retirement. As the years tick by, the fulfillment from her second career—teaching and coaching—slowly replaces the loss of her beloved performance years. We watch Ashley become a teaching associate at New York City Ballet, and later as she travels the world teaching technique and setting Balanchine ballets at the Bolshoi Ballet and Ballet Nacional de Cuba, among others.

Douglas and Steinman envision the film will appeal to dancers and nondancers alike, saying Ashley’s emotional vulnerability weaves a universally human story. The team hopes to have a final cut completed this fall.

—Madeline Schrock