

“Violette Verdy: Celebrating One of the Great Ballerinas of the 20th Century”

Presentation of the President’s Medal for Excellence
to Violette Verdy

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie
President

Indiana University

Musical Arts Center

Saturday, October 5, 2013

8:00 p.m.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Gwyn.

Good evening.

Before we all settle in to enjoy a wonderful evening of ballet, I want to take a moment to say a few words about the woman whose accomplishments we celebrate tonight and to make a special announcement.

Distinguished Professor Violette Verdy is one of the greatest ballerinas from an era of great dancers and choreographers, and she is an Indiana University treasure.

Her remarkable achievements as a dancer, teacher, and administrator in several of the world’s foremost dance companies and ballet schools have garnered her international acclaim.

2. A LEADING BALLERINA OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Violette was born Nelly Guillerm in Pont-L'Abbe in northwest France.

She began her dancing career in 1945 as a soloist with the Ballets des Champs Elysée, later called Les Ballets de Paris.

She toured the United States for the first time in 1953 and, five years later, was invited to join the New York City Ballet as principal dancer, a position she held for 18 years until her retirement from the stage in 1976.

While at the New York City Ballet, she danced more than 25 principal roles. The legendary choreographer and director George Balanchine created many roles especially for her.

She also appeared as a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre and the London Festival Ballet, as well as a guest principal dancer with many of the world's leading dance companies.

She starred in the 1949 film, *Dream Ballerina*, the 1955 film *The Glass Slipper*, and was the subject of a 1978 biography and two documentaries.

She also choreographed for several national and international ballet companies over the course of her illustrious career.

3. FROM PERFORMER TO TEACHER

The legendary dancer Rudolf Nureyev remarked that the first time he saw Violette Verdy dance, he was struck immediately by her style and phrasing. He also noted that

“she has another great gift—articulacy. She can express her ideas with a clarity and intelligence and a choice of vivid images,” Nureyev said.

She put that gift to use after she retired from the stage, as she has dedicated her post-performance life to training future generations of dancers and to working as an artistic director and advisor to leading ballet companies.

In 1977, she was the first woman to be appointed artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet. She held this position until 1980, when she was invited to be co-artistic director of the Boston Ballet.

In 1984, she began teaching with the New York City Ballet.

Since 1996, she has been a professor of dance in the Ballet Department at Indiana University. She was named a Distinguished Professor in 2005. The Jacobs School of Music received an endowment in 2010 to support the first faculty chair in classical ballet in the nation, and named Professor Verdy as the inaugural recipient of the Kathy Ziliak Anderson Chair in Ballet.

Verdy holds three honorary doctorates and has received numerous awards, including the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres, conferred by the president of France. In 2003, she received the Artistic Achievement Award of the School of American Ballet in New York City.

Tonight, I want to take just a moment to add to those honors, and I ask Professor Verdy to join me onstage.

4. BESTOWING THE PRESIDENT'S MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Professor Verdy, for your vital contributions to the arts as one of the premier ballet dancers of the 20th century, and in recognition of all that you have done for Indiana University and for dance education, it is my great pleasure to present you with the highest honor an Indiana University president can bestow: the President's Medal for Excellence.

This medal is given to recognize exceptional distinction in public service, service to Indiana University, achievement in a profession, or extraordinary merit and achievement in the arts, humanities, sciences, education, and industry.

Violette, in every one of these categories, your distinction has been extraordinary during your remarkable career.

So, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the trustees of Indiana University, and in gratitude for your extraordinary contributions to the arts and to Indiana University and its students, I am privileged and honored to present you with the President's Medal for Excellence.

Congratulations.