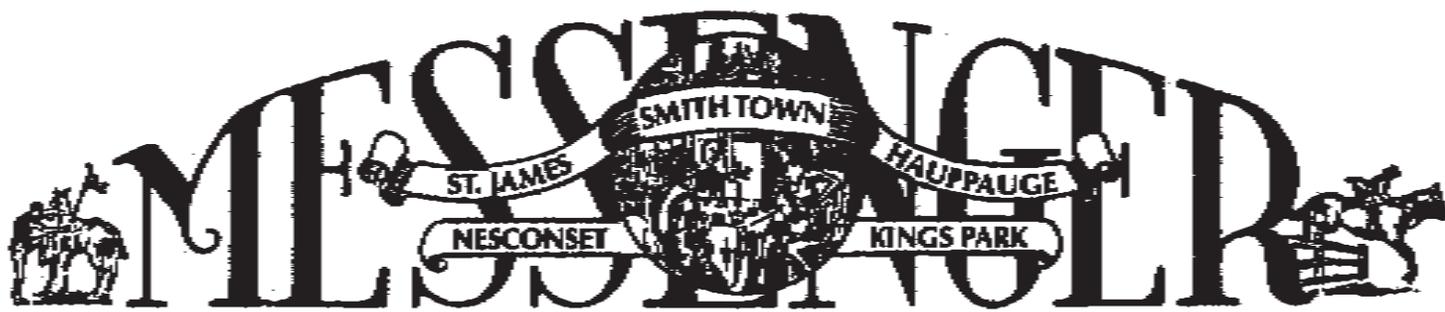


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A Highly Entertaining Evening of Dance



Seiskaya Ballet principal dancer Christina Schifano and guest artist Luciano Lazzarotto sparkled performing the graceful Sylvia pas de deux.

by Michelle Isabelle-Stark

Energetic performances and an eclectic program marked the 26th annual BESFI benefit concert at the Staller Center. Set in three acts, the audience was treated to a highly entertaining evening of dance, from classical pas de deux, to modern ballet, to hot jazz, to folk-inspired character dances. Artistic Director Valia Seiskaya skillfully avoided the classical ballet clichés that can turn a performance into an endurance contest for the audience. Dance is about courage and communicating mood and narrative, not posing, and the young Seiskaya-trained dancers featured in this performance reveled in showing their mettle, aided by a trio of able bodied and talented guest artists – Luciano Lazzarotto from Louisville Ballet, Mikhail Nikitine from Miami City Ballet, and Slava Fadayevev from Hartford Ballet.

Let's start with the radiant Christina Schifano, who opened Act I with the Sylvia pas de deux,

a sparkling dance that she imbued with wit and grace, perfectly balancing delicate arms and carriage with a series of precise pique and chaTnJs turns, culminating in a sequence of hypnotic front attitude turns. The next time we see Christina in Act II she is aggressively working the stage in a high voltage jazz dance set to It's Raining Men. The audience was riveted by her high energy level and brightness of being.

There were three contemporary pieces in Act I, including Sugar Rum Cherry, a take on the Sugar Plum Fairy dance of The Nutcracker, but infused with the feel of Broadway Melody Ballet from Singin' in the Rain. Dressed in red from head to pointe shoes the long and lean Sara Dowd seemed to channel Cyd Charisse from that film, with high extensions and a sultry series of movements done on the diagonal. In Act II, she is the playful gypsy Esmerelda, delivering a festive variation where she accentuates a sustained series of grandes battements dJveloppement with a tambourine, finishing the dance with an exciting series of fouettJs and triple pirouettes.

The very beautiful and flexible KaitlinWhite exhibited her disciplined focus and spirited temperament in the dynamic Cake Walk. Rounding out the contemporary work of Act I was Seiskaya-trained guest artist Julie Miller, now with Louisville Ballet, performing a whimsical modern ballet called Makin' Me Weak in the Knees, a perfect vehicle to highlight her athleticism and dramatic capability. She truly knows how to communicate with her audience.

The lovely and exotic Cherie Romaine showed her range, dancing an innocent and grace-

ful village maiden in the Giselle pas de deux with brilliant beats and footwork, and then in Act III morphing into the leader of a violent street gang in Street People, communicated with whipping fouettJs and attitude! Rising star Kiersten Engel aspires to a professional ballet career and she has the physical attributes to get her there – a perfect line, fabulous turnout, and extension. She was very impressive in the final dance of Act I, the Don Quixote pas de deux, lending the role a sophistication and technical prowess that kept pace with the brilliant performance of guest artist Nikitine. Like Dowd and Schifano she had the opportunity to show her jazzier side in Act II in The Business of Love- think Roxy from the musical Chicago.

A highlight of the evening was the Black Swan pas de deux, danced by the elegant Maria Fechter and Mikhail Nikitine. This role requires maturity and technical assuredness and Maria has both, delivering a powerful performance, so evil yet so pretty, convincing Rothbart that she is Odette the White Swan. Maria is off to college in the Fall. I wish her the best of luck and hope she keeps dancing. She's a treasure.

The final ballet of the evening, Street People, is an original work by Artistic Director Valia Seiskaya that possesses the vibrancy and narrative force reminiscent of Fokine's Petrouchka. Set in a transitional neighborhood with a colorful cast of characters, from street gangs to schoolgirls and a flirty librarian, it tells the story of a street urchin who finds love and family with the local policeman and his fiancée. Danielle Morano as the urchin was a standout, a confident dancer and actor.

Of course, no Seiskaya performance would be complete without a generous sprinkling of character

dances, an often overlooked stylized version of ethnic folk dances. A troupe of twenty pounded out the popular Siberian Kazachok to resounding applause, while a more mature Czardas created a tableau with colorful costumes. There was also a precious piece called Ensemble, featuring dancers recently en pointe partnered by young aspiring danseurs. They are the ballet equivalents of colts training to be thoroughbreds. And that's really what this concert is all about. Long Islander's are treated to first rate ballet and at the same time can enjoy witnessing the evolution of ballet's future stars, which now include Alexandra Kastrinos, with Royal Swedish Ballet; Cory Stearns, with American Ballet Theatre; Alexandra Bergman, with Tusla Ballet, Laura Feig, with Atlanta Ballet, Elizabeth McGrath, with Ballet West - sixty dancers in all have gone on to professional careers.

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



Christina Schifano and guest artist Luciano Lazzarotto