

Premier Ballerina Lyrica Woodruff Returns to Westside Ballet

By **Magnolia Lafleur** - April 21, 2022



Photo by Todd Lechtick

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Pirouetted in a modern world, premier ballerina and Westside Ballet alumna Lyrica Woodruff has all the skill, poise and charm of the starlets that danced their way into audiences' hearts, like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. Returning to the stage as a guest principal, the Pacific Palisades native will be welcoming audiences at the Broad Stage for the first spring performance since June 2019. Performing one of George Balanchine's signature Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux, Woodruff will be dancing alongside fellow Hungarian-born professional dancer Maté Szentes on Saturday, May 7.

"Working with Lyrica has been such a delight from the very first moment we met," Szentes said to the *Palisadian-Post*. "Although we have not known each other before, dancing together came very natural and it felt like we have been dancing together for years."

“Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux is a demanding but beautiful piece and I can already feel that we will have so much fun on stage together. I feel honored to be dancing with her at this very special event at her ballet home of Westside Ballet.”

A protégé of the prestigious—and one of Woodruff’s biggest influences—Yvonne Mounsey, who was a former principal dancer for Balanchine’s New York City Ballet, and Francine Kessler Lavac, Woodruff has trained at Westside Ballet since the early age of 5.

Although she is known primarily as a celebrated ballerina, Woodruff is also an actress and singer who has appeared in television series, including “Bunheads” and “Private Practice.” She also received the Mae L. Wein Award for Outstanding Promise for her role in Broadway’s “Anastasia,” the prestigious Chita Rivera Award for her dancing in Broadway’s “Finian’s Rainbow,” and danced at The Kennedy Center in “Little Dancer” with Tiler Peck.

From a young age, classical music has always spoken to Woodruff, allowing her to become a vessel for each note to seamlessly travel from the vein of her heart on to her fingertips and toes.

“I love classical music, I always have,” Woodruff shared with the *Post*. “We used to listen to 91.5 KUSC all the time. I was 3 years old, we’d be in the car and my mom would start telling us stories to the music ... Then when I really got into ballet, I began to learn how to interpret that sound.

“Music really is my life, from musical theater to ballet to teaching. As a dancer, it’s that much more heightened, as it dictates your movement. There’s a famous quote by [George] Balanchine, ‘See the music, hear the dance,’ which I always resonated with because the choreography is the music.”

Balanchine, who is known as the “the father of American ballet” expected his dancers to have a symbiotic relationship with music, in the way that Woodruff possesses an incomparable ability to turn notes—from whole to eighths—into riveting ballet steps like glisades, pliés and grande jetés.

One of three, Woodruff was born in the Palisades, to parents of a 43-year-old marriage, Largo Woodruff-Blankfein and Fredric Blankfein. Her mother recalled that Westside Ballet was the first place she took Woodruff to when she was born.



Photo courtesy of Lyrica Woodruff

“She’s been here all her life. When she was born, I had to pick her sister up from class so we stopped here first before heading home,” Largo said about her daughter. “When she was 2, during her older sister’s class, Lyrica would be here all day. She would copy the big girls, and if they said ‘point your toe Lyrica,’ she would point her toe, eventually moving her way to the front of the room. Her brother also took classes here, he did ‘The Nutcracker’ and Lyrica was able to dance besides him, he played the bratty little brother. It’s wonderful to see how far she’s come.”

At age 14, Woodruff began to train year-round at the School of American Ballet in New York City at Lincoln Center while continuing her Vaganova training under Luba Gulyaeva and graduated in June of 2014. Her career has been extensive: She has worked with Tony Award Winning director and choreographer Susan Stroman on a ballet musical based on the famous “Little Dancer” statue by sculptor Edgar Degas.

In 2019, Woodruff’s career took a major upward turn when she was awarded the Chita Rivera award—formerly known as the Astaire—from acclaimed dancer, singer and choreographer Fred Astaire for her performance in the off-Broadway revival of “Finian’s Rainbow” for Outstanding Female Dancer in an Off-Broadway Show.

