



Before the Curtain

Portraits of the Atlanta Ballet
an interview with Michael Nelson

B. Lynn Simonton

What sparked Michael Nelson's *Before the Curtain* series was a shoot with a model who was a dancer. Fascinated with a concept of photographing dancers on a much larger scale, he embarked upon an extensive pro bono project with the Atlanta Ballet Company that took him into two worlds—the theater from the vantage point of the audience and the other world backstage that the audience never sees.

Nelson worked on the project for two years almost a decade ago, and he looks back on that time not without some emotion. He describes it as “magical,” as well as “something I could contribute to,” because of the non-commercial nature of the project. He considers it great fortune that

Above
Christy,
Michael Nelson

PORTFOLIO:

the company's artistic director gave him free rein to photograph both from the house and backstage during the ballet's rehearsals, and his resulting portfolio holds images captured from both vantage points, though he suggests that the most meaningful for him are the backstage portraits.

A commercial portrait photographer, Nelson considers all of the shots in this series to be portraits, whether group or solo. Images he likes best are those that tell a story about someone, and this series has quite a few strong examples. And while he once thought there was some separation between his fine art photography and his commercial assignments, he says he has come to recognize the same heart and passion for what he sees and photographs is true in all of his work.

While in some ways similar to photographing a single dancer in his studio, there were significant differences doing this large-scale project. Married to a former dancer, Nelson took instruction from her in the terminology of ballet. He says it also took a little time to establish a relationship with the performers and backstage crew, who came to realize that he was not the typical jobber shooting publicity shots. Nelson knew this had happened when he showed them Polaroid proof shots and they responded to the intensity of the moment he had captured with them. He became something more than just a "guy with a camera," and he became almost like another crewmember in the darkness of the stage wings. Many of the dancers didn't know when he was photographing them, he says, and when they did, they were comfortable enough with his presence backstage not to care.

Left
Serenade 1,
Michael Nelson

Right
Caught,
Michael Nelson



The contrasts between the lighting situation onstage and backstage admittedly presented a challenge. Nelson had the benefit of making use of stage lighting set by a talented professional lighting crew, and he worked with what they provided when he shot dancers onstage from the house. But the contrast in light levels is incredible, and he had to carefully balance the difference between the stage floods and the single 100-watt incandescent bulb allowed backstage. No flash at all was permissible where it would distract the dancers. He made one posed pre-rehearsal shot, "Christy," for which he used an old Bardwell-McAllister 2000watt tungsten fresnel light & reflector, but the rest were all what he calls "quick shots" using available light.

Some images like "Serenade #1" had to be shot from the audience. Nelson especially wanted to capture the gorgeous effect of the blue background with the white onstage. Choosing not to use a sharp contrast film, he made the image with a Mamiya RZ 67 with Agfa RS1000 color transparency film and a 180mm lens.

"Caught" is another image shot from the audience, and for this staged sequence, the ballet company got some assistance from the photographer. In this instance, the dance was contemporary, not classical ballet, and the goal was to illuminate the solo dancer in freeze-frames as he did a series of leaps across a black stage. On Nelson's suggestion, they rented two large commercial Speedotron power packs—using them on a low-watt setting. The dancer carried a remote transmitter in his hand, which he would trigger when he wanted to be seen by the audience — frequently at the height of a leap. What added to the effect was the complete absence of light onstage and in the audience—even the aisle lights were extinguished. Nelson captured his photograph of the performance through one long exposure.

In addition to controlling light, Nelson developed a new type of timing while shooting the dance company. He learned to take shots when the dancers paused, and they paused when the music of the ballet directed them to do so. Without knowing anything about the specific ballet being performed, he could be guided by its rhythmic cues to create



images during the pauses. One of his favorite images from the series is of a solitary dancer. He waited for the moment she paused to capture that frame. Part of the high of the whole experience for Michael Nelson was photographing a company under the direction of the internationally recognized choreographer Bobby Barnett, who pretty much allowed Nelson to work where and how he wished during their countless rehearsal hours together. One of the most telling portraits for Nelson is one of Barnett and a dancer, Jessica Mylene, deep in conversation about her performance. The photograph perfectly captures the relationship between the two subjects through body language that communicates their master/student roles.

Backstage where Nelson shared the limited wing space with the dancers, he used a wide-angle lens to work close to his subjects. He put the Mamiya RZ67 on a monopod to enable necessary quick maneuvering out of the way of the dancers as they

rapidly entered and exited the on-stage area. He was constantly amazed at the transition they made from the beautiful illusions they appeared to be in performance to the flesh and blood humans with evident aches and pains of their profession only revealed backstage. He captured both of these views in his portraits.

Looking back a number of years to the execution of the project, he admits that he is still very “old school,” and while he now does occasional commercial assignments digitally, he still enjoys working with film. Kodak was a sponsor of the *Before the Curtain* project, and many of the images were shot with 120mm T-MAX film, which he processed and printed himself. Color work was done with Fuji RHP and Agfa RS1000. Polaroid has been a big part of his photographic life, as well. He spent some time working with Polaroid’s emulsion transfer process. He admits to having some “coveted boxes of T-55 4x5 black & white



Left
Solitary Dancer,
Michael Nelson

Right
Direction from
Bobby,
Michael Nelson

and some of the medium format 665 Polaroid film to use selectively. “There’s something unique about the imperfections of film,” he says, “to show what’s really going on.” He did a recent shoot with a young model who had experienced only digital cameras. She was amazed when he put a print in her hand made with Fuji’s proofing film.

Before working on this project, Michael Nelson had no prior familiarity with ballet, nor had he ever experienced the Degas paintings of the subject. He says that *Before the Curtain* became for him a classical exercise in the exploration of beauty and grace, form and function. His visual response to the dancers’ art was intuitive, a combination of eye and heart.

Michael Nelson has been a professional photographer for over 20 years, following diverse experiences that include working in business, as a firefighter and paramedic, SCUBA diving and sailing, flying, and teaching photography. His only fear is mediocrity, and his approach to life and work is the same — full of humor, spontaneity, and a lot of passion. Among his numerous corporate clients, Baker Books has chosen one of Nelson’s images for the cover of the soon to be released book, The Fine Life. Visit Nelson’s website <http://www.michaelnelson.com>.

To ask a question or comment on this article, visit our online Forum: www.phototechforum.com

Product Resources

Cameras: Mamiya RZ-67; Lenses: 65mm, 110mm, 180mm; Film: Agfa RS1000 color, Kodak TMY B&W, Fuji RHP color; Lighting: Bardwell-McAllister 2000 watt tungsten fresnel light & reflector, Minolta Auto Flash Meter 4, Polaroid 669 metered; Software: Adobe Photoshop CS4; Scanner: Umax Powerlook 3000.



PORTFOLIO:



Top
Pas de Deux 1,
Michael Nelson

Bottom
Catnap,
Michael Nelson

