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DANCE



Members of Ballet Hispanico rehearsing "Slices," choreographed by Ann Reinking, below, in the company's Upper West Side studio in September.

Photo by Matthew V. Agnew/The New York Times

## Her Career-After-a-Career: Showing the Way

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

"HUH!" The sound ricocheted off the walls of the Manhattan rehearsal studio as the dancers of Ballet Hispanico expelled their breaths at once, bodies pounding the floor, muscles rippling, hair flying, like so many human pistons. "Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh!" The breaths came in unison, growing louder, angrier. And then ...

"Wheewwwww!" Release.

"O.K., take a break," said the woman at the mirror, her layers of navy pantsuit, gray sweater-vest and white turtleneck in stark contrast to the vivid leotards and leggings adorning taut bodies. "The dancing's fine. But the vocals aren't good enough. I want it to reach a frenzied peak, like you're a manhole on a steam pipe, blowing straight out of the air. Scare me a little!"

"Huh!" she shouted.

Eyes widened.

"Think about how it feels to be a dancer," she said more gently. "Three times out of a seven-day week you're thinking, 'I can't go to the studio.' Sometimes it's grim. I want you to think of the moaning and frustration and the pent-up feelings that come from doing your job."

The dancers rose. Their bodies began to pound the floor. "Huh!" they shouted, the sound even more guttural and explosive now. "Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh!"

"That's it," said the woman, Ann Reinking, a grin spreading across her angular face. "You know how it feels!"

Twelve dancers nodded tentatively, winded at the close of the most athletic segment in "Slices," Ms. Reinking's second ballet for the company, which will receive its New York premiere on Tuesday as part of Ballet Hispanico's two-week run at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan. The work is a non-narrative collection of four vignettes set to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and music by Carlos Santana and Philip Hamilton — "like slices of dessert or glimpses into different windows," Ms. Reinking said.

"God, they dance beautifully," she said later, practically purring. "Their muscles are young. But when you ask them to get vocal, they get scared. They have to fly blind a little bit and trust the instrument. And they do, eventually. But I tell you, if I had to go back into 'Chicago,' it would be the same thing."

Gone are daily rehearsals, the eight performances a week, the glare of the footlights, the view from the stage that Ms. Reinking knew during a three-decade career that included two incarnations as Roxie Hart, the chore at the end of her line, in "Chicago." At 53, Ms. Reinking is well-ensconced in Phase 2 of her career, one that has taken her full circle from a childhood as a balletic "bun head," to starring roles on Broadway and a fling with movies, and now back to her foundation in more classical dance. Oh, the cover-girl looks are intact: the knowing azure eyes, the knife-sharp cheekbones and



the fine, pale line of a mouth. And there is still what she calls her whiskey voice. When she laughs, you can almost hear the ice clink.

But her dancing shoes, though not yet in storage, don't get a lot of use these days, except for the occasional benefit performance. (Last week, Ms. Reinking did a song and dance — and a cartwheel — from "Chicago" in three performances with Bebe Neuwirth for the "Encores! 10th Anniversary Bash" at City Center.) Instead, Ms. Reinking is immersing herself in the roles that dancers often take on once their dancing days are largely over: director, choreographer and teacher.

"You have to have tunnel vision as a dancer to get to where you're going," she said, stretching out in a folding chair at Ballet Hispanico's offices on West 89th

Street, near Amsterdam Avenue. "But once you get there, you have to save yourself by spreading your horizons. It's the paradox of this profession. The very thing that makes you very good will destroy you."

Ms. Reinking gives every indication of reveling in what she calls "this continual transition" into choreographing, which began in the late 80's with a staging of Gretchen Cryer's "Eleanor" for the Williamstown Theater Festival. From there she went on to the revival of "Chicago" in 1996, "Fosse" in 1999 and, most recently, a crowd-pleasing segment in "Within You Without You: A Tribute to George Harrison," presented in October by American Ballet Theater.

Now comes "Slices," a showcase created for Ballet Hispanico, the company that first won her affection in 1982, when her friend William Whitener choreographed "Llamada" for the troupe and Ms. Reinking hung around its studios to learn the piece so that she could

she's given all the best of herself."

