

Dance

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Catching up with PNB's Amanda Morgan on changes since the George Floyd protests

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Pacific Northwest Ballet corps de ballet dancer Amanda Morgan in Kent Stowell's "Swan Lake." (Angela Sterling)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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For ballerina Amanda Morgan, simply existing used to feel like a form of activism. Growing up Afro Latinx in the predominantly white world

of classical ballet, and then as the only Black ballerina in the Pacific Northwest Ballet company, she felt like her every action reflected on her whole community. But when protests broke out in response to George Floyd's murder, Morgan took to the streets. "When I see injustice, I'm going to take part in trying to stop it," she said.

Morgan was heavily [involved in protests](#) throughout the summer of 2020. When she was called back to work at PNB, she had to prioritize her health and safety, so her [activism evolved](#). Two years after her summer of street activism, Morgan says she's seen some real improvements, but she worries that people in the arts — and society at large — are too easily satisfied by surface changes. For now, she's focusing her activism on the arts. "That's where my calling is and where I'm needed," said Morgan.





Amanda Morgan takes part in Seattle’s protests against police brutality and racial profiling in 2020. (Courtesy of Amanda Morgan)

Morgan has already seen changes in ballet — like the shoes. Costume designers and choreographers often default to pink pointe shoes and tights, which emphasize the lines of a dancer’s legs — if the dancer has fair skin. Morgan says contemporary choreographers are often sensitive to this, but organizations tasked with maintaining a deceased choreographer’s legacy can be resistant to changing older ballets. After years of work with the George Balanchine Trust, PNB received permission for dancers to wear tights and shoes that match their skin tone in “The Nutcracker” for the first time this season.





Pacific Northwest Ballet corps de ballet dancer Amanda Morgan as Dewdrop, with company dancers, in George Balanchine's "The Nutcracker." (Lindsay Thomas)

The biggest change, though, has been PNB's diversity.

"The company is more racially diverse today than it was in 2020, when about 30% of the company was BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color]. Racial identity should only be identified by the individual, but the company is currently about 45% individuals of color with five dancers identifying as Black or Brown. New hires next year will increase the overall number of dancers of color to about 50%," Peter Boal, PNB's artistic director, said in an email.

"It was incredibly hard to be 19 and 20 years old in the company and having this whole community behind me counting on me to do well. It was a lot of pressure," said Morgan. With more dancers of color on the stage, some of that pressure has lifted. "I can focus more on the dancing," she said.

But Morgan notes that two of PNB's new dancers of color are also nonbinary — a first for a major dance company. For them, simply existing has drawn [media attention](#). "They have this unique position where they are not just Black dancers. They are crafting a whole other way of going about things when it comes to [gender in dance](#)," said Morgan. With fellow dancer Cecilia Iliesiu, Morgan (an alum of PNB's dance school) created a mentorship program for advanced students in the PNB school to address the burden of representation as well as issues of mental health, and career planning pressures.

Even with these changes, Morgan and Boal both say equity work is ongoing and evolving. Morgan wants to see continued discussion of microaggressions and how

organizations can get away from them. Boal noted, “Gender equity and accessibility have also been at the forefront of PNB’s recent work.” He adds that PNB is also active in the broader arts community, sharing a close, informal advisory relationship with Donald Byrd at Spectrum Dance Theater and partnerships in equity work with Seattle Center, Seattle Opera and Seattle Repertory Theatre.

“A good start is diversifying the people that are on stage but I also want to see diversification at every level of the organization,” said Morgan. That includes the choreographers and composers whose work the company performs. PNB has made progress in diverse programming, but Morgan looks forward to performing a season that reflects the full diversity she sees outside the auditorium.

“Ballet in particular likes to present a fantasy, and sometimes as a person of color you need that. It’s just one thing after the next and the reality is the people who are going to feel it first and the most are people of color.” But she can’t support the fantasy of uniformity. “There are just so many talented artists of color that can tell a different story for audiences to experience,” she said.

Her own creative endeavors reflect that.

“Musings,” a film she created with Nia-Amina Minor in 2020, is both an expression of grief for, and a celebration of, Black and brown communities. She established [The Seattle Project](#), an interdisciplinary artistic community, to create opportunities for Black, Indigenous, people of color and queer creators to share their work. The Seattle Project was recently awarded a grant from Seattle’s Office of Arts and Culture to present a series of folklore-based performances in Seattle parks this summer.

“The arts are so powerful to let audiences know what’s happening in the world and understand it,” she said. “Much of what I make is a form of activism.”

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