

# SOTO

From page 1

New York City Ballet performing "Apollo," "Le Corsaire," "Valse Triste," "Sonatas and Interludes" and "Who Cares?" (with music by Gershwin.)

Soto retired from the New York City Ballet in 2005, so seeing him perform in person is extremely rare. He and dance partner Darci Kistler, also of the New York City Ballet, will perform a pas de deux choreographed by Peter Martins and set to the music of "Somewhere" from "West Side Story." The two had performed it in a special performance in December at New York City's Roseland.

"We got to talking, and we talked him into staying in shape," says Melinda Roy, artistic director of Gulfshore Ballet and a former principal dancer in the New York City Ballet. (She was with the company from 1978 to 1996.) She also talked him into reprising the dance for the school's annual benefit.



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"He's a really good friend, and a great friend of Gulfshore Ballet," Roy says. "He's really helped

support the school for all these years. Jock was a partner of mine, we remained very good friends. He likes to help."

In fact, it was Soto who helped Roy initially brainstorm fundraising ideas for the school, which started in 2000 with 25 students and now has 125.

"The two of us came up with [the idea of the annual dance performance] and wrote it down on a cocktail napkin," Roy recalls. "This is our sixth Bravo! Ballet, but we had one Bravo! Broadway starring Tommy Tune."

"[Melinda Roy] and I basically grew up together in the New York City Ballet," says Soto from London, where he is currently staging Jerome Robbins' "Afternoon of a Faun" for the Royal Ballet. "She became a ballerina. We danced together several times and became good friends. When she moved to Florida and opened this ballet school, from the beginning, she and I have done fundraisers for the school.

"One of the first things we did, we danced in her studio together. I got her out of retirement. I was down in Florida and I had to rehearse; it was during "Nutmcracker" season in New York. I made her take her pointe shoes off the wall and rehearse with me. That was the beginning of trying to raise money for the school.

"The other idea was bringing stars down from the New York City Ballet, and performing here. And it's kept on, it's a tradition now. The thing about it is, it's Florida. We live in New York City. We turn it into a fun little thing. Dancers being dancers, they're on a tight schedule. They come for three days only...Even then, to have 24 hours of sunlight, is a lot for professionals. They love going to Lindy's house. We call it Lindyland."

Soto, who teaches at the School of American Ballet, the official school for the New York City Ballet, was so impressed with the caliber of two of Roy's students that they're now attending the school and taking his classes.

"So they're on their way to a professional career," he says.

Soto himself fell in love with ballet when he was 5 years old. Half Navajo, half Puerto Rican, Soto was living on a reservation in Arizona. He was inspired to begin dancing when he saw Edward Valles dancing "Rubies" in George Balanchine's "Jewels."

"The thing that struck me the most about him — he was my idol when I was growing up — is he was so incredibly masculine. He brought the masculinity to dance. He was masculine and refined, and to me, I didn't look back," Soto says. "I thought, 'That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.' I've told him; I know him now. I've told him many times. And he giggles.

"I was very young. I looked at this kind of dancing, I thought it was so beautiful. I did



COURTESY PHOTO

Jock Soto and Melinda Roy of the New York City Ballet, performing "Rubies" from Balanchine's "Jewels," circa 1990.

Native American dancing with my mother, but this was a totally different form of dancing. There weren't a lot of boys doing it, especially in Phoenix, Arizona. I was basically the only one in that studio. It was tough to go to school; I got teased for that."

Part of the reason for making the documentary "Water Flowing Together" with Cates was to be an inspiration to the younger generation, he says.

"I want dancers to understand that there is life after retirement," he says. "I want dancers, especially young, confused boys who are afraid of their sexuality, to know that it's OK to be who they want to be, that this is also an art that you can really, really care about and admire and respect. The payback is wonderful. The payback is you get to express yourself to an audience every night and you get to dance those ballets."

Soto's parents were supportive of his career choice. They scraped and sacrificed, and he went to New York City for two months with his mother when he was 11. When he was 13, Soto moved to New York permanently, attending the same School of American Ballet where he now teaches. In 1981, he became a member of the Company's corps de ballet. Three years later he was promoted to soloist, then a year later, became a principal dancer.

According to choreographer/ballet master-in-chief Peter Martins in the movie "Water Flowing Together," Soto was a "dancer with a natural grace [who] could just do anything." Soto has had "one of the greatest careers I've ever seen," he says. "Not just in longevity, but in impact."

"His build is not so common [for ballet]," Roy says, "but boy, I'll say, he certainly worked with what he has. His build is more of a modern dancer's build. He's used all of his gifts throughout his career. He's just had a spectacular career."

In addition to premiering numerous dances and having dances written specifically for him, Soto appeared with the New York City Ballet on television, on five different shows of "Live From Lincoln Cen-

ter" on PBS including "Ray Charles Concert with the New York City Ballet" and "Lincoln Center Celebrates George Balanchine 100." He appeared on seven episodes of "Sesame Street" (three of them with former New York City Ballet principal dancer Lourdes Lopez.) His portrait was taken by famed pop artist Andy Warhol, with whom he was friends. Soto was also a guest artist with the Kirov Ballet in "Jewels" and at the Bolshoi Theatre in 2003.

