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**I** am a rather controversial artist." In the course of a two-and-a-half-hour interview, this is the only understatement Fernando Bujones makes. He discusses his own talent, which is considerable, in superlative terms. Occasionally, whether out of some intermittent sense of modesty or the duty to document his boasting with a little evidence, he volunteers the critics' opinions, quoting reviews of his dancing. Though his statements are grandiose, few are exaggerated and none is patently false. Now in his eighth year with American Ballet Theatre, with guest engagements all over the world and two weeks with Natalia Makarova this month at the Uris Theater in New York, Bujones is a dancer who merits more serious consideration than he has been given in the past, if still a little less than he claims to deserve.

His virtuosity may be unequaled in all ballet today. Broad turnout, a high jump, sharp beats, effortless turns, clean fifth positions and a well-sustained line—any one of these qualities is hard to come by in male dancers, and Bujones has them all. But even more important, and rarer still, is the stamina which enables him to create effects, to consistently shape the dance phrase to fit the contours of the music—slowing the last in a series of turns to finish in a balance, precisely gauging a leap's takeoff and landing, with time enough between to make a definite position in the air. In the studio and on the stage, Bujones is conscientious.

"If I could compare myself with one dancer in all history," he says, "and I think very much the way he used to think, it's Fred Astaire—he was a total perfectionist in his dancing, a complete artist, always in good taste." Great dancers being the only measure we have of great dancing, Bujones is forever making such comparisons, appropriating his place in history. He calls himself to the public's attention as if they might otherwise overlook or underestimate him. Asked why, he replies, "I don't do it as much as I used to. . . . There was a time when I had to put myself on the map."

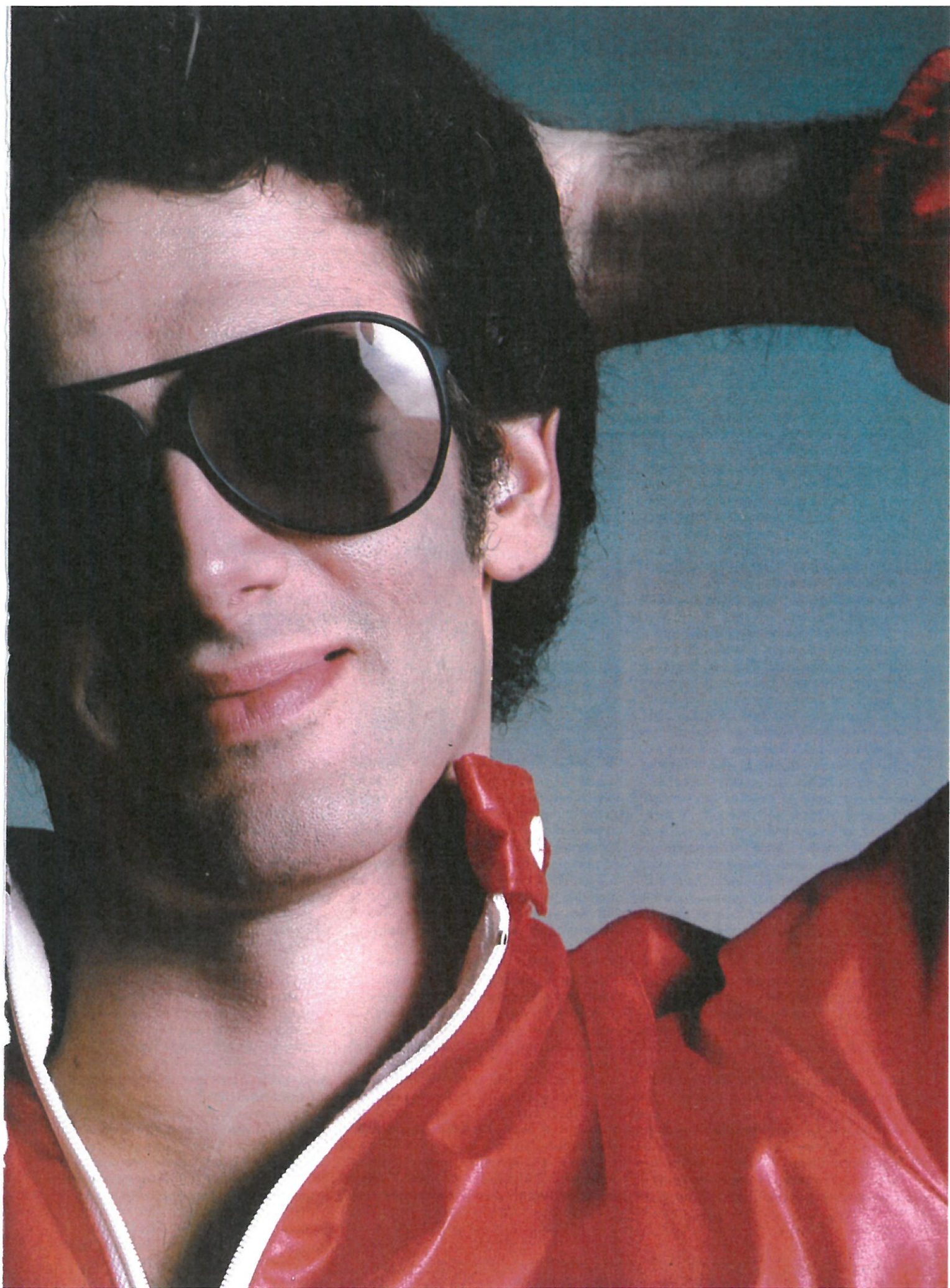
In July of 1974, while Bujones was walking off with a gold medal at the Varna Competition in Bulgaria, Mikhail Baryshnikov defected to the West and stole his thunder. The news reached Bujones and Zeida Mendez, his coach and cousin, in Varna. Baryshnikov's debut in *Giselle* with ABT was scheduled for the evening

