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## THE ARTS & CULTURE ISSUE

Jennifer Grace, Colorado Ballet  
principal dancer, as Princess  
Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*.



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# ON POINTE

Meet the enchanting principal dancers at the center of the stage as Colorado Ballet pirouettes into its 2024/2025 season.

In the world of ballet, few roles are as revered—and feared—as Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*. It's a role that demands not only technical mastery but also an extraordinary depth of artistry and stamina. Yet, it's not just about executing flawless pirouettes or maintaining perfect balance during the iconic Rose Adagio; it's about projecting the ethereal, romantic essence that makes Aurora come to life. For any ballerina, embodying Aurora is akin to climbing Everest; the challenge is immense, the pressure palpable. As the opening production for Colorado Ballet's 2024/2025 season, *Sleeping Beauty* is not just another ballet—it's a test of endurance, precision, and sheer willpower.

One of the most challenging moments in this ballet, the Rose Adagio stands as a true test of a

ballerina's mettle. Aurora must balance en pointe while accepting flowers from four suitors, a scene that demands not only impeccable technique but also unwavering focus and grace. It's a moment that can make or break a performance. "It can be so technically demanding that you can dance in fear throughout it," says Gil Boggs, artistic director of Colorado Ballet. "I'm looking for somebody who can command the difficulties of the steps and just project to the audience."

Jennifer Grace, cast in the role of Aurora, is fully aware of the stakes. But Boggs has full confidence in his dancers. "Jennifer Grace looks like Sleeping Beauty every day," Boggs says, emphasizing not just her physical resemblance but her deep understanding of the character. Grace's partner, Mario Labrador, equally fits the bill as the dashing Prince Désiré.

"Mario is just princely. He's tall, dark, and handsome," says Boggs.

*Sleeping Beauty*, a pinnacle of classical ballet, is steeped in romanticism—a fairytale brought to life through music, movement, and sheer visual splendor. This season's production is enhanced by the stunning sets and costumes on loan from Boston Ballet. "The romanticism of the fairy tale is what's most important to bring out," Boggs says. "These are just beautiful, beautiful sets and costumes for that."

But it's not just about appearances. Beyond the aesthetics, it's the dancers who will bring the story to life. "It's all in the artistry from the dancers," says Boggs. "Whatever they're projecting, that's what's going to draw the audience in."

And with five weeks of intense rehearsal, the dancers are well-prepared for the task. Their days are

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PHOTO INTERN: RYAN ANDREWS



# MESSAGE THROUGH MOVEMENT

In *The Sleeping Beauty*, the roles of Princess Aurora and Prince Désiré are brought to life by principal dancers Jennifer Grace and Mario Labrador. Grace, who joined Colorado Ballet in 2021, has an impressive résumé that includes training at The Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow and performing with Tulsa Ballet. Mario, also a 2021 addition to the company, trained at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy and performed as a soloist with the Mikhailovsky Theatre. “Jennifer looks like Sleeping Beauty every day,” says Colorado Ballet artist director Gil Boggs. “And Mario is princely—tall, dark, and handsome. They not only look the part but have the technical skill and artistry to bring these characters to life.”

**DLM: Jennifer, can you tell us about how you collaborate with the choreographer and artistic director to develop your interpretation of Princess Aurora?**

**JG:** *Sleeping Beauty*, choreographed by Marius Petipa, debuted in 1890. As is true with all story ballets, it has evolved slightly over the years to keep up with the current level of technical ability but, for the most part, has remained true to Petipa’s vision. Each time the ballet is restaged, details about the movement quality, characterization, and steps

are all passed down from ballet master or director to the dancer. The dancers and the staff must work very diligently to ensure that each movement is telling the story and that it “reads” correctly from the audience. A slight tilt of the head and a different smile can change the innocent joy and curiosity of Act 1 into more of a coy flirtation, and that’s not what the story is. Our director and ballet masters help with

