

Pennsylvania Ballet's Angel Corella Debuts *Don Quixote* This Thursday

He drove around Barcelona shopping for castanets, fans and matador costumes.

by **SARAH JORDAN** • 2/29/2016, 8:26 a.m.

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Pennsylvania Ballet artistic director Angel Corella leading rehearsal. [photo by Alexander Iziliaev]

It feels a little bit like destiny that Pennsylvania Ballet's Spanish artistic director, Angel Corella, should stage his own interpretation of the iconic evening-length ballet *Don Quixote*. Corella, who retired as a principal from American Ballet Theatre in 2012, by his own

description says he's performed "a million versions" of *Don Quixote* and was entirely familiar with the charms of this sunny, comedic ballet known for its dazzling choreography. Corella also knew what he didn't like about the ballet — and has edited out the slow parts, streamlined the action and added authentic Spanish details — Spanish guitarists, Flamenco-inflected solos, as well as shawls, fans, castanets and matador costumes he bought last summer in Barcelona.

After observing a rehearsal recently at the company's North Broad street studios led by ballet master Charles Askegard — who will dance the title role — I was able to sit down with Corella to discuss *Don Quixote* and how this two-hour ballet will look with the Spaniard's personal touch. Choreographed by Marius Petipa in 1869 and based on the book by Miguel de Cervantes, the Spanish-themed ballet follows the chivalrous Don Quixote and his servant Sancho Panza as they help a young couple, Kitri and Basilio, overcome obstacles on the way to the wedding altar. It opens Thursday and runs through March 13 at the Academy of Music.

This is a huge, grand ballet with a lot going on. How is it progressing?

I finished setting the whole thing yesterday. I was a bit stressed. It's a long ballet with a lot of acting and a lot of things happening at the same time. I've seen and danced a million versions of *Don Quixote* but in some versions it's hard to understand what's going on, so I wanted to simplify some of the passages that were too long or unnecessary. I tried to make everything as clear as possible for anyone to understand, not just ballet aficionados. If there's anything about Spanish people it's that we are extremely clear about what we want.

There are several Don Quixote productions out there, why not use a previous staging?

I'm incredibly familiar with full-length ballets. I know them by heart, every single step. It's funny because I didn't have to go to any other productions or study any, how do you say, 'book of the steps' because I have the curse of photographic memory. So I memorize everyone's steps, besides my own.



[photo by Alexander Iziliaev]

That's a good thing, right?

Well, yes but also a curse. I go to sleep and my brain keeps going and going. So that was one of the reasons. I'm very familiar with every full-length ballet I've danced, not only one version but many versions. I also wanted to bring my thoughts on those different moments of what should be happening. Some of this production is really different, like the sets and the costumes, but it still has the same heart of the traditional *Don Quixote*.

Do you remember the first time you danced in *Don Quixote*?

Yes! It was an incredibly special moment. It was the very first full-length ballet that I ever did. It was the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House season [at ABT]. I was only 19, and it was a major thing. The first year I joined American Ballet Theater I was a soloist and within six months, I was promoted to principal dancer. It was still during the time they opened [the season] with a full-length ballet, and it was a big thing for whoever was doing opening night. It was Paloma Herrera, an Argentinian dancer, and myself. A lot of people were really upset because they gave it to me. Now they do a gala performance where every principal dances, and everyone is happy and no one complains. I still remember that fifteen minutes before the show started I was already in makeup and costume, and we had a rehearsal on stage just to make sure everything was okay.

How did it go?

Better than I expected. I don't remember exactly what I did, but people told me 'Every single turn, you were doing nine, ten pirouettes.' It was like out of this world. I just remember a feeling that I got at the end of the show. It was just euphoria. They said the audience was clapping like for 40 something minutes after the show. Our feet were really hurting because

we'd bow and then bow and people wouldn't go. It was pretty amazing.

Did you consider casting yourself as Don Q, Gamache, or your former role, Basilio?

Or Sancho Panza? [Angel laughs and pats his stomach] No, if I do something on stage in the future it would be something that none of the others dancers might be able to do or a very specific thing, but I think that it's kind of silly. It's not necessary. We have great dancers and great actors in the company.

Tell me about the casting of your ballet master — and former principal with New York City Ballet — Charles Askegard and resident choreographer and former dancer Matthew Neenan as the characters Don Quixote and Gamache.

