

# MARGARET BARBIERI

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Her maternal pride envelopes a career that has always been motivated by family. "My mother was a worrier," explains Margaret, who was born in South Africa of Italian parents. "She thought I was a sickly child at age five, but the doctors could find nothing wrong. They suggested I mix more with others and get more exercise. From the moment I started ballet lessons I knew I'd found my outlet for expressing myself. I absolutely loved it, but at age 17 I knew I had to go to The Royal Ballet School in London in order to launch a career. My father wanted me to be educated in South Africa and my mother wouldn't leave my father to accompany me to London, so my middle brother quit his job and off we went. Three months later his company transferred him to their London office where he met his future wife."

It was also in London where Margaret met her husband, Sarasota Ballet Artistic Director Iain Webb. "I was already a principal dancer and Iain was new to the corps de ballet. I sized up his talent right away. A dance teacher asked that I encourage Iain's passion for dance, so to keep him motivated, we attended theatre and concerts together. The gossip columnists soon proved prophetic: we became a couple."

Balancing a career and a personal life "was very hard when Jason was young. Iain and I would load Jason, the dogs and nanny into the car and move on to the next town for performances. We'd set up wherever we were, then go back to London to do the washing, then repeat it all again. I struggled to be a good mom and wife. Once Jason was age 3, I knew I couldn't manage a touring schedule so I decided to explore teaching and directing. Because I'm not a risk taker, I spent a year studying teaching to find out if I was any good. Now, after 20 years, I have dance students in all major companies in Europe and America."

As for her career, she explains that, "Dancing and directing are very different disciplines. Teaching and directing are more work. As a dancer you worry about

yourself and your partner, but once you start dancing nerves disappear. A director worries about everybody. Sitting in the audience you worry about what can go wrong. Your shoulders seize up in spasms."


To keep up with the newest choreography, Margaret sees as many performances and attends as many choreographic workshops as possible. While refreshing the upcoming Sarasota Ballet presentation of *Giselle*, Margaret realized that, having performed it several times, Sir Peter Wright's production couldn't be equaled. Margaret is very proud that Iain gained Sir Peter's support and is looking forward to staging Wright's production featuring Alina Cojocar and Johan Kobborg this month, November 27-29, to be precise.

Production of the classics hasn't stopped ballet from changing, especially since traveling has become much easier. "Formerly, every country had its own approach. Now with the interchange of dancers and teachers, it is incredibly interesting to incorporate various approaches. To move forward in dance, companies need to grow; there is a place for romantic dancers and contemporary style."

Ballet has allowed Margaret to experience most major cities and venues in Europe. She describes Generalife Palace Gardens in Grenada, Spain as magical with Nureyev and Fontaine dancing in a breathtaking sunset, and a temple in Cairo lit up behind the performance. "I actually warmed up in the temple. It felt kind of sacrilegious."

Although they still enjoy traveling—often going to New York to attend straight and musical theatre — "Iain and I like to relax at home where something always needs to be done." Home is in both Sarasota and Cheswick outside of London, where son Jason, now 22, is working and attending university.

For the future, Margaret looks to short-term goals and usually takes one day at a time. "I never aimed higher than being accepted at the Royal Ballet School, but I got roles young," she notes. In fact, Margaret admits, "I would have liked to have been an actress and was recruited for an acting role by Fred Zimmerman, but the timing was bad. I was a principal dancer and didn't want to give it up. Somehow I regret missing the opportunity. However, I have passion for both dance and my second career teaching and staging. I love my students and have worked with so many wonderful people and feel it is my duty to pass it on. I so love to see ballets come to life."

Her advice to other women: "Go after what you believe. You can't be afraid to work hard. Being a woman is hard in some worlds, but it makes being stronger possible." 

Story: Virginia Sirocky  
Images: Barbara Banks