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Photo: Alexander Iziliaev

A Tribute and a Promise – PAB Closes out the Season

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Amy Aldridge danced her last show with Pennsylvania Ballet on Sunday, May 14. Artistic director Angel Corella prepared a rich palette to feature this 23-year company ballerina—and to make a statement about PAB’s future. For those fans who endured the [dramatic personnel shifts](#) Corella effected a year ago—when about 40% of the company members whom he had inherited, on taking over artistic leadership in 2014, either got pink slips or judiciously announced their own plans to work elsewhere—this program was both a tribute to a long-standing favorite dancer and a promise that the company would continue to move in new directions.

Aldridge was featured in three works throughout the program, one a premiere by company choreographer-in-residence Matthew Neenan, and two from the selection of five pas de deux that constituted the last act of the show, each a snippet from works announced for the 2017–18 season. Neenan’s *Somnolence*, a world premiere, reflected the evening’s theme, demarcating the “old” PAB and the new. The corps dancers opened the ballet lolling and tossing on the floor, shifting their pillows under and around their restlessly twitchy bodies. Upstage, in a slow, bent-kneed shuffle, Aldridge, Ian Hussey (who joined PAB in 2004) and James Ihde (joined in 1995) crossed the stage, each holding their pillow differently, but all apparently in a daze. Jermel Johnson (joined in 2003), emerged from an upstage mountain of pillows, slithering down to the stage floor. Around them danced more recently hired companions—the tiny but endlessly stretchable Oksana Maslova (joined in 2014), the charming Dayesi Torriente (2016), and energetic Alexander Peters (2011). Having seen a number of Neenan ballets at both PAB and [BalletX](#), I was relieved here to note the thematic coherence of *Somnolence*, along with the signature humor and quirky movement I’ve come to expect from this choreographer, who sometimes gets stuck in his own clichés or splashes too many ideas into a work for me to grasp. Here, the lead dancers held consistent characterizations, pillows were vigorously used as everything from comforting cushions to interpersonal barriers and even weapons, and the beautiful costuming and sets by Steven Earl Weber were both soothing and arresting. A longtime admirer of Aldridge, Neenan seemed inspired by her imminent departure to do his best in this tribute. It ended with the leads processing toward the audience, each carrying a white pillow, which, as they reached downstage, they dropped to the floor. Aldridge’s, however, turned out to be anything but cushioned; apparently made of

ceramic, it landed with a shatter that drew all the dancers to attention, and sent a pang through viewers' hearts.

Aldridge also danced, with Craig Wasserman, in George Balanchine's *Tarantella* (1987), a virtuosic play on the Italian folkdance, and she was clearly having a ball. Her final pas, with Peters, was an excerpt from Balanchine's *Rubies*: it absolutely brought down the house. As I was racing out to make my train, the audience was on its feet, clapping and shouting in heartfelt homage to a ballerina who, over the course of nearly a quarter century, they have come to think of as their own.

Two of the other pas de deux showcased Corella's newer hires. The "Black Swan" from *Swan Lake* (Marius Petipa) was exquisitely realized by Mayara Pineiro and Sterling Baca, whose technical virtuosity and dramatic skills whetted my appetite to see them in the full production. Similarly, Maslova and Arian Molina Soca elegantly shared a duet from *Sleeping Beauty*, in which their perfect timing and synchronicity etched each phrase. Even his fusty costume (he looked like a waiter) could not obscure his princely artistry. Two dancers who survived Corella's cuts were paired in Balanchine's "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux: Lillian Di Piazza floated—wafted—through this gracious choreography, supported perfectly by Hussey. She has reached new heights under Corella's guidance, and Hussey remains a delight.

The program opened with the PAB premiere of Christopher Wheeldon's spunky *Rush* (2003), to music by Bohuslav Martinu, conducted by Beatrice Jona Affron. The work's precision, clarity of form, inventive partnering, and stunning color palette, designed by Jon Morell and lit by Mark Stanley, provided the contemporary mastery that the art of ballet needs to survive. While PAB continues to experience [sudden](#) and [puzzling](#) personnel changes, it also promises the molding of a stellar company of dancers performing current and stunning work, along with regular displays of old chestnuts, vivaciously presented. May it settle, take root, and flourish.

Re/Action, Pennsylvania Ballet, May 14, <https://www.paballet.org/>

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