

# The Ballerina Who Got Away Comes Back

By MARINA HARSS NOV. 2, 2016



Carla Körbes in Martha Graham's "Lamentation," which she will perform during Vail Dance Festival: ReMix at City Center. Teresa Wood

When the Pacific Northwest Ballet principal dancer Carla Körbes announced in 2014 that she would retire at the end of the next season, at 33, it came as a bit of a shock. Ms. Körbes, whose performances were a marvel of musicality and clarity, surely had many more years of dancing ahead of her. New Yorkers were especially stricken — they had had only a few glimpses of her in the past decade.

“I wasn’t having fun anymore,” she said recently via Skype, as she wrangled her 10-month-old son, Rafa, at home in Los Angeles, where she lives with her husband, Patrick Fraser, a photographer. Seemingly re-energized by her distance from the grind of company life and by her new job — she is associate artistic director of Benjamin Millepied’s [L.A. Dance Project](#) — she’s returning to the stage, but strictly on her own terms. She’ll perform three short works, including Martha Graham’s famous solo “Lamentation” and George Balanchine’s “Élégie,” at [Vail Dance Festival: ReMix](#) at City Center, beginning on Thursday.

Thirty-three is relatively young for a top dancer to retire, unless struggling with a major injury. Most stay as long as they can, partly because few make plans beyond their dancing careers. “I had in my mind I would stay until 40, 45 — my idols in Brazil danced until their 50s,” Ms. Körbes said. But, as she [said at the time](#) of the announcement, she found that she was tired of dancing through injuries.

For 10 years, Ms. Körbes, who is originally from Porto Alegre, Brazil, was a principal — the star, really — at [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#) in Seattle. New Yorkers thought of her as the one who got away. She had started her career at New York City Ballet in 2000, but left for Seattle five years later. She was hungry for a wider range of dance: “I wanted to do works by William Forsythe and Nacho Duato and Merce Cunningham and the classics.” (City Ballet’s repertory is more neoclassical, anchored in the ballets of George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins.) In the long run, though, it was this very diversity, and the lack of preparation that accompanied it, that led to her early exit.

The demands on high-level ballet dancers are greater than ever. One night they do exhausting, exacting classical ballets like “Swan Lake”; the next they are expected to take on contemporary works that require extreme flexibility, torque and ruthless attack. Rehearsal periods are brief because of financial constraints. The body has limits, and injuries are an unfortunate reality. Ms. Körbes’s breaking point came during a rehearsal for a new work in 2013. “I felt the process was kind of rushed,” she said, “and that was exactly what I didn’t want to do with my life anymore.”

Her final performance was in June 2015. She was nearly four months pregnant. “It was really sweet, knowing he was in there,” Ms. Körbes said of her son. She had no clear plans about whether or when she would dance again. She moved to Los Angeles, accepted Mr. Millepied’s offer to become his artistic associate at L.A. Dance Project, took a teaching position at the [Colburn School](#) — a performing arts school in Los Angeles — and had her baby. A year later, things haven’t quite settled.

And her job description at L.A. Dance Project is still in flux. “I work with Ben on getting the company in shape,” Ms. Körbes said. “I teach class. I lead rehearsals when they’re here. But it’s been uneven because the company has been on tour so much.”

Mr. Millepied said [in a recent interview](#) that he hoped she would also dance with the company. She is scheduled to appear at a gala next month in Christopher Wheeldon’s “After the Rain.” But she seems unsure about future appearances and, as she points out, L.A. Dance Project’s artists are not used to dancing on point. “It’s great to do both classical and contemporary work but the body needs preparation,” she said. She knows this better than anyone.

One place Ms. Körbes has felt comfortable is at Vail International Dance Festival, where Damian Woetzel is artistic director and which she has attended regularly since 2009. “For me, she stops time,” Mr. Woetzel said by phone between rehearsals for the festival’s New York run. “She inhabits space in an innately moving way.” Last year, because Ms. Körbes was pregnant, she planned only to teach and coach. But when another dancer couldn’t perform because of altitude sickness — Vail is 8,000 feet above sea level — Mr. Woetzel asked if she would step in.

“Did you bring your point shoes?” he asked her. She had. (“I used to pack them even when I was going to the beach!” she said.) So she put them on and danced “Élégie,” a solo Balanchine created for Suzanne Farrell just months before his death in 1983. ([Ms. Körbes’s quietly haunting rendition](#) was captured in a YouTube video.)

What Ms. Körbes loves about Vail is the care that goes into preparation. “You work all day,” she said. “All the dancers are there. It’s extremely collaborative.” This was the kind of work situation she had pined for as a company dancer.

Now, after retirement, she has been reminded of how good it feels to perform, so, cautiously, she is dancing again. The joy is back: “It’s so good, just how it used to be,” she said. “And that’s why I’m doing it.”