Soto had a reputation for being a dancer with whom all the ballerinas wanted to be partnered. One commented that he would never crush her tutu.

"He just has an incredible innate sense of how to handle a woman on stage," Roy says. "You just never feel, when you're dancing with him, that anything could go wrong. He's just that in tune with his partner. You don't always find that with every single partnership. He has a special gift for that, that made all the girls very comfortable."

Soto and Roy partnered for many dances. Roy lists Tchaikovsky pas de deux, "Rubies" from "Jewels," "Stars and Stripes" and "Leibesleider" as some of her favorite dances with Soto.

"It was always such a joy to look across and see him, or turn around and see him," Roy says. "He has a great sense of humor, he always helped with my nerves. Jock is just like a big, mighty oak: he's right there, rooted and grounded."

"I like to take care of them," Soto explains. "There's a lot of different kinds of dancers, and I felt very comfortable taking care of whoever I was dancing with. I wanted to make it look as if the ballerina was floating."

When Soto retired in June, 2005, he danced five different ballets at one performance, one for each choreographer he'd danced for: Balanchine, Robbins, Martins, Lynne Taylor-Corbett and Christopher Wheeldon.

"That had never been done before in the history of the New York City Ballet," Soto says. "Peter [Martins] insisted I do them;

they were the five choreographers I had worked with in my lifetime, including himself. I kept thinking, 'I don't know how I'm going to get through this.' The adrenalin and the audience helped me too. My Florida friends all came. By the end, I was just ecstatic. I couldn't believe that I'd made it."

"It was a marathon," says Roy, who was in the audience. "It was quite something. He just had the audience in his hand. Everybody was so overjoyed and sad at the same time, that it would be his last time on stage. He did some of the highlights of the parts that were his favorites.

"[Now that he's retired,] he seems to be making a smooth transition. I think his body was really starting to hurt. You just know when it's time to hang up the slippers. Dancing is really difficult on the body, it takes a beating from it. It's just not a long career, like athletes. You have to start at a very young age. You seem that you're right at your prime, and injuries force you to retire. Jock really retired at the top of his game. He still looks amazing. He just wanted to go out on top. And that he did."

Yet Martins convinced Soto a year and a half after he retired to dance Lord Capulet in his "Romeo and Juliet" at Lincoln Center. He did, with Darci Kistler as Lady Capulet.

"Luckily I could retire after those 14 shows again," Soto says.

"It's funny. When you're young, that's all you strive for: you want to get on stage and you want to perform. This is what I want to do. When you do it, and it goes well, you're so happy. Later on in life, when you mature as a dancer in your 30s, when I was in-between 28 and 40, those were the most wonderful times of my life on stage. It just got easier and easier. Early on, you're young, you want to dance. Later on, it just becomes a more personal thing. You walk on stage and it's just a natural thing, you express yourself through your body. It's you telling a story with your body. And you can discover new ways of doing a ballet every time you do it. It can be a different story. For me, it was a real expression of me."

Retirement, he confesses, was hard. "Now I can talk about it," he says, "but I didn't talk about it much when it was happening...it was tough. It's not easy to give up the one thing you've done your whole life. And what the hell am I going to do next? Where do you go from there? I didn't have a college degree. I couldn't become a lawyer, I couldn't become a doctor. I've remained a teacher at the school. I love, love teaching now. I run a catering company with my partner, Luis Fuentes. If I didn't have those two things, I don't know what I would've done.

"If you knew me, you'd understand, I'm pretty set in my ways. If I decide to do something, I do it, I go through with it. I knew that stopping at 40 was going to be good. I had the rest of my life to find out what I want to do. I knew I was dancing at the top of my form. I wasn't leaving dancing badly, I knew it was the right thing to do. I had to prepare myself mentally, months in advance."

Roy says that Soto, a talented cook, wants to go into the restaurant business. In 1997 he wrote a book with former New York City Ballet principal dancer Heather Watts, "Our Meals." And in recent years he's auctioned off several meals for Gulfshore Ballet, raising a total of approximately \$20,000. (Soto cooks for the winning bidders.) The annual dance benefits raise between \$65,000 and \$70,000 apiece.

"He went into school the day after his retirement, for restaurant management," Roy says. "His partner, Luis, is a chef.

"We're very fortunate to pull him out of retirement for this [dance benefit.] It will probably be the last time. It takes so much to just stay in shape, to be able to do what he's able to do. You have to take class every day, go to the gym. This caliber of dancer and dancing requires an amazing amount of hard work. But it's definitely what keeps our school running. It's not-for-profit. Without this benefit, we would not be able to make it on tuition alone.

"People will definitely think it's worth it, once they come out to the show. It will be very exciting to see him on stage again." ■