



THE RADAR CULTURE

BY VICKI CRAIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE WIGDAHL

CURTAIN CALL: Willy Shives in the Joffrey's rehearsal studio.

POINTE TAKEN *After nine years with the Joffrey Ballet, principal dancer Willy Shives is preparing for his last dance in the spotlight*

For any young farm boy in south Texas in the '60s and '70s, becoming a professional dancer was an extremely far-fetched dream—and one that most probably couldn't even imagine. But from the moment seven-year-old Willy Shives stumbled upon a dance studio while working his paper route, he was hooked on ballet. Fast forward nearly 40 years, and that former farm kid is one of Chicago's most beloved dancers. And after nine hugely successful years with the Joffrey Ballet, this month Shives will perform his last dance as one of the company's principal dancers.

Known for his exquisite technique, chameleon-like adaptability and gravity-defying jumps, Shives' career began when, at age nine, he earned a full scholarship to study at the famous School of American Ballet in New York City. Shives proceeded to dance his way into an award-winning professional career that included stints with companies in New York, Austin, Tulsa, Milwaukee, Minnesota and Pittsburgh.

Looking out over Lake Shore Drive from his Uptown condo, Shives says simply, "I lived my dream." His face lights up when talking of his love of dance and the charmed life he lives with his wife, Evie (a teacher at the Walt Disney Magnet School and Chicago Ballet Arts) and his two young daughters, Cecily and Ally. His family and his career, he says, definitely keep him young. At 46, he still takes daily dance classes, and his execution—once deemed the "equivalent of velvet" by the *Chicago Tribune*—is still spot on. So why retire now? He says, while his official retirement has been in the works for over three years, the time is finally "right."

In an interesting twist, this is the second time Shives has attempted retirement. Injured, tired and with a second baby girl on the way in 1999, he was ready to head home to Texas. That's when he met Gerald Arpino, co-

founder and director emeritus at the Joffrey Ballet. "Mr. A" convinced Shives to come dance for him in Chicago.

"Willy is a rare, exceptional artist," says Arpino. "I first saw him in the role of Albrecht in *Giselle* with the Milwaukee Ballet, and I was immediately taken by the intuitive quality of his partnering. He has a gracious bearing that truly allows a ballerina to shine, which is so important for a male artist."

With a career spanning three decades, eight major ballet companies, international tours, critical acclaim and a role in the Robert Altman movie *The Company*, Shives seems to have nine lives. His next step? Transitioning from assistant to full-time ballet master for the Joffrey, a role that will have him teaching, staging and rehearsing his fellow dancers.

Affectionately called "grandpa" by some of the younger company members, Shives thrives in this mentoring role and enjoys watching the dancers embrace his direction and "make it their own." Whether through coaching, character roles or his daughter's future career (yes, at least one is planning on following in her parents' footsteps), his presence will be felt on the Chicago stage for many years to come.

In his final performances, during the "American Moderns" program this month, Shives will dance *Ruth, Ricordi Per Due* with long-time partner Maia Wilkins, who's also leaving the company after this season. Created for the pair, *Ruth* is a memorial piece in which one lover is left grieving. But for Shives, the tears won't continue offstage. "It's not an end but always a beginning," he says. He's ready to move on and is "cherishing every moment" until that last curtain call. Our prediction: There won't be a dry eye in the house. ■

The Joffrey Ballet presents "American Moderns" May 14-25. www.joffrey.com.