From the time she left her large middle-class Seattle family at 18 for New York — ballet training under her belt, savings in the bank and round-trip ticket in hand — Ms. Reinking believes she has given nothing short of her best. Within months she had landed on Broadway, moving swiftly from the ensemble of "Cabaret" to "Coco" and then "Pippin" and becoming a specialist in the triumvirate of musical theater: dancing, acting and singing. When the choreographer Patricia Birch stood up in the audience during auditions for "Over Here" and pointed at Ms. Reinking, yelling, "That's the girl!," a star had been discovered.

Eight months later, Fosse called on her to replace Gwen Verdon in "Chicago" and then Debbie Allen in "Sweet Charity." "My grooming was perfect," Ms. Reinking recalled. "When I look back on it, everybody's judgment call was appropriate, because it was just enough for me to hang my hat on, and I got to grow without being completely overwhelmed."

When she started to choreograph, Fosse was among the first to give her the nod, and some astute advice: "Don't try to be brilliant," Ms. Reinking remembered him saying just before his death in 1987, nearly a decade after their much-publicized relationship. "Just do what you know."

Soon, she had created works for the Joffrey and Kansas City Ballets as she honed her skills to prepare for the time when her body, like every dancer's, would fail her and her attention would shift elsewhere. "It hurts more to dance these days," she said, "and now that my family doesn't want me to work at night, well, fortunately people are asking me to choreograph and direct." Ms. Reinking is married to the sports writer Peter Talbot and has a 12-year-old son.

Recently she has been choreographing a musical for the Roundabout Theater called "The Look of Love," a tribute to the work of Burt Bacharach and Hal David. "There's lots to dance to in there," she said, opening her arms wide. "Lots to dance to."

Thirteen years ago, Ms. Reinking founded the Broadway Theater Program in Tampa, Fla., a three-week musical-theater "boot camp," as she put it, that connects students ages 14 to 22 with professional performers like Julie Andrews, Tommy Tune, Bebe Neuwirth and Mandy Patinkin.

"I wanted a way to pass on all the gifts, all the instruction that I've been given," she said, "because these people need to know that when you get to theater, you're going to be putting in big days just to go to class, just to get better. And my advice is this: you've got to have tunnel vision, yes, but you've also got to have a friend outside of this world, a family, and you've got to be interested in other people's problems because you have to have somewhere to go when your time comes to make that transition." She paused. "You cry a little when it happens, like any time you let something go. But in the end, you grow. We all grow."

**Ann Reinking, mostly teaching and choreographing now, tells the young to have 'tunnel vision,' but also to ask, 'What then?'**

include it in her own repertory. Fifteen years later, Tina Ramirez, the company's founder and artistic director, asked her to take a smaller work commissioned by New York University, where Ms. Reinking was teaching jazz dancing, and to enlarge it for Ballet Hispanico.

"The troupe's versatility as a whole is as eye-popping as the pelvis-popping influence of Bob Fosse on Ms. Reinking's choreography," Anna Kisselgoff wrote in The New York Times upon the 1997 premiere of the work, "Ritmo y Ruido" ("Rhythm and Ruckus"), which has become a Ballet Hispanico staple.

With "Slices," Ms. Reinking had just three weeks to create the work. Ms. Ramirez had received a call earlier this year from Wolf Trap, the performing arts center in Vienna, Va., asking her troupe to perform in June. Ms. Ramirez approached Ms. Reinking again, and "Slices" soon had its premiere. "It was an extremely short time in which to do choreography and costumes and lighting," Ms. Ramirez said. "But there we were, ripping pants to get the costumes ready. I was so embarrassed, but that's Ann. She wants it done, and she's interested totally, and not only in her choreography. I like to say she has emotion on the tip of her sleeves, and the dancers respond to that."

Pedro Ruiz, a principal dancer and choreographer whose ballet "Cecilia" will receive its premiere at the Joyce, said: "Her work is very dynamic, very sensual. She gives you an isolation of the body that I love very much, being Cuban. There's heat. In this new ballet,