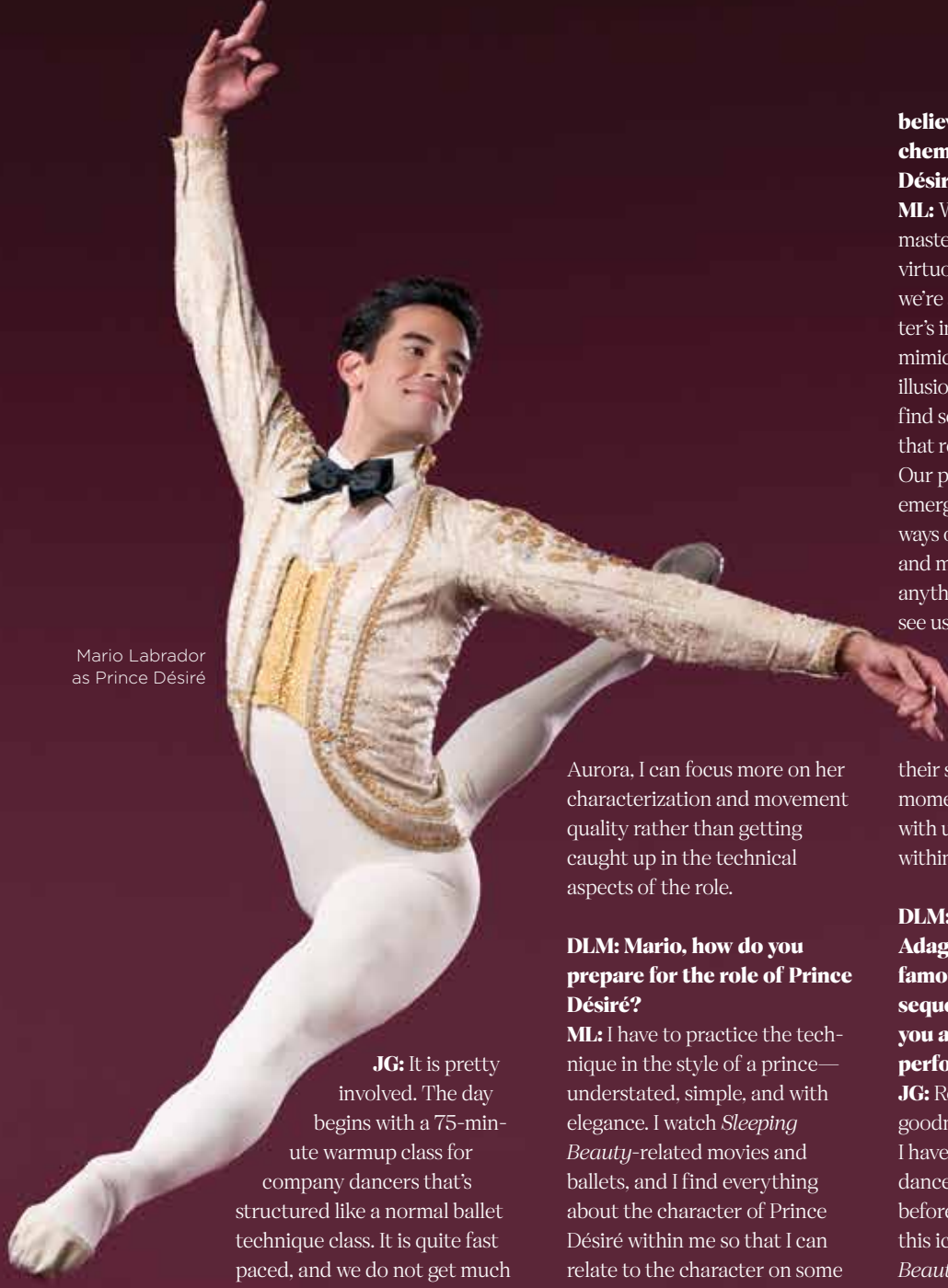
that acting aspect so that it comes as naturally as the movements by the performances.

**DLM: What is your favorite scene or moment in the *Sleeping Beauty* ballet?**

**JG:** Well, all of Act 1. Nothing beats Aurora’s first entrance. Prologue and Act 1 are combined into one act, so the Auroras have to wait almost 40 minutes after the curtain goes up to make their first entrance. It’s nerve-racking, and there is a huge amount of anticipation that builds and builds backstage until you get to let it all out in a burst of energy! You then have to keep that energy going through Rose Adagio, your solo, the coda with all your friends, and then you see Carabosse. After 15 to 20ish minutes of essentially straight cardio, you prick your finger, and the fever dream begins. The final push really requires you to reach into the depths of your determination to make sure that you keep the story alive while you are “dying,” both figuratively and physically. It’s very satisfying when we finally collapse and close Act 1.



