

Carolina Ballet chief aims to score like hockey team

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RALEIGH -- Robert Weiss sits in the pitch dark of Raleigh Memorial Auditorium, tense as a pulled tendon.

"I want you to kill the downstage lights," he says to his lighting designer.

"One to three out," Ross Kolman calls into his headset. There are 400 stage lights, and Weiss is scrutinizing them all.

"Can they glow more?" Weiss asks in his gravelly smoker's voice. "That's what I want."

"Are you going to want lunch?" asks Leilani Goode, his temporary personal assistant.

"Yeah, I'm gonna," Weiss says, his eyes are still trained on the stage. "I just don't know when."

When he'll eat or when he'll get home or when he'll have a chance to take that trip to Europe. For the artistic director of Raleigh's newly formed professional dance company, this has been not only a busy week but also a busy year.

As the curtain falls on today's matinee performance of "Romeo and Juliet," the Carolina Ballet will have completed its inaugural season. And Weiss will have pulled off a rarely attempted feat: the birthing of a ballet company.

By almost all accounts, the year has been more successful than the company's creators dared imagine - ticket sales were healthy (close to 17,000 as of May 13), reviews positive and audiences enthusiastic.

But Weiss, who still goes by his childhood nickname, "Ricky," has had barely a second to stop and pat himself on the back. And that's not because he's self-effacing. Friends describe Weiss as "strong" and "aggressive," not "humble."

Since he arrived in Raleigh two years ago, Weiss has been creating, coaching, administering and budgeting nonstop. As the founding artistic director, he has been responsible for hiring the company's 21 dancers, figuring out how to pay for them and for the costumes, sets and choreography needed for each of the season's five programs

- and for helping to raise the \$1.6 million operating budget. Like the president of a start-up company, Weiss must decide every tiny detail and each huge issue.

There will be no slowing down anytime soon. He plans to take Monday and Tuesday off, then return Wednesday to soliciting donors, writing contracts and commissioning music.

"It's very tiring," says the 50-year-old Weiss, wearing jeans, a mint-colored sweatshirt and at least a day's worth of stubble. "I think it's even harder the second year."

Not that hard work is new for Weiss. During eight years as artistic director of the Pennsylvania Ballet in Philadelphia, he led twice as many dancers and handled a budget five times the size of Carolina Ballet's. Before that, he danced for 16 years with the demanding choreographer George Balanchine.

But growing a professional dance company from a pre-professional troupe and school is even more all-consuming. Every time Weiss puts together a program, collaborates with another artistic group, holds a technical rehearsal, he is doing something that has never been done in this place, in quite this way. And with every choice he makes - from costumes to choreography - his reputation and that of the fledgling company are on the line.

"What he's doing - it takes more than 24 hours a day," says Will Graham, artistic director of the Raleigh-based National Opera Company, who collaborated with Weiss on last Christmas' dance and choral performance of Handel's "Messiah."

"But he has that sort of boundless energy," Graham says. "He has done a remarkable job."

Those who work with him day in and day out think so, too. Weiss' assistant, Goode, moved to Los Angeles five months ago but flew back, on her own dollar, to work with him the week before the April performance and again for "Romeo and Juliet."

"I'm here because I just love Ricky so much," she says. Weiss has no assistant the rest of the year.

Dancer Timour Bourtasenkov speaks highly of his boss as well. He left Pennsylvania Ballet last year to become one of Carolina Ballet's principal dancers, but only on the condition that he could perform in other companies, too. Weiss allowed that, and Bourtasenkov has seen his busiest performing year ever.

"We work together as a team," Bourtasenkov says of his relationship with Weiss.

But the side of Weiss that inspires such loyalty is sometimes hard to see under his curt, New York exterior. When he talks about Carolina Ballet's first year, for instance, he can sound disgruntled. "The community still hasn't recognized how important the arts are.

I think we're just as important as a new hockey team."

All that drops away, however, when he talks about dance itself. To Weiss, dance should be a spiritual, magical experience for audience and performer, a place where music and body and soul meld into something profound and indescribable.

"Your body can fly and soar, but it's not really your body. It's your spirit," he says.

That's what drives him to work so long and so hard, what pushes him to aim for perfection.

"I think if you're an artist, you have to expect perfection and demand perfection," he says. "Real life has plenty of imperfections, so you have to demand perfection on stage. That's why people come."

Weiss was 5 when his parents took him to his first ballet performance, "The Nutcracker," in New York City. "I just fell in love with the magic of it," he says. A few years later, he was on stage himself.

In high school, he attended New York's Performing Arts School for drama. He wrote poetry and even considered pursuing a science career. Then he took Stanley Williams' class. The Danish dancer made Weiss see ballet less as sport and more as art.

"I learned," he says, "that when you can get the technical so second-nature that you don't have to think about it, you can transcend your own body on stage, and it can be a spiritual experience. That's when I decided I definitely wanted to be a dancer."

Soon afterward, just before his 17th birthday, Weiss was plucked from the school by Balanchine to dance for New York City Ballet. In his 16 years there, Weiss says, he learned everything he knows today about dance, choreography, how to run a ballet company and what mistakes not to repeat.

Though Weiss considers Balanchine an artistic genius on the level of Picasso and Stravinsky, he has no interest in replicating the control that Balanchine demanded over dancers' personal lives.

Weiss moved from dancer to director when he took over as Pennsylvania Ballet's artistic director in 1982. He expanded that company's repertoire, stature and earnings. But a dispute between Weiss and the ballet's board over the company's future led to Weiss' departure in 1990. He went back to New York and began free-lance choreographing and even tried his hand at writing plays.

That's where former N.C. School of the Arts dean Robert Lindgren found him two years ago as Lindgren headed the search committee for Carolina Ballet's artistic director. "We looked at everybody who responded, but obviously Ricky was a strong candidate," says

Lindgren, a Carolina Ballet board member. "... And he's been fabulous since he got here."

Lindgren offers a word of caution along with the praise. "As with all nonprofit organizations, he's going to have to contend with having money every year, not just one year. It's an ongoing struggle."

Weiss says he is ready; already he has planned for the company budget to reach \$2.5 million - almost a million more than last year's. He hopes to hire more dancers and add a fifth performance date to each program. "We're definitely expanding," he says, "but we're being very, very careful."

Even if he were feeling daunted by this year's sprint, Weiss says he won't be moving back to New York anytime soon. The Big Apple has lost some of its luster now that he has spent two years in the Triangle. His favorite thing about life outside the city? His washer and dryer. The first he has ever owned.

Robert Samuel Weiss: Born: In New York City.

Occupation: Artistic director of the Carolina Ballet.

Experience: Danced for 16 years in New York City Ballet; performed principal roles in more than 40 ballets, some created for him by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins; artistic director of Pennsylvania Ballet; created more than 20 ballets as choreographer; won two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships for choreography.

Family: Wife, Melissa Podcasy; mother, Sally Weiss.

Pets: Two cats, Rudy and Margeaux.

Thoughts on the Triangle: "When I took this job, everyone said, 'You're moving to the boonies.' But that's just not true. The Triangle has a large and active artistic community. ... It's just not as in-your-face as it is in New York. And that's too bad - for the public."