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Photo: Jacob Bucko

Philadelphia Dance Theatre Breaks Ground With Alumni Performances and a New Venue

by Lauren Putty White

We all know the story. Great artists, big and small, had their live performance opportunities come to a halt once the pandemic hit. It's no wonder that now, with hope in the near horizon, dancers everywhere are beginning to grace outdoor stages. On a perfectly warm Saturday, [Philadelphia Dance Theatre](#) presented a wonderful alumni concert in their new space outside their Mount Airy home. A beautiful white marley stage with cobblestone walls as a backdrop was surrounded by greenery and woods in the studio's backyard. The stage's welcoming vibe was similar to that of the glorious venue, [Jacob's Pillow](#) in Massachusetts. Returning to this place brought nostalgic happiness; many of the faces I would see that night were those of my former students who have gone on to become game changers in the dance world.

I believe that School Director, Joy Capponi, is living her true calling in life. The fruit of her labor is evident in the caliber of her current and former students. These kids come out like machines, ready to take on any path in the industry. PDT is a pre-professional ballet school that not only provides quality classical training but also exposes students to a plethora of well-respected choreographers and styles. Having had the privilege of teaching some of these alumni when they were in their teens, I was satisfied to see the maturity and artistic development in their creative practice after some time apart. To be a witness to such growth made me feel like a proud parent!

Though the show varied in levels, mixing students with the professionals at times, one common thread woven throughout this performance was pure passion. As I honed in on the professionals in this showcase, their performances were exceptional. One of the first alumni solos was an exquisite contemporary ballet piece by [Patricia Brown](#), entitled *In the End, We Begin*. [Amber Brown](#) gave a sultry and rich performance, accentuating feelings of longing and solitude through simplistic beauty. Instead of seeing a solo hang on virtuosity like multiple turns and the height of the leg, I appreciated the clarity of Brown's elongated limbs in space. The thought-provoking trio, *Rules for Living*, was crafted by [*Kirsten Kaschock](#) along with two alums [Kiley Dolaway](#) and [Lila Kushner](#). One senior

student, who happened to be Kaschock's son, Bishop Kaschock, moved with maturity, command and strength beyond his years. Likewise, Dolaway and Kushner eloquently threw their bodies across the stage, looping, pulling, lifting and frolicking carefreely, meeting in moments of unison. The voice at the end of the song was monotone yet haunting, and left the audience with, "Thoughts are things. You'll never be alone on this earth." Perhaps these three powerhouse bodies were a physical representation of thoughts and relational experiences.

After intermission [Melissa Chisena](#) served a delicious contemporary Italian number *La Notte* by showcasing alumni altogether in sensual black dresses and a mysterious, luring presence. The ladies confidently partnered each other in tango-like fashion with soft yet ferocious femininity. Choreographer [Joe Gonzalez](#) decided to take the prima out of ballerina with an unpredictable contemporary solo on Analiese Capponi, another alum who happens to be the director's daughter. Wearing a green leotard with her long hair loose, Capponi taunted us with her clean aesthetic, bold angular lines, and fragile qualitative contrasts. Transitioning from solid, elongated positions to broken shapes, there was no doubt that Capponi's movement vocabulary expanded beyond her classical roots.

In the final piece we were reunited again with Kushner and Dolaway with a conceptual stunner *Like A God*. Dressed in black suits with white button ups, the two were the complete opposite of the stark, "well-put" appearance they gave. A staticky television onstage played a frightening image of the movie *The Ring*. I couldn't shake the screen's image as Dolaway bent creepily on top of the prop, hair flying, while Kushner seamlessly threw her limbs around with sustained control. This suspenseful beginning transitioned into a rugged blues song *Loan me a dime* as Dolaway took center stage, crawling and twisting her body [b-girl](#) style. The athletic execution pulled at my gut and brought me into the heaviness that she embodied. There was contracting, shaking and shimmying, cradling moments of despair along with ruthless and fearless partnering between the two dancers. It was too powerful for me to blink.

I left feeling so full and inspired of how adaptable and strong-willed these young dancers have been during this time. Though I was in their lives for a short period, I am still grateful to have played a small role in where they stand today and it brings me great joy. Coming out of the quarantine tunnel, it gave me the much needed reminder that art has life even in stillness, and that possibilities truly are endless when you just believe.

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[Breaking Ground and Alumni Concert](#), Philadelphia Dance Theatre, May 22nd-23rd.

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