Jennifer Grace  
as Princess Aurora



Mario Labrador  
as Prince Désiré

### **believable and captivating chemistry between Prince Désiré and Aurora?**

**ML:** We have wonderful ballet masters who guide us toward virtuoso performances, ensuring we're all aligned with our character's intent. It's not just about mimicking gestures to create the illusion of chemistry. Instead, we find something within ourselves that relates to the characters. Our personal feelings and beliefs emerge, showcasing our own ways of loving, being faithful, and more. The audience can see anything and everything. If they see us relate to our characters

in some way, they relate with us. Seeing our true feelings, our true beliefs, is the key to

their suspended belief. In that moment, they are willing to go with us wherever we take them within that story.

Aurora, I can focus more on her characterization and movement quality rather than getting caught up in the technical aspects of the role.

### **DLM: Mario, how do you prepare for the role of Prince Désiré?**

**ML:** I have to practice the technique in the style of a prince—understated, simple, and with elegance. I watch *Sleeping Beauty*-related movies and ballets, and I find everything about the character of Prince Désiré within me so that I can relate to the character on some level and in return be relatable or understandable to the audience. I decided I would keep Prince Désiré simple in my mind and not worry about whether he needs to be complex. His character seems faithful, he always does the right thing, and he is loving. His faithfulness to the moral rightness of the fairy tale and his belief in love at first sight are the most compelling aspects of his character.

### **DLM: How do you work with Jennifer Grace to create a**

### **DLM: Jennifer, the Rose Adagio is one of the most famous and challenging sequences in ballet. How do you approach this part of the performance?**

**JG:** Rose Adagio! Oh my goodness, where to even begin. I have been fortunate enough to dance the role of Aurora twice before now, and my approach to this iconic section of *Sleeping Beauty* has been completely different each time. The first time, I was *very* focused on the technical aspects of it all. The second time, I was able to relax a little more into the characterization of the dance. When you look at the big picture of Act 1, Aurora enters and has two minutes of very high-energy dancing before she even starts this seven-minute-long dance. All told, she is on stage dancing for over 20 minutes with only two very short periods of time

**JG:** It is pretty involved. The day begins with a 75-minute warmup class for company dancers that's structured like a normal ballet technique class. It is quite fast paced, and we do not get much down time between combinations. I push myself a little more each class to work on building my stamina and better muscle memory for each movement, which in turn builds mental strength and a knowledge that I can trust my body to do exactly what I have trained it to do, even once I have hit a point of extreme fatigue.

After we are nice and warm, we have six hours of rehearsal split into three hour blocks with an hour lunch break in between. Once I am in the rehearsals for

### **DLM: Mario, how about you? What's your favorite scene?**

**ML:** The Rose Adagio with Princess Aurora and the four Princesses. It has the iconic balances at the end where Aurora has to be en pointe on one leg and hold a balance four individual times in a row. The music is soaring, Aurora is balancing center stage. It's quite exciting to say the least.

### **DLM: Jennifer, what does your typical rehearsal day entail as you prepare for this role?**

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where she gets to exit the stage. Knowing that, I am already working to build my stamina. Now that I am a little more experienced, I like to really break it down, focus on each moment, and let the movement itself tell the story of meeting all these new people and trying to choose a husband from the four suitors. The more I really embrace the excitement and joy of the character, the “easier” and more enjoyable it is.

**DLM: Do you have any pre-performance rituals or routines that help you get into character?**

**JG:** During any performance, you will always find me in the wings. I like to feel the energy of my coworkers on stage and get a feel for the lights. Side stage for me is a calm place somewhere between real life and the performance itself. In this place, I take a moment to be truly grateful for all the work and dedication that has been put into bringing the production and me to this point. I pray that I can share all this gratitude with the audience, take a deep breath, do a quick set of crunches before my first entrance to ensure my core is engaged, and then my performance begins.