## IN FIRST POSITION?

Fernando Bujones, by dint of technique and talent, demands comparison with the greatest dancers of our time

by Holly Brubach







## "Perhaps if I were not such a highly technical dancer..."

of their return; they took a taxi straight from Kennedy Airport to the New York State Theater to see his performance.

Bujones had joined ABT two years earlier, when he was seventeen years old. After a few months in the corps he was handed solo and, soon after, principal roles; his promotion to principal-dancer status came just after he returned victorious from Varna. But the spotlight belonged to Baryshnikov. Bujones talked bigger and danced louder. The best defense, as any athlete knows, is a good offense, and many people found Bujones' braggadocio downright offensive. "Fernando Bujones," wrote Marcia B. Siegel in 1976, "is all impeccable technique and insufferable conceit." There was his youth to consider: perhaps in time he would trust the audience to recognize his talent, he would bring more personal interpretation to his roles. Meanwhile, there were fans clapping and stamping their feet, clamoring for higher jumps and more turns, and, when Bujones met their demands and outdid even himself, cheering in frenzied disbelief. The skeptics sat back and quietly waited.

With a short ration of publicity and a Russian defector for a nemesis, Bujones, like many other ABT dancers, began to interpret personal injustice in political terms. Even today, he crusades for American dancing as "the best in the world." What, exactly, is American dancing? "It's exactly what I am," he says. "It's a dancer who has been trained at the School of American Ballet in several styles and combined them to produce a complete technique. This is what we are—a melting pot of many styles, getting the best from everybody. I have had predecessors like Nureyev and Baryshnikov, from whom I have learned, and I have surpassed them, technically speaking. At the same time, I have seen Erik Bruhn and Royes Fernandez and learned from them—my technique is a combination of all these great artists in the past and present, and I have worked to surpass their standards, and even my own."