I asked them and they said yes. It was really surprising that they were on board right away.

Why were you surprised?

Well, both of them have been dancers, great dancers, so sometimes some great dancers don't feel a character role is as important as dancing the main role. In this case, if I was the height of Charles Askegard [6'4"], I would love to do Don Quixote, because it is really important to have the right stage presence, the right personality to be able to carry those character roles. Matthew is incredible as Gamache. The great thing with Matthew is that being a choreographer, he understands right away if I tell him something to do and he improves it.

Tell me about your costume and prop shopping in Spain.

I had my Vespa, and I went around to these beautiful old fashioned shops off the tourist routes in Barcelona. They have these amazing shawls and headpieces and castanets and bull fighter hats and all of these wonderful things that usually cost a lot of money. I was able to buy them for a reasonable price.

I understand your mother embroidered many of the costumes.

My mom is a retired school teacher, and I mentioned to her that to have all of the costumes done the way I wanted was going to be really difficult. She said 'I love embroidering. I can help.' My mom did most of the embroidery on them because the hand labor would be so expensive and take so much time. Our costume department is incredible here and the costumes are looking incredible, but for that to be done by hand, it takes a lot of time. That's also one of the reasons she wanted to come here — just to see the costumes on stage. [laughs].

You're using an opera set. Why go with an opera set?

The sets are from San Diego Opera from *Don Quixote*. I actually started looking at ballet sets but I wasn't crazy about them because most of them do a backdrop and just a few houses. It doesn't feel real enough. I wanted to make it feel like a square of a town. When I saw the pictures of the set I was like 'That's exactly what it looks like in Spain.' But, it's a lot more complicated to put it on stage because these are proper houses. Most of them are whole units so the dancers can actually go inside.

Don Quixote is known for its spectacular dancing. For the non-dancer, can you describe what makes it so difficult?

It's the energy of the dancing. It's really high energy. There's not a moment when your energy goes low. In the second act in the gypsy camp just a little bit, but the rest of the ballet you're like fire. Most of the dancing is fast and is up on your feet, so by the end of the second act your calves are on your ears [laughs]! Your calves start to get really, really tight. There's a lot of partnering. Your back starts to suffer.

How about the risky one-handed lift Basilio does with Kitri? I was hoping to see that in rehearsal.

Ah yes the one-handed lift. Yeah, the partnering not only hurts your back and gets your arms tired, but also makes the calves get tighter, because to be partnering you have to grab the floor [with your feet] so you won't fall. So it's really demanding. *Don Quixote* and *Romeo* are the two ballets that are the hardest ballets for men to dance.

You have two new dancers, Mayara Pineiro and Etienne Diaz, dancing the leads. Can you tell me about that choice to get them up front and center?

If you're going to have a pair of dancers carry the whole ballet, it has to be a couple who's done it before. I had seen Etienne do the role, and I knew what he can do. I saw them both at University of Hartford where I was the artistic director of the summer program. At the end of the summer program we put together a *Don Quixote*, and he danced the main role. Mayara was dancing the Gypsy Lady. I could already see she was an unbelievable dancer. They have the right tension because they are a real couple. They just got engaged. It's not that I like to break up couples, because I hate doing that, but usually couples who are lovers in real life when they go on stage that tension disappears because they're too comfortable with each other. But because they are newly engaged, they still have that tension.

Where are you on opening night?

I'm usually at the back of the house by the wall, sometimes I sit down, but mostly I'm standing and moving around. The ushers are not very happy about that. Right before, I'm on stage talking to the dancers, making sure that everything is okay, talking to the costume department, making sure the dancers don't have makeup with eye lines going out to here, 'Your eyes aren't going to look bigger, but just that you have a long line under them.' Making sure that the headpieces, the hairpieces, that everything is okay. Then when I see that, I go to watch the show.

I was surprised to see how much comedy is in this ballet.

With this ballet you get absolutely everything. You get love, you get laughter, comedy, you get incredible dancing, amazing music, incredible sets and costumes and a fun love story. The whole story is incredibly funny, but with a very strong message — that money cannot buy love and love will always win. Also, Don Quixote's a dreamer so that if you dream really big, that in

the end, it will come true. So fight for your dreams and fight for your love.

Don Quixote, March 3-13, Academy of Music, Broad and Locust streets. paballet.org.