

DANCE

Kaori Nakamura's Final Performances

Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle

★★★★★

Rosie Gaynor

Last Saturday in Seattle, Kaori Nakamura danced a perfect Giselle. Bright, fresh, saucy, she charmed us from the beginning. She tore our hearts out with the humanity of her mad scene. And, as a Wili, she floated, luminous and liquid, thrilling and chilling. It was impossible to believe that the following day this master of phrasing, expression and technique would retire from Pacific Northwest Ballet.

But on Sunday evening the exquisite, 44-year-old Nakamura did indeed dance her farewell performance in the company's Season Encore. The evening ended with the challenging Rose Adagio from *The Sleeping Beauty*, a Nakamura favourite. A roar went up from the audience as she held – and held – the final balance. A 15-minute standing ovation followed, with so many flowers that at one point I could

barely see this 5ft 2in ballerina.

Nakamura studied with Reiko Yamamoto in her native Japan. She was only 15 when she won a Prix de Lausanne (in 1986, the same year as Darcey Bussell). According to PNB, she was the youngest ever to win this prestigious prize. Nakamura went on to study at the School of American Ballet. She danced a few years in Japan, seven years at Royal Winnipeg Ballet and 17 years at PNB. From the



Perfect: Kaori Nakamura in 'Giselle'

beginning she was a firecracker, a dynamo, known for roles requiring speed, purity and precise footwork. But it wasn't just technique; there was something exhilarating about her.

With patience and hard work, Nakamura quietly broke free of typecasting, proving that her musicality and intelligence would allow her to master nearly any tempo, any style, any role, any character.

PNB artistic director Peter Boal told me in 2012 that at an age when many ballerinas might rest on their laurels, Nakamura continued to grow. In new roles such as Jean-Christophe Maillot's Juliette, Boal had seen a depth of emotion from Nakamura that astounded him. And he relished the increasing strength he saw in her performances of contemporary works such as Ulysses Dove's *Red Angels* and *Vespers*. Former partner Alexei Ratmansky says Nakamura's feather-lightness is a rare quality. Rarer still: when contemporary work called for a more grounded feel, she was willing and able to relinquish the beautiful lightness that is part of her identity. Nakamura would do anything for dance. And it showed.

pnb.org