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Photo: Jeanne Ruddy Dance

Aging Bodies, Changing Times: Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company Takes Its Final Bow

By Annie Wilson

The traditional dance company model, with company class and daily rehearsals is going the way of the wild egret. Last week, I emailed Jeanne Ruddy a request to come watch a rehearsal for the Final Season performance of the Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company. The rehearsal schedule I received within Ruddy's reply made me salivate. Five days a week, JRDC dancers take company class, have a scheduled lunch break, and approximately four hours of rehearsal in the afternoon. To me, this is practically unheard of. I, and many of my colleagues, are used to running from one rehearsal to another, where perhaps there is a short warm-up before diving into a practice that is three to four hours per week, at most. I am used to packing a lunch with me to shove down my throat as I bike from the morning rehearsal to afternoon rehearsal or job. Yes, freelancing is the wave of the future, and that is what Ruddy intends to do next year. Instead of running a full-time company, she plans to "pursue individual artistic projects and be available to accept guest artist invitations, and to write."

The programming for the season finale had already been set before Ruddy made her decision to discontinue the company, and will feature three separate works. The piece that I had the chance to observe in rehearsal: *Out of the Mist... Above the Real*, is particularly appropriate for the group's final performance. This dance consists of four sections: "Childhood," "Youth," "Middle Age," and "Old Age," and is a literal representation of the four-painting series by Thomas Cole, [The Voyage of Life](#). It is scored by Daniel Brewbaker, who, like Ruddy, drew inspiration from Irish culture and poetry. What struck me most about what I saw was that the dance created a space to watch bodies of all different ages interact with a chorus of fit, twenty-something company members.

Zoe Shae Buzby plays the title character in the "Childhood" section, as a three-year old, and ten-year old Sophia Davis is "Youth." Ruddy herself stars in "Middle Age," and Brigitta Herrmann is "Old Age." I observed the latter two sections in rehearsal. It is a rare sight

to see the bodies of young professional dancers relegated to the background while an older body takes the spotlight.

Having danced in the Martha Graham Dance Company for ten years, Ruddy's body is clearly imprinted with Graham's technique and performance quality. Later, when I asked her about Graham's influence on her, she chuckled: "Sometimes, when I'm in the studio, I have to tell her to go away. It's a second language, you know, there's English, and then there's Graham." She told me she's been training hard since November to prepare for the role. But in this rehearsal each of her gestures looked as if they'd been performed similarly hundreds of times before, through decades of dancing.

Herrmann's dance was more contained than Ruddy's. It was the dance you might expect from a body that has been alive for over 70 years. The different sets of values embodied in these sections were striking—the young dancers leapt through the space, holding their legs in the air, reaching outwards and upwards. Herrmann didn't need all that fancy dance. Through her clarity of gaze, I was able to glimpse the dance through the eyes of someone who's seen a lot more than me. It was a startling reminder of how much dance audiences (and perhaps our greater contemporary culture) value that youthful gaze, since it is the one we see most often onstage. In this moment I considered our own discomfort with change, the aging process, what it inevitably leads to, and why we don't see elderly bodies as often onstage.

It's fitting that this piece, which aims to honor the aging process and the cycle of life, is what ushers the Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company out of existence, ushering in a new creative era for the artistic director and her dancers, and maybe even the new era of dance-making that is replacing the traditional company model. It will be seen with a world premiere (also fitting), *Game Drive*, and *MonTage a Trois*, which was originally an installation piece at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art Hamilton Galleries, restaged for the proscenium.

Final Season, Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company, Suzanne Roberts Theater, May 10th-12th, 8 pm. www.ruddydance.org

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May 3, 2012