

Putting a Ring On It



Dancing with the one you love— isn't that everyone's dream? Our Valentine special brings you three couples who have made a lifelong commitment to each other, as well as to a life in dance. What are the pleasures—and the challenges—of sharing your stage life with your partner in marriage? Reading these stories will warm your heart.

Haiyan Wu & Yang Zou The music swells and Haiyan

Wu soars with it, landing on her husband's shoulder with the ease of a bird on the wing. She and Yang Zou are rehearsing the Sugar Plum pas de deux from Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*, a duet they have performed together many times, but not as principals with Oregon Ballet Theatre. December's *Nutcracker* run was only their second opportunity to dance as a couple since their arrival in Portland last August. (The first was an outdoor appearance with the Oregon Symphony on the city's waterfront, when they danced "The Man I Love" segment from Balanchine's *Who Cares?*)

The way they dance the Sugar Plum pas de deux says a lot about a relationship that began in Miami, where they met more than six years ago. Wu, a Beijing native, had gone from the National Ballet of China to Miami City Ballet in 2003, the year after she won the gold medal at the USA International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Mississippi. Zou, born in Changsha, joined MCB in 2005, after dancing with China's Guangzhou Ballet.

They had watched each other dance before they met. "The first time I saw him was on video," Wu says. "Edward Villella showed me and asked if I knew him.

Nice dancer, I said. He has a nice, expressive quality.” Zou first saw Wu at a competition in Shanghai in 2001, where she won the gold medal and he was a finalist. “Pretty girl, good dancer, I thought. She didn’t notice me, because she was focused, the way she always is, on her performance.”

It’s clear they love dancing together, whether it’s in the classics in which they were trained in China, or in the Balanchine and Robbins repertoire, in which they were frequently paired in Miami. “When I dance with Yang, it is very special,” Wu says. “I feel I can trust him. Every ballerina tries to be perfect and he can help me.”

“I most enjoy dancing with Haiyan,” says her husband. “I know her so well, I feel more connection with her inside my own body.” When asked by a Portland reporter last summer about their favorite roles, Wu answered readily “Giselle.” Zou, after some thought, responded, “Anything I dance with my wife.”

They have been together since 2006, living, breathing

ballet most of the time, practicing at home as well as in the studio. That changed when their son was born in 2009 and he is the reason they left Miami. “We had to rehearse so many different kinds of ballets,” Wu says. “The schedule was very hard; there were more performances and we traveled a lot. It was too hard to be responsible dancers and responsible parents, so we chose our son.”

At OBT, where the workday is shorter than many places because of a dearth of studio space, and since several company members also have children, they feel they can be both. “We are so lucky,” Zou says, “to find this company where we can enjoy our careers and take good care of our son.”

Both are interested in performing new work, even when not dancing together. In OBT’s fall program, they shined in Christopher Stowell’s new *Carmen*, Zou as a macho Captain of the Guard and Wu a highly nuanced Micaela. Impeccable classicists they may be, they nevertheless enjoy, as Zou puts it, “the process of exploring new ways to put ourselves on stage.” Preferably, the way they do everything else, as partners. —*Martha Ullman West*

*Haiyan Wu and Yang Zou in "The Man I Love" from
Balanchine's Who Cares? Photos by Blaine Truitt Covert,
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