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September 03, 2019

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## Swan Song

Richmond Ballet dancer Maggie Small prepares for her final performances before retirement.

BY SAMANTHA WILLIS



Scott Elmquist

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"It never occurred to me that I wouldn't be a dancer," says Maggie Small in her measured way, her slender fingers wrapped around a cup of hot tea. She's perched gracefully on a plush chair in the lobby of the Richmond Ballet and sips as the happy voices of children float up the nearby stairs.

Soon, pupils of the School of Richmond Ballet's Minds in Motion dance camp troop by and Small smiles at the children. The energetic elementary- and middle-schoolers pause their chattering to smile back at her.

Small is a hometown star dancer of the Richmond Ballet, a standout ballerina entering her 16th — and final — season with the company. To see Small on stage is to witness a vision: She bounds into the air to the swell of orchestra strings, her face a mask of ecstasy and her limbs lines of fluid, seamless movement.

In three shows Sept. 27 through 29, she will end her career in the same way that she started it: performing John Butler's seminal classic "Carmina Burana," which Small first performed with the Richmond Ballet as an apprentice more than a decade ago.

"This will be my fourth performance of this particular piece," Small says. "This time will be very meaningful for me personally, not only because it will be my final time doing it, but also because I know and love it so well."

Small is a native of Richmond and grew up in the near West End. She began as a student in the School of Richmond Ballet when she was 4. She describes an idyllic, if busy, childhood.

"I took riding lessons, piano lessons," she says. Small was drawn to the arts early, and thanks to her father John Small, a Richmond-based guitarist, music was always a part of her life.

"Maggie tried piano and guitar, and she was good at both," her father says. "But her mother's influence was greater, thankfully." John says it was Small's mother, Ettrick native Vera, who encouraged her daughter to take dance lessons.

"[Vera] is the daughter of educators and became a teacher herself, but she had danced as a child," says Small, a native of Yorkshire, England, who made America his home in 1973. "Maggie absolutely dedicated herself to dance, and she flourished at it."

Small stuck with the ballet through her elementary, middle and high school years, becoming a trainee of the company before she turned 18. After graduation, she spent a year studying dance at New York University before returning to the Richmond Ballet as an apprentice. She joined the main company in 2006, and recently earned a bachelor of arts in performing arts through St. Mary's College of California.

After a lifetime of movement, Small will transition into her new role as a grants writer at the ballet in early October.

"My goal has always been to dance, but what I realize is that I love the art — teaching it, supporting it, sharing it," she says. Once she leaves the stage, she will be able "to advance the art of dance in a way I never have before, and that excites me."

Any reflection of Small's time dancing with the ballet would be incomplete without including her title role in "Portrait of Billie" in 2017, another of Butler's pieces originally featuring master dancer Carmen de Lavallade in the title role.

A former professor at the Yale School of Drama, de Lavallade spent several weeks coaching Small and the Richmond Ballet's main company for her performance as legendary singer Billie Holiday.

"It was truly the experience of a lifetime," Small says.

In January, de Lavallade, a 2017 Kennedy Center honors recipient, chose Small as the only dancer to perform alongside her in "Life of a Legend: Carmen de Lavallade" at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Other milestones include her performance with the Ballet at Linbury Theatre in the Royal Opera House in London, and appearing with Jessica Lang Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, the prestigious Massachusetts dance center and festival. Representing Richmond Ballet as a homegrown ballerina, Small has even been a cover girl for Dance Magazine.

Small reflects on the importance of representation in the world of dance, and acknowledges that the traditional American image of ballerinas and dancers has not always been culturally diverse. As a biracial woman, Small says she identifies as herself. Neither her father, who is white, nor her mother, who is black, put any limitations on her.

"I look up to dancers like [de Lavallade] and Virginia Johnson," a pioneering black ballerina, choreographer and artistic director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. "They have paved the way for us to have conversations about representation on stage, and how artists and companies can reach more diverse audiences."

Although her time as an artist is winding down, Small believes the arts are an appropriate way to heal a nation fractured by social and political divisions.

"Our humanity binds us all," she says. "Dance is a universal language; it is a visual representation of trust, communication, openness. It impacts every artist, but it also impacts the audience who experiences the art, even if they don't realize it."

Small will dance in all three performances of the Richmond Ballet's Contemporary Classics series, including "Theme & Variations" and "Carmina Burana" at Dominion Energy Center, accompanied by the Richmond Symphony, the Richmond Symphony Chorus, and Virginia Commonwealth University's Commonwealth Singers. Those shows run Sept. 27-29 and show times vary. Small will take her final bow on Sunday, Sept. 29, during the 2 p.m. performance.

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