

Rachel Foster of PNB photographed by Matthew Karas

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Strong but fluid: Onuki in TWB's *Don Quixote*

Maki Onuki

The Washington Ballet's lyrical powerhouse

BY EMILY MACEL

Maki Onuki may be petite, but she has exceptional power and fluidity. It's a combination that makes her particularly valuable in The Washington Ballet, a company with 22 dancers and an ambitious repertory. Onuki can effortlessly bend and lunge in Edwaard Liang's contemporary *Wunderland*, and also capture the precision and delicacy of the title role in Bournonville's traditional *La Sylphide*. Her assurance and energy across the ballet spectrum have caught the attention of critics as well as visiting choreographers, and she seems poised for more opportunities ahead.

Now 25, Onuki grew up in Yokohama, a city just south of Tokyo. She started ballet at age 4, performing in small local schools. By 12, she knew she wanted a professional ballet career. Luckily, her parents already were accustomed to their children's ballet passion: one of Onuki's older brothers, Masayoshi, dances with Victor Ullate Ballet in Spain.

Onuki says her flexibility comes naturally. She credits her strong technique, however, to training for several years at the Stuttgart Ballet's John Cranko School and dancing for a year with Vancouver's Goh Ballet. Despite her international schooling, Onuki only had one destina-

tion. "When I left Japan, I wanted to end up in the United States," she says. She auditioned for the Washington Ballet's Studio Company seven years ago and jumped when she received an offer.

From the start, she impressed Washington Ballet artistic director Septime Webre, who invited her into the main company after only a year, though most dancers spend two years at the junior company. "Maki brings an amazingly strong technique," he says. "She has a jump that springs out of nowhere and the ability to move quickly without seeming to be working at all. Yet despite those athletic qualities, she's comfortable with extreme lyricism. You're left almost giddy after watching her dance."

Webre cites her enthusiasm for every role as one reason for his frequently casting her. Though the company is unranked, Onuki often ends up with a featured part. "She's really excelled in the full gamut of repertory," Webre notes, praising her performance in *La Sylphide*, as well as her *Kitri*, *Sugar Plum*, and many Balanchine roles. Her range, he feels, stems as much from her attitude as her technique. "She's a go-for-broke dancer," Webre says.

Offstage Onuki seems quiet and shy. It's onstage that she feels at home. "When

Stephen Baranovics, Courtesy TWB

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I'm performing," she says, "I can express myself so much better than in normal life." Though she feels more at ease with the audience on the other side of the footlights, Onuki remembers sitting there and falling in love with dance as a child. Once in Tokyo, Onuki saw Sylvie Guillem perform Maurice Béjart's *Bolero*. "She was so strong and dramatic, it shocked me," Onuki remembers. She now works toward having similar emphasis in her movement. "I like to think of my dancing as having that attack," she says.

While she admires Guillem's hyper-extended limbs and sheer ability, Onuki does not want to be pigeonholed as simply a superior technician. "I'm quick, I have good technique," she says. "But I would like to do something adagio with soft movement." She hopes one day to perform the lead in *Giselle*. "That role is all about coming from inside," she says. Webre agrees *Giselle* would suit her. "She'd be beautiful," he says. "She can be like smoke or a whisper when she dances."

He feels that Onuki has hit her stride in the last two years. Webre credits her work with guest choreographers—like Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, and Liang—who have set and created works on the company. This month, Onuki will star in the *Bolero(+)* program, which features pieces by Liang, Nicolo Fonte, and Karole Armitage. In May, she'll perform more contemporary works like Tharp's *Push Comes to Shove*, Morris' *Pacific*, Nacho Duato's *Cor Perdut*, and Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*.

Though onstage perfection may be Onuki's goal, she doesn't mind having imperfect moments in the classroom and studio. "If anything goes wrong, the moment always ends in a laugh from her," says Webre. "She doesn't take herself so seriously." Her frequent partner, Jonathan Jordan, says she throws herself into the material without fear. "She's a no-bones-about-it kind of person," he says. "She always gives 100 percent. But she's light-hearted about it." That combination, light of heart and strong in spirit, can take you far—just ask Onuki.

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