Bujones, born of Cuban parents in Miami, Florida, was taken to Cuba by his mother when he was one year old. There, at the age of eight, he began his ballet studies with Alicia Alonso's Ballet Nacional; Mendez, then a dancer in the company, lived for a time with him and his mother. In 1963, the three were reunited in Miami: Zeida, dancing with the regional company; Fernando, taking class again but, he says, "not very seriously—just goofing around;" and Mary, his

mother, working as the ballet's stage manager. When Melissa Hayden and Jacques d'Amboise of the New York City Ballet came for a guest engagement, Mrs. Bujones approached them, and Fernando, then twelve, was granted a scholarship to SAB. The trio packed up and moved to New York. "The first year," Bujones recalls, "I worked hard, but it wasn't until the second year that I looked inside myself and realized my own talent."

Mendez, then studying at the ABT school, says, "I would finish my class and go right over to see his almost every day—it was a class with twenty kids in it, so he only got general corrections. After-



wards, we would go home and do it all over. Saturdays and Sundays we would spend in the studio." When the time came to prepare for Varna, she coached him in six variations for two months, then worked to develop his stamina: "Thirty days in a row. We started with one variation, then one variation twice, then three times full out, and the next one marked, until in the end it was two variations six times full out. So when he went out in the first round and did *Fille mal Gardée* and the Black Swan, the stamina was there for six variations—he wanted to do them again."

A businesslike, opinionated woman with driving energy and a disarming sense of humor, Mendez, now embarked on her own career as a film-maker, still serves as Bujones' coach. "We've been working together well over ten years," she says, "and because of that we have developed a very special relationship, a silent communication. I'm looking for a ten, a perfect score, and that's rare—there's always something that's not right. When I come backstage after a performance, all

he has to do is look at me and he knows—I don't have to say a word."

Though she is quick to list his flaws, barely perceptible to an audience—"there's a problem *à la seconde*, a problem with turns to the right, one arabesque that is much better than the other, and his good turning side is the bad arabesque side"—Mendez concedes that Bujones is technically "as thorough as anybody could be." One of his new business ventures (which include a line of "dancer's jeans") is a video-cassette demonstration of the basic ballet *barre*, intended, he says, "as a picture book others can learn from and as a record of my technique at its peak." The half-hour program, produced, directed and narrated by Mendez, exposes Bujones to a close scrutiny few dancers could withstand: his technique is exemplary.

In tackling any role for the first time, Bujones and Mendez start with the steps themselves. "If you don't have the stamina," she says, "the first thing that goes is the technique. Many people think Fernando doesn't have to worry about technique, but he works at it—he makes every position happen. And in a way we believe that it is as interesting to see the preparations and the transitions—you have to make the preparation as beautiful as the turns, the transition as interesting as the beginning or the end."

"After he gets his stamina for the dancing and every step is well-executed and well-timed, we go after the characterization." Bujones does his homework, researching the ballet's history and the ways in which his role has been interpreted by other dancers before him. "I think it's his prerogative to bring something new to a role," Mendez says, "but there are certain roles that you cannot tamper with—like *Les Sylphides*, *Theme and Variations*, *Etudes*, purely stylistic ballets in which you have to fit the mood because there's nothing else, you cannot bring anything personal into them. But if there is a story, then we work out all the relationships between his character and the other roles. In the acting, it's a matter of action and reaction: in most ballets, it's the ballerina who initiates almost everything and the male dancer reacts—in *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Bayadère*, *Coppélia*, *La Fille mal Gardée*. So when we block a role, I give him actions to provoke reactions from him."

The only true picture of Bujones as a dancer is a composite of all his roles. In his own words: "Solor brings out virtuosity and the energetic, almost nervous quality my body naturally has onstage, even when I am just standing. Something is



...people would recognize more the artistic qualities in me?"

