

IAIN DRAYTON: Welcome to this latest episode of Talks at GS. My name is Iain Drayton. I'm Co-Head of the Investment Banking division in Asia ex-Japan. And today it's my great pleasure to be joined by Kara Medoff Barnett who is Executive Director of American Ballet Theatre.

Kara, thanks so much for joining us today.

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: Iain, thank you so much for having me. It's such an honor and a pleasure to be here with you a few years after we first met at a performance of *Swan Lake* in Singapore.

IAIN DRAYTON: I remember that well. All right. So, if I've done my research correctly, you had your first ballet lesson, I think, when you were three years old. You were raised in North Carolina. You attended your first performance at the Lincoln Center when you were eight. And I think that was George Balanchine's *Jewels*. And so, my first question to you is given that you have, obviously, such a long history in your own life an association with ballet, are there any things that stuck with you from those early years that serve you well now in your current role at the helm of ABT?

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: Absolutely. And I think that the things that I learned in my early dance training would have served me in any leadership role. It just so happens that I ended up back in the arts and back in the ballet world. But that was not part of a grand plan. When I went to college, I thought I was going to be a doctor. So, I think that from that first ballet class I was hooked. And I wasn't just hooked by the glamour and the magic of performance, although the experience of live performance, the adrenaline of live performance is definitely something that has stuck with me, but it was really about the ritual and the structure and the discipline of ballet training that kept me going back to the studio day after day, evening after evening, weekend after weekend when my friends were doing other things. There's something about the way that every ballet class starts with the same basics. And the same steps that warm up your body, but also focus your mind. And I think that it's those 10,000 hours that then allow you to have this freedom and magic and transcendence on the stage.

And I think that it's that sense of practice, that sense of focus, of perseverance, of tenacity, of resilience, all of those skills that you learn early in the dance studio are life skills. They are leadership skills. And I think that many people who

engage in sports, right, and play serious sports as young people develop some of these same skills. But in dance, the key is then that effort is supposed to look effortless. So, there's this whole layer that goes on top of the physical technique and skill. And it's this level of artistry and infusing steps that are 400 years old with your own personality, your open inspiration, your own sense of discovery.

And so I think you learn both, the perseverance and the tenacity, but then also the payoff of this freedom. And then you also learn humility and resilience. And I will never forget falling flat on my face in front of thousands of people, literally flat on my face. And my brothers chose to memorialize that moment in slow motion on repeat at my wedding. But luckily, they also showed what happened afterwards, which was I bounced back up and finished the performance. And I think that anyone who has engaged in serious ballet training has that grace under pressure ingrained. You know? The agility, the courage, and all of those skills come in hand leading any type of organization or enterprise. And particularly when you're navigating through crisis, the grace under pressure thing comes in handy.

IAIN DRAYTON: So, that's the perfect segue into the second bucket of conversation which is now your leadership role at ABT. And so, you were named executive director of ABT in 2016. You know, fast forward to today, I think this year ABT is celebrating its 80th anniversary. So, under your lead, my understanding is that if COVID hadn't hit we would have seen for the first time two black dancers playing Romeo and Juliet at they Met this spring. We've just seen as part of your digital season that you've had your first all-male pas de deux. And so, talk to us a little bit about what diversity means to you, above and beyond bringing or appealing to the broadest possible background of people, if you will, the broadest possible population? How have you put an emphasis on diversity? What does it mean for the future of ballet? Has it changed anything in terms of the way that ABT recruits, that it nurtures talent?

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: Sure. Well, ABT's secret sauce as America's national ballet company has been in our diversity and dynamism. This is a national company, and by the way we are America's national ballet company by an act of Congress. So, even though why were founded in 1940, we in 2006 were designated the national company. And other national companies strive for exquisite sameness. And I think the thing that always attracted me and attracts many of our audiences, and artists to ABT, is that we elevate individuality and uniqueness. And that doesn't

mean that we have always exemplified diversity in the ways that we aspire to in the future. But it does mean that this is a company that celebrates individual superpowers and individual narratives.

And it's the reason that if you come to watch *Swan Lake*, as I know you've done Iain, on successive nights, it's a different ballet. The steps are the same, but the story is different because it's infused by the individual dancers who are inhabiting the roles.

And so, our goal is to celebrate and amplify difference and uniqueness and excellence. RISE stands for representation and inclusion, sustain excellence. And it's our belief that our continued excellence, we're celebrating our 80th anniversary this year, if we're going to thrive for the next 80 years, we need to celebrate diversity on and off the stage. And we need to create an environment where artists and staff and crew and musicians and audiences and faculty and students can all thrive and pursue their dreams. And pursue the greatest expression of their participation in this art form.

IAIN DRAYTON: Obviously, you are, as we talked about earlier, you were getting ready to celebrate ABT's 80th anniversary. The COVID pandemic hits. Very quickly you adopted your rallying cry of "Alone but together," ABT. I think many of us can relate to that in various forms wherever you are in the world over the last few months. And so, my first question on this topic is, how did you adapt the strategy of ballet? How has that strategy evolved from the beginning of the pandemic until now?