“I didn’t even know I was eligible for the award and found out a month later,” Woodruff said. “One of my close friends called me and was like, ‘Congratulations you star.’ I was like, ‘Haha, so how’s your day?’ And she said, ‘Lyrica, did you check Playbill today?’ So I checked it and I couldn’t believe it, I thought I was being punked.

“I flipped, I called my mom, I couldn’t believe it. We [dancers] call it the dancer Tony’s and there were such amazing life-long dancers nominated, so it was truly just an honor to be nominated alongside them.”

A week later, Woodruff was cast as the feature Odette and Olga Romanov in “Anastasia” on Broadway, in what she calls a “full-circle” moment where she plays an actress playing a ballerina—a “perfect melding of the worlds where ballet life and musical theater life came together.”

During the coronavirus pandemic, Woodruff said she moved from her apartment in New York to Tennessee, where her parents live, and began teaching at Roots Academy as a way to give back while staying in shape.

As for Santa Monica-based Westside Ballet, they “successfully weathered the pandemic by launching a Crisis Relief Campaign.” The funds they raised helped them survive; now begins their season to thrive with “reimagined repertoires,” according to spokesperson Jewels Solheim-Roe.

“[Westside Ballet aims to] pay tribute to the life-renewing qualities of spring with a demonstration of how the ballet world is resiliently re-emerging: experiencing artistic growth and renewed energy, creatively blossoming with new visions, ideas and experiences,” Solheim-Roe said.

Woodruff and the Westside Ballet hope to elevate peoples optimism and hearts through their upcoming show, “New Horizons,” which will demonstrate ballerina’s movements corkscrewed into immeasurable positions, starting with the contours of their figures, dexterously clasped in perfect place with twisted legs, bended backs, pointed toes and compressed skin, forever devoted to the crusade of movement.

“I am so excited to be back as so many of us, on and offstage, have been affected by the pandemic,” Woodruff explained. “And I have a really wonderful partner, Maté, it’s crazy that we only met two days ago and we’ve never worked together before and it’s been the easiest partnership.”

With a few weeks leading into the May 7 premiere date, choreographer, Westside Ballet Artistic Director and Westside Ballet alumna, Martine Harley has been helping refine the dancers’ performances for opening night.

“This spring, the excitement of returning to the Broad Stage is made even more special with the guest appearance of our beloved alumna Lyrica Woodruff,” Harley shared with the *Post*. “Lyrica grew up at Westside Ballet and was a prodigy of Yvonne’s before going on to her illustrious career on Broadway. We’re so lucky she can come back to perform with us in Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux this May as she’s a brilliant technical dancer that always brings the house down.”

The show kicks off Saturday, May 7, at 6 p.m. with “A Petite Soirée” reception and awards, followed by the 7:30 p.m. “New Horizons” premiere, featuring special performances.

Tickets and more information can be acquired online at westsideballet.com/spring-performance.

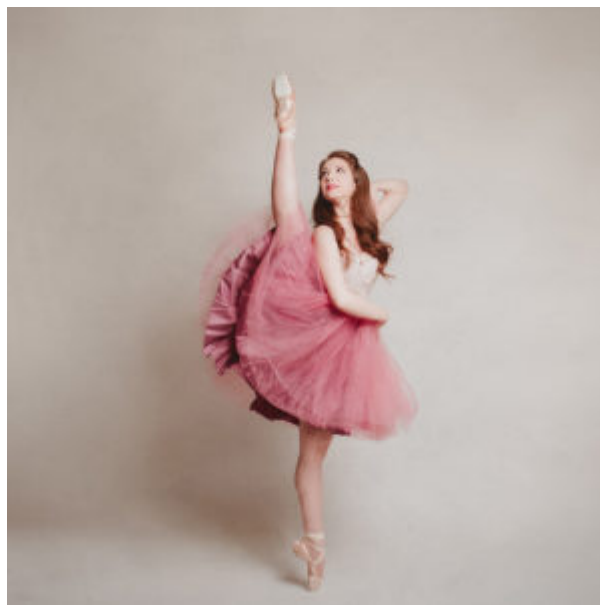


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