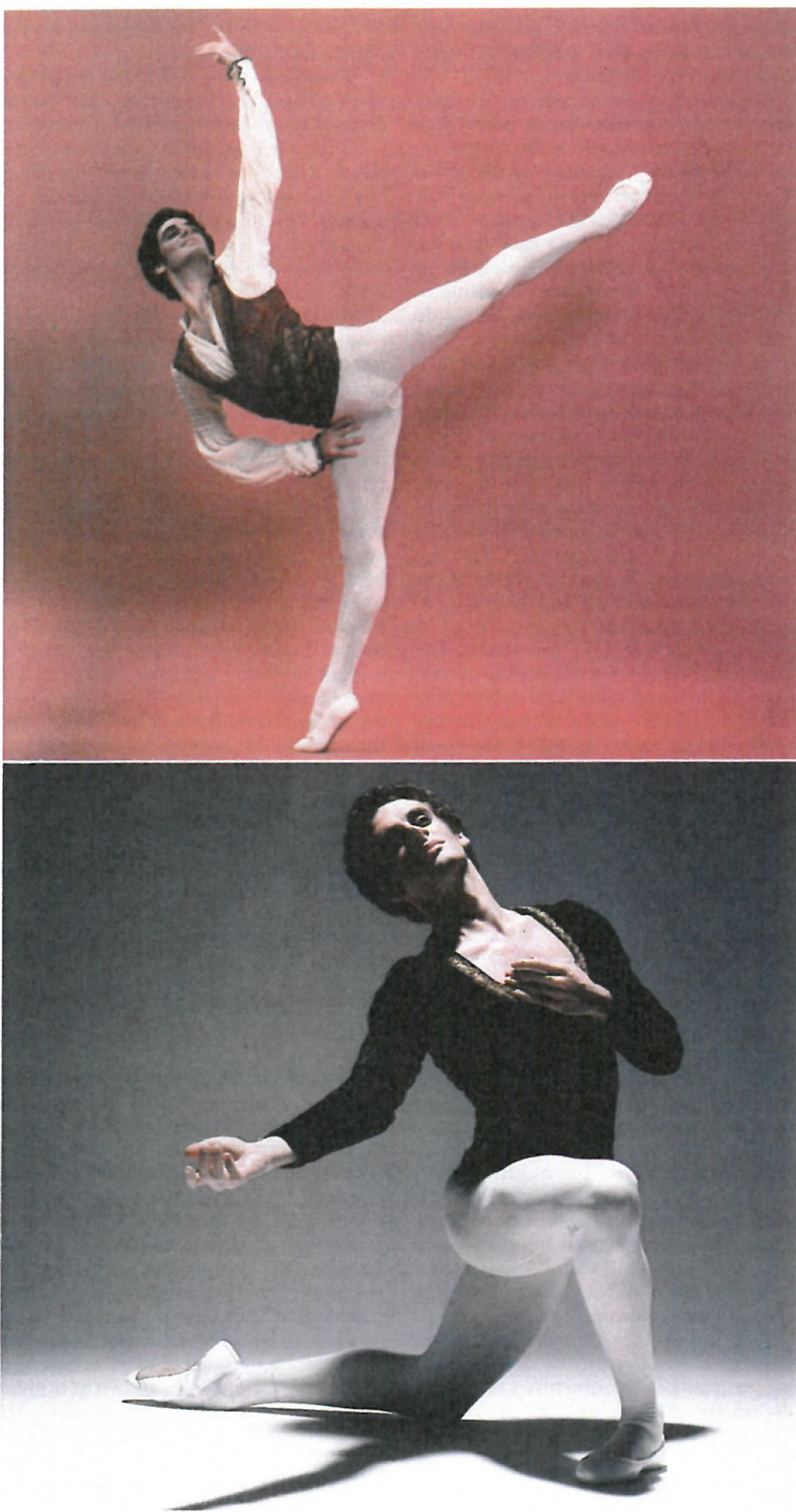
happening inside Solor, and you must be able to see that in the tension I transmit.

