



On Solid Ground

Director Roy Kaiser brings stability to Pennsylvania Ballet.



Top: *Requiem for a Rose* by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Above: Roy Kaiser

BY BRENDA DIXON GOTTSCHILD

It was one of those special moments, a happy coincidence that lifts our spirits and makes us laugh out loud. The opening night of Pennsylvania Ballet's 45th anniversary season last October was the same night the Phillies won the World Series. It was the city's first major sports championship in a quarter century and, for ballet lovers, a testament to the excellence of our artistic athletes that this dance company has survived. On that unforgettable night Broad Street, the city's cultural lifeline, was flooded with baseball and ballet fans, both cheering for their teams.

Without a doubt, and despite the global financial crunch, this is an amazing time of stability and creativity for Pennsylvania Ballet. In 1994 nobody would have predicted that the company would be healthy and wise and out of the red in 15 years. Back in 1982 the dancers were told to go home, and the company closed down for several weeks. The founder, Balanchine protégée Barbara Weisberger, and artistic director Benjamin Harkavy resigned, and former New York City Ballet principal dancer Robert Weiss was named artistic director. Then Weiss resigned in 1990, replaced by former New York City Ballet dancer Christopher d'Amboise. In 1991, bankruptcy was avoided by the "Save the Ballet" campaign, initiated by d'Amboise, raising a million dollars in two



Top to bottom: Balanchine's *Serenade*; Martha Chamberlain in Ben Stevenson's *Cinderella*; Robbins' *The Concert*; Julie Diana and James Ady in Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*.



weeks. D'Amboise left in 1994. To make a long story short, the company had six managing directors and four artistic directors between 1988 and 1998. Things didn't look good.

But hope was alive, standing in the wings. Enter Roy Kaiser, who became interim artistic director in 1994 and artistic director in 1995, and is still going strong. Dancing since he was a child along with his four (count 'em) brothers, Kaiser was hired in 1979 by Weisberger and promoted to principal in 1990. By 1987 he also became assistant ballet master and was named ballet master when he retired from the stage in 1992. He became associate artistic director in 1993, under d'Amboise. In 1994 he was appointed interim artistic director, taking over from Jeffrey Gribler, principal and ballet master who had served as interim director for the six chaotic months immediately following d'Amboise's departure. This season Kaiser celebrates his 15th year in charge of the company and his 30th year with it.

In the aftermath of its beginning as an outpost of New York City Ballet—and without losing its Balanchine backbone—Kaiser has expanded Pennsylvania Ballet's repertory, increased its personnel, and created a nurturing atmosphere for its family of dancers. Working to maintain a supportive environment, he wants everyone who works here—dancers, musicians, composers, choreographers—“to feel a freedom and a comfort that will allow them to be as creative and expressive as possible. You don't get that if peo-

ple are on edge or worried. I try to make it a nice place to work.”

Although he has guested with other companies, Kaiser prides himself on having lived his artistic career with PAB. Why did he stay, through thick and thin? “No matter which role I was playing in my different incarnations,” he says, “I always felt surrounded by phenomenal artists who I think make the company look so incredible. It always came back to being inspired by the people I was working with and the work I was doing.”

Like Kaiser, the people he's talking about are in it for the long haul. His artistic staff includes ballet master Jeffrey Gribler and ballet mistress Tamara Hadley, both former principals. Hadley's husband, William DeGregory, also a former principal, directs Pennsylvania Ballet II, the junior company that performs regionally and shoulders the ballet's extensive outreach program. All three came on board in 1975. Principal ballerina Martha Chamberlain has grown artistically, gaining depth of character portrayal, since coming in as a teenager 20 years ago. Meredith Rainey, a freelance choreographer, retired as a soloist in 2006 after a 17-year stint with the company. And Matthew Neenan, PAB's youthful choreographer in residence since 2007, danced in the company from 1994 to 2007 (“On the Rise,” Feb. 2005). With the right kind of leadership, long tenures make for artistic integrity and the passing on of a legacy. Chamberlain gives Kaiser “full credit for bringing me up through the ranks and giving me promotions at the right time.”