**DLM: Mario, do you have any advice to share with young, aspiring dancers?**

**ML:** Enjoy and love your life as much as you can. It’s much nicer when you get to your goals if you’ve done so.

**DLM: What are some key moments you hope will stand out with the audience?**

**ML:** Any moment of the ballet can mean something to someone, and I hope that whatever that moment is, it feels magical.

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long, beginning with a morning class to hone their technique, followed by a full day of rehearsals. “It’s hours upon hours of preparation,” Boggs says, adding that the physical demands of being in pointe shoes for extended periods are not for the faint-hearted.

But it’s not just the principal dancers who bear the weight of this production. Boggs is quick to highlight the importance of the corps de ballet, often overlooked but vital to the success of any company. “The corps de ballet, to me, is the most important part of any production because they’re the glue. They’re the fabric that holds the ballet together,” he says, drawing a parallel to the unsung heroes of a football team. “I call them my offensive and defensive lines because they’re blocking and tackling for everybody so that we can win.”

This emphasis on teamwork extends beyond the stage. Colorado Ballet is deeply committed to the well-being of its dancers, offering a comprehensive wellness program that includes physical therapists, a masseuse, a fitness director, and even a sports psychologist. “We’ve assembled a wonderful sort of wellness department,” Boggs says, expressing pride in the support system available to the dancers. “Because, let’s face it, the anxiety, the angst of going out and performing day in and day out... I’m very proud of the team that we’ve put together for these dancers.”

Boggs curates each season with the audience in mind, balancing classical favorites with innovative works that challenge both the performers and the viewers. As for what’s in store for Colorado Ballet’s 2024/2025 season, Boggs has carefully curated a lineup that balances the classic with the contemporary. “The criteria for selecting ballets for each season are, one, I want something that’s going to interest the audience, something that they’ll find interesting, such as a *Swan Lake* or a *Sleeping Beauty*. And two, I want to find something that is going to challenge the audience. Last year, we did *Jekyll & Hyde*, and this year, we have *Casanova* and *ALICE (in wonderland)* coming—both full-length productions—along with our annual holiday tradition of *The Nutcracker*.”



Gil Boggs  
Artistic Director

But it’s the ballets in the MasterWorks series that truly excite him. “At the end of the season, we do our MasterWorks. This is what I call the bucket list of ballets for our dancers. It literally is one of our best programs ever each year.” The

2024/2025 program opens with George Balanchine’s *Serenade*, followed by Jiri Kylián’s *Petite Mort*, and concludes with Twyla Tharp’s *In the Upper Room*. Each piece is a masterclass in choreography, demanding both physical and emotional depth from the dancers. “Never have I not seen an audience jump to their feet yelling and screaming at the end of *In the Upper Room*,” Boggs says. “It’s 40 minutes of just grueling, intense dance that has you mesmerized.”

As the company steps into another season, it’s impossible to ignore Boggs’ role in its transformation. “When I got here, the company was riddled with debt,” Boggs recalls. “We had a modest budget of just over \$6 million. Now, we’re on the cusp of a \$15 million budget, which is just spectacular growth.” This growth is not just in numbers but in the company’s artistic achievements, audience engagement, and community impact.

The company’s influence extends far beyond the stage. “We’re in schools every day, Monday through Friday, working with kids. It’s about movement. We’re not necessarily teaching them ballet so much. It’s just how to move and how to express themselves. That’s so important,” Boggs says. This outreach is part of a broader vision to make ballet accessible to all, ensuring that the art form continues to thrive in Denver and beyond.

As the company prepares to debut another season, the excitement is palpable. The community that Colorado Ballet has nurtured over the years—its patrons, its students, its collaborators—will once again be drawn into the world of dance, where stories are told through movement and music. Colorado Ballet stands poised to deliver a season that not only captivates its audience but also reaffirms its place as one of the city’s cultural cornerstones.



COLORADO BALLET | coloradoballet.org

<b>COLORADO BALLET</b> 2024/2025 SEASON	<i>Sleeping Beauty</i> October 4-13	<i>The Nutcracker</i> November 30- December 29	<i>Casanova</i> January 31- February 9	<i>ALICE</i> <i>(in wonderland)</i> March 7-16	<b>Ballet</b> <b>MasterWorks</b> April 11-20
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IMAGE COURTESY COLORADO BALLET