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Photo: Alexander Izilaev

Rio Retires; Two Ballerinas Talk

by Julie Diana

After ten years of gracing the stage with Pennsylvania Ballet, Riolama Lorenzo retires this week. Her earlier stint with New York City Ballet was marked by a mentor/mentee relationship with the legendary Jerome Robbins. Her flexibility, precision and range coupled with her deep and ever-compelling presence helped the Cuban-born dancer rise from corps to principal here in three short years. Lorenzo and thINKingDANCE writer Julie Diana, also a PA Ballet principal, enjoyed a conversation about Lorenzo's career, family and what's to come.

Why are you retiring?

Because I think I'm ready. I'm at that point in my life. As a mother of two it's too much without any family around and I've done the roles that I wanted to do: *Carmen*, *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Prodigal Son*, stuff like that.

As you look back on your career, what are some of your favorite memories?

All the places I've been. It's funny how you can mix something you love to do with traveling and sight-seeing. Here, at PA Ballet, you can even have a family while you're still working. I couldn't imagine being at [New York] City Ballet and having a family. I guess I have two sets of memories, one from City Ballet and one from here.

At City Ballet, it was Jerry [Robbins]. Working with him and how he made me feel. He picked me at the School [of American Ballet], that's where it began. We used to kid around and call ourselves Jerry's kids! When I joined the company, all the principal parts I did were his ballets. He made me feel special at a time when I was extremely self conscious, extremely self critical. I think that's what kept me there for so long.

How long were you at City Ballet and why did you leave?

I didn't stay around for a long time after he [Robbins] passed. I joined City Ballet in 1995 and left in 2000. I was in Miami for two years when I met Javi and he's the one that pretty much brought me here to PA Ballet. He was starting med school at Hopkins, in Baltimore, MD which is only an hour and a half drive from here. I still felt like I had something to give, I guess. I was still young, 24. I've been here 10 years, double the time I was at City Ballet.

What did you do in Miami?

I went to college and taught. When I decided to go back to dancing, I took some classes at Miami City Ballet and at the school I was teaching in with my mom. I trained for about three months to get back in shape to come audition here!

How did your parents feel about your dancing again?

My dad was ecstatic! My dad's my biggest fan. I was actually going to stop dancing when I got pregnant, but my dad said, "After all this time, you're not going to have a retirement show and go out like a ballerina?" And I said, "Well, Dad, I can come back and have a retirement show. But in turn, you can come up from Miami for those months and take care of the kids!" And that's what he did.

My mom's very happy that I'm retiring. She danced, so she knows how hard it is, how painful it is, what a strain it is. I've danced a good number of years and she's happy that I'm finally hanging up my pointe shoes. I was 17 when I started with City Ballet.

What do you plan to do after you retire?

I won't do any gigs. I'm the type of person that can't do it halfway. I can't! I'll probably teach once Rio starts preschool. Javi's going to have a really rough schedule for the next two years - he already graduated from a fellowship in pediatric cardiology but he wants to do a second fellowship in pediatric intensive care. I don't know how much free time I'm going to have.

What do you think you'll miss the most?

I'll miss you guys! My good friends, that camaraderie. Being active, having a routine. I'm very routine oriented. I'll have to find a new one. That'll probably be the hardest thing for me.

And the performing?

You know, not so much. It's the getting up and having something to do, having a purpose. Honestly, performing lately has been more nerve racking than anything else. I think the older you get, the more scared you get. That's why I'm glad I'm finishing with something where I don't have to do tricks.

What will you most want to show Rio and Sebastian when they're older?

My dad's got that covered. He's got videos from when I first started, to school-age dancing, to City Ballet videos, videos from here. My dad always asks for the posters. He's got a shrine at his house!

How did you feel dancing through each pregnancy?

I was feeling great with my first; I felt amazing! I have all these pictures from *Giselle* and I know that he's in my belly. I did *Serenade* after that, 4 ½ or 5 months pregnant with Sebastian. It was a good experience because it kept me in shape. Totally the opposite experience with Rio! With Rio, my body did not want to dance.

How has motherhood changed you as a dancer?

It changes everything. Dancers are naturally focused on themselves, we come in every day, we look at ourselves in the mirror, we have to be detail oriented with everything that we do. And once I had Sebastian, I was thinking, "What do I need to do for him?" Dancing became more of a "me" time luxury, rather than the vanity of it all. Which I think helps because you're not overthinking things and you enjoy the moments that you have to yourself.

Has there been one moment, either here or in NY, that really stands out for you?

It was Jerry coming up to me at a party. He had just put together *West Side Story* Suite for the company. I was one of the America girls and an understudy for Anita. He sent me to take voice lessons. It was major, because I had just gotten into the company! He wanted it to be real onstage, and I was a little reserved. But at one of the galas, we had been drinking cocktails and were on the dance floor. I felt him just standing there watching us and then I see him shuffling over to me. He taps me on the shoulder, a big smile on his face, and said, "This is what I want to see onstage!" I said, "But Jerry, I'm drunk!"

He was hilarious, that man! I loved him. I loved him so much.

Riolama Lorenzo's final performance with Pennsylvania Ballet will take place during the run of Pushing Boundaries: Forsythe & Neenan (2/9-12) on Sunday, February 12 at 2pm at the Merriam Theater. paballet.org

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