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: So, this has been a rapid evolution and rapid problem solving. But we've had certain commitments and priorities and lenses for decision making from the very beginning, from March when we shut down our studios. We had just come back from a triumphant premier on the West Coast and we landed in New York. And a few days later we're sending everyone home. And we said, "Look, we're sending everyone home. But we're going to stay together." And that's that rallying cry of ABT is alone, but together. We have not had mass layoffs or furloughs. We have managed to-- our greatest asset is our people. We don't own a theatre. We don't have a big endowment. We don't have a vast digital content library. We have some of the most extraordinary human beings on the planet on our stages, our artists, but also the people behind the scenes, our staff, our board, our-- the people who make up this company are remarkable individuals with a shared purpose. And so, we decided we're

going to grow through this together. And we're all going to sacrifice. But we're going to sustain this community of individuals.

And then our other thing that we've been saying from the beginning is that hibernation is not an option. This is a moving company that has been resilient and entrepreneurial since the '40s. And we're going to play to win. We're not going to just play not to lose here. We think that if we can kind of take some of this crisis to be catalytic fuel for growth and transformation and rapid evolution, we think that this crisis can provide a moment of invention and really turbo charged reach and relevance for the art form and for our company.

We do it through digital content creation. Right? So, storytelling on new platforms. Right? Finding ways to find the intimate human stories. It's tough to do the big, epic stories right now. You can't get hundreds of people together with big sets and costumes. But what are the intimate stories that work really well on a screen and that make people care about these dancers and their trajectories?

IAIN DRAYTON: I want to go back to the phrase alone, but together. And it can be applied to so many families around the world, particularly at Christmas time. Okay? And one highlight for so many every year is ABT's *The Nutcracker*. And yet, how are you approaching that tradition in this most untraditional of years?

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: Well, it's so funny because as someone who danced for many years you hear that *Nutcracker* music on an advertisement or in normal times in a shopping mall. And you have this muscle memory. And your body wants to start doing the choreography. It's that ingrained. I have five siblings and I think that they've probably seen, collectively, a couple hundred *Nutcrackers*.

But for ABT we have a glorious *Nutcracker* production. And in my opinion, too few people have seen. It's choreographed by Alexei Ratmansky, a MacArthur genius who's our artist in residence. And we perform it in southern California in most years at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa. And so we said, well, what can we do with it this year? What we can do is we can share a highlight from it. We can share one of the most glorious sections, the grand pas de deux. And we can share it with the world. And we can share it with kids and families everywhere. You don't have to be in Orange County, California this year to

experience the joy and the artistry of ABT's dancers performing to this iconic music but doing it with Alexei's brilliant choreography.

So speaking of partnerships and corporate partnerships and, you know, finding ways to innovate, we worked with our global electronics partner, LG Signature and with Matador Content who's helped us navigate digital storytelling and created a, what I think, is just a dazzling ten-minute film of the grand pas de deux featuring two of our principal dancers: Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside. They've been sheltering together. They're best friends and have been working together throughout the crisis.

And we didn't just launch it on our website, although it is there. And it's on our YouTube channel, so you can all check it out. But we also wanted to premier it in Times Square. And we premiered it on LG's billboard in Times Square last week. And it continues to run there throughout the holiday season. So even in this time of isolation and loneliness, we hope that people who wander through what was once the vibrant, beating heart of New York City and now is much quieter and lonelier, that they'll look up and see some just exquisite dancing. And that it will evoke a feeling of joy and connectedness, inspiration, possibility, some sort of a holiday embrace and a holiday gift from American Ballet Theatre to our fans.

IAIN DRAYTON: The pandemic has forced innovation. It's forced us to think about new ways of doing our business. And then we start to think about what does that mean for the future? Are we going to go back to what we were? Are we going to stick with what we have now? Is there going to be some sort of fusion? How are you thinking about all of that for ABT?

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: We can redefine what widest possible audience means during this time. And then not let go when we are passed-- when we're all vaccinated, and we have herd immunity let's keep that broader definition of widest possible audience.

Just as one example, our biggest gala ever at the Metropolitan Opera House, the biggest theatre we perform in, you might have 3,000 - 3,500 people if we sell out. I think there are 3,800 seats at the Met. Our first digital gala, our first online virtual celebration back in May called ABT Together Tonight had 75,000 people tune in. So, if we play our cards right and we create digital content that is compelling, we have the opportunity to reach so many more people.

Now one thing that I'm thinking about is also the digital divide. How do we make sure that you don't just have to get to the red velvet seats of the Met or the great opera houses and concert halls of the world? You also, perhaps, don't have to have access to a screen, a device, high speed internet. How can we bring ballet to you? And so, one thing that we're really exciting about and that we're going to experiment with, continuing that kind of test kitchen mentality in 2021 is outdoor performances in non-traditional venues. So, not just in amphitheaters, but in parking lots and parks. And so, we want to try to tear down barriers to access and tear down those traditional obstacles that make people think ballet is not for me.

IAIN DRAYTON: Well, thank you Kara. With heartfelt thanks from me on behalf of Goldman Sachs, thank you very much Kara. This was wonderful.

KARA MEDOFF BARNETT: Thank you so much Iain.

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