"Don Basilio is completely different, a juvenile, gigolo type—he's a flirt, a flirt with everything. At the same time, it's a very technical role, and the technique speaks for the character because the bravura and the Spanish flair depend on sharp accents, which come naturally to me because of my Latin background and my understanding of Spanish dancing. You cannot dance Basilio as you would dance the second act of *Giselle*, for example—even if the variation calls for a lyrical arabesque, Basilio would get there in one count instead of two or three to make the movement more brilliant.

"The second act of *Giselle* brings out the lyrical qualities, the romantic side of my dancing. And the first act is very interesting because it's probably the one role that is in the acting: from my first entrance, there's that exhilarating feeling of beginning to fall in love—you see it in the eyes, in the walk. I flirt with Giselle because she is shy. Others play it as if they don't really care how she acts, they'll do whatever they want to in the end, but I don't—I'm a little bit insecure about how she's going to react, about how I can manage to make her fall for me again, because I love her. When she begins to feel faint, tenderness comes into my characterization. At the end, when Bathilde confronts me, I give Giselle a look to tell her I'm going with Bathilde because I must, I am the prince: 'I have to do this for now, but I will be back.' But Giselle does not quite understand, and when I see her break down, I feel what is coming to me. I don't play it furious or arrogant, I play it like I'm almost going crazy myself, and they have to pull me off the stage.

"Siegfried I play very young, as I am myself. He really has no idea of life whatsoever—he's out for adventure, a little bit confused, he doesn't know what he really wants. In the first act, I try to show Siegfried's melancholy, confused search in an adagio that brings out, perhaps more than any other role, the refinement in my dancing—my line, my classical looks."

"Classical" is the one word most often used to characterize Bujones as a dancer; he calls his roles in the full-length nineteenth-century ballets "my signature." A classical dancer, according to Mendez' definition, is "one who has classical dimensions. When you have to do a face in art school, you study Greek faces for the right proportions from the top of the head to the nose, from the nose to the chin. It's a physical, God-given thing, and if you



Bujones as Basilio in Act I of *Don Quixote* (top) and as Albrecht in Act II of *Giselle* (bottom)



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don't have those classical dimensions, you will end up being *demi-caractère*, soubrette, some other type of dancer."

To listen to Mendez, one would think that expression in dancing is finery only the formerly rich should wear, so that no one suspects they are now on the skids. "I love competitive sports, so does Fernando—he is competitive onstage. And Cynthia Gregory—I don't care that she may not be as artistically inspiring as another dancer, she is more inspiring to me technically. Cynthia and Fernando don't have to act, let them dance to each other—let her do a triple *fouetté*, and then Fernando is going to get so excited he will do triple *à la seconde* turns and hold his balance, and I love that. Of course, if you don't have the technique, you have to do interpretation; but if you have the technique, use it, it's not going to be there forever—ten years at the most, then you'll be artistic because you have to. Once that technique goes, Fernando will have the interpretations and so will Cynthia, so will all the technicians."

In *Swan Lake* at ABT last season, Bujones and Gregory were at the top of their form, daring each other with every variation in a gleeful game of can-you-top-this-technique until, in the Black Swan variations, Siegfried and Odile faded from view and it was Bujones and Gregory dancing the impossible. "We created pandemonium in the theater," Bujones proudly quotes Anna Kisselgoff's review, as if pandemonium were the highest praise of all. "They forgot their characters and just danced outright," Mendez says. "That's the danger. They went along with the audience."

Bujones explains: "Ballet has become very popular in the last five years, and the majority of the new audience has seen it as an exciting, athletic art. They do not see it yet with all its subtleties, the finer points of line or positions in the air. I think my public expects a high technical level—bigger leaps, more turns, more bravura—and that exhilarates me because I like to give that sort of performance. Those expectations inject in me an energy to perform, and the day I don't have that sort of public, maybe I won't be as exciting a performer."

"But because the technical side of my dancing is so obvious, the dramatic and artistic qualities are sometimes taken a little bit for granted, or just not seen as clearly. Perhaps if I were not such a highly technical dancer, people would recognize more the artistic qualities in me." Perhaps, but the burden of proof rests

with him, after all: audiences see what a dancer shows them.

