thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Alexander Iziliaev

What is Revolutionary about PA Ballet’s Revolution?

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

At the Pennsylvania Ballet’s recent program, *Revolution*, artistic director Angel Corella presents works by choreographers who, he claims in program notes, are revolutionary. Featured are David Dawson’s *The Third Light* (2010), George Balanchine’s *Square Dance* (1957), and Brian Sanders’ *Chicken Bone Brain,* a world premiere.

A rumbling recording of blaring horns plays as the house lights are still on; the audience remains chatting, murmuring through this break in traditional ballet beginnings. The house dims and the curtains open just enough to frame a man running on a treadmill. On the dark stage, this perpetual non-traveler’s muscles catch the low light as he rolls forward off the machine. The masking ascends to reveal an intricate set: long, thin, bone-shaped props suspended in the air. Masses of male and female dancers, wrapping their bodies around one another, hold up smaller “bones” of various shapes and lengths. The dancers soon twirl off, leaving three men onstage to climb onto the suspended bones.

This, Sanders’ *Chicken Bone Brain*, is abstract and strange: an exploration of how rigid props can combine with fluid dancing to create contrast in textures. The male dancers become the focus, their strength on display as the suspended props carry their bodies in arcs that skim the stage floor. The women also perform to their strengths, washing across the stage with impossibly fast chaînés en pointe, terrifyingly close together, their arms stretched over long bones held across their shoulders. The audience applauds their spins, in the tradition of appreciating ballet’s display of challenging technical accomplishments.

Dawson’s *The Third Light,* exploring various interpretations of “light” and “illumination,” begins the evening’s production. As I observe this work, I see it as compositionally undeveloped, although a valuable experience for the dancers performing it: these young dancers, in PAB’s largely new company, may have felt challenged by the fast, contemporary arm wrappings, hip undulations, and breaking of body lines. Breezing past the formalism and clarity of shape one might see in more classical works, *The Third Light* is a technical feat

for the dancers. However, I see little choreographic cohesion, too many fleeting, eye-contactless interactions, and not enough stillness, unison, or change of pace to help me grasp any unifying concept behind the work. In comparing this work with Sanders, I am left wondering if ballet choreographers learn the craft the same way that modern/contemporary choreographers learn it, or if there are, in fact, fundamental differences in *how* ballet composition is conceived.

Balanchine's *Square Dance* is a breath of fresh air after Dawson's opener. This is what PAB *does*: fast, clean, and formal technique. And they're doing it better than ever! It takes my breath away when the male dancers perform pirouettes, all with the exact same rate of revolution, evoking the grandeur of windmills pushed by the same breeze. It is stunning to see such clarity and unison. On a different day, I would likely critique the Balanchine work's technical, stripped style, devoid of narrative, a style that now seems outdated, though revolutionary for its time. But when placed next to *The Third Light*, I appreciate the clarity of form, the musicality of the work, the speed of the dancing, the performers' pleasant expressions, their eye contact when dancing with each other. It is everything that the Dawson dance was not, and I realize the importance of contrast both in choreography and in programming an evening of works.

Observing this program as a modern/contemporary-dance audience member, I found *Chicken Bone Brain* to be vastly more interesting than the other two works on the program. But I wonder how ballet audiences felt about Sander's work. Though it was met with thunderous applause, some ballet traditions were challenged: beginning the music while the house lights were up, the darkly lit stage, and the prominence of aerial technique. My sensibilities were challenged as well, knowing that a modern-dance audience isn't so quick to applaud technical feats in the middle of a performance. It makes me question the collision of these traditions. Is this the "revolution" that Corella was going for? If so, it hardly seems *revolutionary* as these forms have been crossing over for decades now. I think of Twyla Tharp's long history of creating ballets for Joffrey, American Ballet Theatre, and other companies, and PAB's last season, with work by Trisha Brown.

Perhaps it is revolutionary to have a local, non-ballet choreographer set a work on PAB, and to feature that work in their season (as opposed to *Shut Up and Dance*, which regularly presents collaboration of this kind). Sanders was a fantastic choice for this trial—his ballet was clearly defined, mature, and appealing to young audience members. Let's see more of these collaborations in PAB's future.

Pennsylvania Ballet, *Revolution,* Merriam Theater, November 10-13. http://paballet.org/revolution

By Kalila Kingsford Smith
November 19, 2016