

# BAZAAR MUSE

A NEWLY *minted DANSEUSE ÉTOILE* with the PARIS OPERA Ballet, JAPANESE-NEW ZEALANDER ballerina HANNAH O'NEILL is the TOAST of the CITY of LIGHT

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

AS A TALENTED YOUNGSTER, Hannah O'Neill aspired to appear on the world's most celebrated stages as a ballet dancer; appearing on runways was never part of the plan. Yet that was exactly what the 31-year-old recently found herself doing when she closed Yohji Yamamoto's Pour Homme autumn/winter 2024 show. At her fitting, she was casually told that she might be walking alongside someone, only discovering pre-show that her mystery companion would be none other than German filmmaker Wim Wenders. "He was so cool," she says. "Just before we started walking, he was like, 'I think Mr Yohji likes it if we're very natural. The music [makes me feel] as if we're going for a walk by the sea.' I totally went with that flow."

But it was nowhere near the surprise that greeted O'Neill at the conclusion of a performance of the late choreographer George Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial* in March 2023 when, in line with time-honoured tradition and without warning, the company announced her elevation to *danseuse étoile* – the highest ranking the company has to offer – in front of the audience. "[It was] a little confronting," she recalls. "I felt a bit too exposed. I almost just wanted to hide away. But it's a very special moment that you get to share with the audience."

As a Japanese-New Zealander dancer at the world's oldest ballet company, O'Neill is a member of an exclusive club. Indeed, not only is she one of the company's few non-French dancers, she is the first Australasian to receive the accolade of *danseuse étoile*.

I meet O'Neill at the Opéra Bastille, where just hours later she will be dancing the role of Kitri, the heroine in *Don Quixote*. She warmly welcomes me into her dressing room, a sparsely elegant space stocked with a copious supply of pointe shoes, switching seamlessly between English and French, a language she picked up after moving to Paris at the age of 18 and which she speaks fluently with the lightest of accents.

Born in Japan (her mother is Japanese while her Kiwi father is a former professional rugby player) O'Neill began dancing aged three. She studied at Tokyo's Kishibe Ballet Studio, then at the Mt Eden Ballet Academy after the family moved to Auckland when she was eight, before landing a scholarship to The Australian Ballet School. During her training she picked up numerous prizes, most notably, in 2009, the Prix de Lausanne (an international ballet competition open to dancers of all nationalities aged 15 to 18) – often called the "Olympics of Ballet" for young dancers.

Her career aspirations aged 16 or 17? "I saw myself at the end of the corridor, having a wonderful career in Australia," she says, in reference to The Australian Ballet, which shares a building with The Australian Ballet School in Melbourne's Southbank. "But the Paris Opera Ballet had always been a dream of mine." She decided to enter their yearly external audition – a long shot, given that the vast majority of dancers come from their own

school. "When I got [the contract], there was no hesitation there – I pretty much ran and took it."

Joining the company at 18, O'Neill's rise through the ranks was swift. She was promoted three times in three years, gaining the second-highest title of première *danseuse* in 2016 – the only current member of the company to have ascended to the title so rapidly. She thrived under the tutelage of then director Benjamin Millepied, who picked O'Neill, then a *sujet*, to dance *Odette/Odile* in *Swan Lake*. It was a considerable honour, being a role usually offered only to *danseuses étoile*.

Despite her seemingly unstoppable early success, O'Neill's trajectory hasn't always been smooth sailing. She was born with an extra rib, an anomaly which ultimately required surgery in 2018. She also suffered a blood clot that could have proved fatal had it not been dealt with in time. "I was off [work] for about six months," she says. "We're a big company so when you're not there . . . you kind of become a nobody." This came just after a change of company director, and under Millepied's successor, Aurélie Dupont, O'Neill was overlooked for further promotions.

"I questioned myself a lot – like, *What do I have to do so that they like me?*" she recalls. "[Yet] even though I wasn't dancing the roles that I had always wanted, I still loved being on stage. That was my saviour."

It was the appointment of Spaniard José Martinez as the new director of dance in December 2022 that seemed to reverse O'Neill's fortunes, with her nomination as an *étoile* announced mere months after Martinez's arrival.

Despite her lack of runway experience, O'Neill's life frequently intersects with the world of fashion, with which she sees clear parallels to her own discipline – namely, "excellence and the search for perfection". She has worn costumes crafted by Chanel and Balmain

while performing, is a front-row regular at Paris Fashion Week and has fronted a campaign for luxury Belgian brand Delvaux. She mentions an upcoming fashion-related project that is in the works; it's too early to share details for the moment, but it's got her excited.

O'Neill has already lived in four countries: Japan, New Zealand, Australia and now France, where she has spent her entire adult life. But, as she says, "home is where the dog is" – which would mean Auckland, where her golden retriever, Jonty, and her parents reside. But she relishes life in her adopted city. "I've got amazing friends and my apartment here," she says. "My life now is in Paris."

Now she's at the pinnacle of her career, I ask her: where to from here? "I have the title now and I'm so honoured, but it hasn't changed how I work," she explains. "[Yet] there's a certain sensation of liberty. I can go on stage and just dance for myself." HB

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