With a good nose for balancing tradition and innovation, Kaiser has both departed from and perpetuated the Balanchine-heavy legacy framed by Barbara Weisberger. Unlike his predecessors in the artistic director position, he is not a choreographer. “That's been an advantage,” he asserts. “It allows me to step back, look at this company as a blank canvas, and bring in the influence of other artists. In addition to many of the new works we've created here—and Matt Neenan fills a large part of that area now, having choreographed 11 or 12

Top to bottom: Paul Kohlik; Alexander Iziliaev; Paul Kohlik; Paul Kohlik; all Courtesy PAB

works so far—I've also been able to look at other works out there that I think are appropriate for my dancers and important exposure for our audiences."

Under Kaiser's leadership the company has enjoyed 28 world premieres and 41 company premieres and is still counting. Over the years he's introduced new work from choreographers not previously represented. Gribler singles him out as "the best of the four directors I've worked with at programming." Chamberlain agrees. "He's very good at putting together programs," she says, "like starting off the new season so strong, with *Rodeo* (de Mille), *Theme & Variations* (Balanchine), and a new ballet by Matt Neenan." The company will return to the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, for Thanksgiving week to perform their acclaimed production of Balanchine's *Nutcracker* and bring it home to the Academy of Music for December—a Christmas tradition in Philadelphia. The new season lineup sparkles with contrasts of tradition and innovation. It includes an all-Chopin program of Robbins favorites (*In the Night* and *The Concert*) and Matthew Neenan in *March*, and a combined program of Balanchine, Robbins, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, and William Forsythe in *May*. Come June, John Cranko's highly praised *Romeo and Juliet*, rarely performed in the U.S., will close the season.

The range of Kaiser's 39 dancers is broad enough to embrace a repertoire of works by the tried and true, including Balanchine, Bournonville, Tharp, Martins, de Mille, Forsythe, Cranko, and Robbins. But they also shine in works by a younger generation of choreographers, including Neenan, Lopez Ochoa, and Christopher Wheeldon—whose radical remake of *Swan Lake* from 2004 is still in the rep.

Kaiser likes dancers "who can perform," he says emphatically. "I have really well-trained classical dancers, most of whom have other influences in their training. I look for powerful personalities, big movers. I love people who eat up space."

Although he's brought this ensemble to places undreamed of when it

began in 1963, Kaiser's tastes echo Weisberger's. She is an honorary trustee of the company and, once the planned PAB school is up and running, she'll be an artistic advisor. "Barbara Weisberger still talks about a spirit that comes across when the company performs," Kaiser says. "A lot of what's here today is an outgrowth of the same spirit. There's a sense of ensemble, so that whether or not you're a featured dancer, there's an equal sense of responsibility to the performance." As Meredith Rainey puts it, "PAB is full of individuals who work as a team. We all had our own personalities and looked completely different onstage, but when you put us all together, we all work together."

A sense of community has flourished, largely because veterans like Gribler, deGregory, Hadley, Chamberlain, Rainey—and Kaiser—have been there to offer a continuity of core values while also responding to the need for innovation and renovation. "For the dancers who've been there a long time, you pass that family feeling along," says Rainey.

The current financial climate is a challenge to all arts organizations. But Kaiser contends that nonprofits are a little better off in this climate than most. "We're used to dealing with difficult financial scenarios. If you're creative, there are ways to address financial pressures and still accomplish your goals. Through the years we've built up a resolve to get through." Kaiser's resolve, tempered by his laid-back personality,



Megan Dickinson and Ian Hussey in Matthew Neenan's *Carmina Burana*. Below: Riolama Lorenzo in Wheeldon's *Swan Lake*.

makes for an easy fit for his dancers.

As Gribler quipped, "It's hard for me to believe that the man I used to do the second act of *Giselle* with, hung out with in the subways of Philadelphia when we were young and barhopping, has been such a great boss for the past 15 years!"

Kaiser has good reason to celebrate: His business acumen, artistic reach, fine-tuned sense of programming, and easygoing nature have stabilized this company, allowing its personality and character to flourish. He's a cool guy and an extraordinary leader. Happy anniversary, Roy!

Brenda Dixon Gottschild's most recent book is The Black Dancing Body (Palgrave Macmillan).



Alexander Iziliayev, Courtesy PAB; Rosalie O'Connor, Courtesy PAB