Though Bujones' technique is still disproportionate to his acting, his recent performances have exhibited a new maturity, greater sensitivity, more dramatic detail. His presentation lately has been less adamant, more relaxed. Bujones attributes this to more performances and, consequently, less pressure to prove himself each time onstage as if there were no tomorrow.

Mendez thinks Bujones is now more mature as a dancer "because he is more mature as a person. It was bound to happen. Since he had the technique at eighteen, nineteen, everybody rushed him, and then expected him to do a full Albrecht. My lord, give the guy two, three more years. . . ."

"He was desperate to do *Le Corsaire* ever since he was twelve. We had seen Nureyev's film, then saw him dance it at the Met. Fernando worked at that role ever since then, little by little. We have the funniest home movies—here is Mr. Big-time at the beach in the summer, wearing a black eyepatch and little shorts, in his own famous version of *Corsaire*. He knew the steps, and we slowly started to develop the stamina. He kept asking, 'What about my interpretation—isn't it coming?' No. Finally, I had to say to him bluntly, 'You know, when you finally go to bed with a woman, then you dance *Corsaire*.' He had been behaving toward a girl the way he thought it would be, and then all of a sudden when he really had contact with a woman, it was different; he had been playing at the passion, and then he understood it. So now he has found a woman he is married to, he has experienced more, which of course makes him more of a person."

Bujones married Marcia Kubitschek, daughter of the former president of Brazil and associate director of the Ballet de Rio de Janeiro, in June. "She has always been able to make me see things in more than one way," he says of her. "And although dance is life for me, there are also other things—love, travel, children. She has brought all that to me." One of her daughters by a previous marriage is now a student at SAB.

This month, Bujones joins Makarova in her one-act staging of *Paquita*, based on the Kirov version. "Makarova is a great artist because she brings out qualities that are interesting in everybody she performs with," he says. "One has to be very secure to partner her, and always there to give her security—both physical and emotion-

al. I think in the past we have been a very interesting combination because I gave her technical assurance and she gave me artistic qualities I didn't even know I had."

Fine dancers are in short supply, and Bujones is in demand. But not so much in demand as might be expected. What a puzzling course his career has taken: no major choreographer has seen fit to make a ballet for him, acclaim from the critics has been slow in coming and, when it finally came, curiously reserved.

In his novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, Randall Jarrell says of one of his characters: "Mrs. Robbins asked: 'If I am not for myself, who then is for me?'—and she was for herself so passionately that the other people in the world decided that they were not going to let Pamela Robbins beat them at her own game, and stopped playing."

Both Pamela Robbins and Fernando Bujones, by their self-promotion, have dared other people to deny their own worth—hers as a person, his as a dancer. Critics, choreographers and even audiences have at times perversely refused Bujones the homage he has been due. But instead of easing his grip on his own virtuosity and finding some more personal way to go about dancing, Bujones persisted in refining an already perfect technique. But his detractors wanted something more—or, more precisely, something else. Bujones looked as if he had learned to dance by the book, only to discover that no one else took the book so literally.

It is only very recently that he has put the book aside and ballet has for him, in his dancing, taken on a significance bigger than technique. Toward the end of ABT's last season, when a foot injury forced him to curtail his dancing, Bujones refused to cancel his final performance—in *La Bayadère*—but modified his variations and even so danced with a good deal of pain. As if to compensate for short-changing his audience on technical feats, he gave them more acting and sustained it throughout the dancing. If the jumps were lower, if there were fewer turns, nobody noticed. The claims Bujones had made for himself for years—and now was no longer making—the audience suddenly felt compelled to make for him; this time, no one could abstain from applause. The ovation was thunderous.

Ms. Brubach is a Pittsburgh-born free lance who writes a monthly dance column for *Vogue*, and has been a contributor to *Mademoiselle* and *Ballet Review* as well as *Ballet News*.