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Who Says Ballet Is No Fun?

by Michelle Isabelle-Stark

Each April dance lovers are treated to an artistic Rite of Spring at the annual Ballet Education Scholarship Fund, Inc. (BESFI) Benefit Performance at the Staller Center. The St. James-based Seiskaya Ballet Company once again delivered a dazzling production last weekend, showcasing the promise of emerging ballerinas partnered by a trio of world-class professional guest artists. The multifaceted talents of the Seiskaya dancers bloomed in a variegated assortment of classical pas de deux, vibrant character dances, and an original allegorical work.

The program began with the romantic *Les Sylphides Pas de Deux*, set to the gorgeous music of Chopin. Lithe-some Samantha Niewadowski was partnered by the elegant and powerful Hagop Kharatian, transporting the audience to a poetic moonlit idyll with softly sculpted movement. Samantha possesses a graceful and delicate technique, beautifully revealed in this role through expressive arm and hand movements, stretched arabesques and turns that lingered in space.

An unexpected homage to U.S. troops, devoid of the trite sentimentality and overt political posturing that seems to accompany such work, was inserted in Act I. Choreographed and danced by Michael Cusumano, a Seiskaya-trained danseur formerly with ABT, "Soldier" was an artistic embodiment of the physical demands and machinations of war.



Seiskaya principal Julie Miller and guest artist Hagop Kharatian were riveting in the *Black Swan Pas de Deux*.

The syntax for the action was built on a combat motif - turns evoking tank turrets, stealthy and crouching motions, and the percussion of gunfire.

Julie Miller was nothing short of brilliant as Odile in the *Black Swan Pas de Deux* effortlessly integrating nuanced gesture with precisely executed movement, unveiling a seductive wickedness. Her keen dramatic sense was complemented by a display of incredible balance and strength, resulting in a virtuosity rarely seen in a young dancer. In the dramatic climax, Miller adroitly unleashed her technical prowess to bewitch Siegfried, danced by Mr. Kharatian, with an electrifying series of thirty-two fouettés.

Other highlights of Act I included Emily Portoghese, performing lightening quick beats as an ebullient villager in the charming *Giselle Peasant Pas de Deux*, a brightly colored ensemble

of younger dancers dancing to a lively Asian piece in *Oriental*, and a lovely *Grand Waltz*, danced in perfect synchronization by the corps de ballet.

Act II featured a pair of 13 year old "baby ballerinas." Megan Liberty is a fearless performer who radiates personality to the last row of the theater and beyond. As Esmeralda in the *Esmeralda Pas de Deux*, she was a stunning vision in gold, literally taking flight in leaps that required a suspension of disbelief. Endowed with legs of mythical proportion, she was elevated to the upper bound of possible heights by Kharatian, whose strength and classicism provided a complementary restraint to her unbridled energy.

Margrit Motola was positively hypnotic in the *White Swan Pas de Deux*. A dancer with an aristocratic bearing and ethereal quality, she was a sublime vision, executing each movement with

a diaphanous quality that requires enormous discipline and concentration. A highlight of Act II was the black and white *Harlequinade Pas de Deux*. Again Michael Cusumano delivered an exhilarating performance. His use of mime was extraordinary, fully engaging the audience and communicating the awkwardness of Harlequin while conveying a seductive physicality that played nicely off of the coquettish and charming dancing of Maria Fechter as Columbine. With a brilliant smile and gracious confidence, Maria consistently delivers to the audience in every role she dances.

Rounding out Act II were foot-stomping character dance miniatures *Kazachok* and *Zhok*. Who says ballet is no fun?

Forest, an original choreography by Valia Seiskaya finished the program in Act III. The serene and colorful sets were complemented by imaginatively executed costuming for swans, snake, butterfly, deer and other creatures of the forest. The struggle between Water and Fire in this piece mirrors the battle between the White Swan and the Black Swan, the contrast between fun character dances and classical pas de deux. This was a brilliantly conceived program, providing the audience with a balance of excitement, beauty and color rendered in dance.

Michelle Isabelle-Stark is a professional freelance writer who has written several reviews and articles about ballet.