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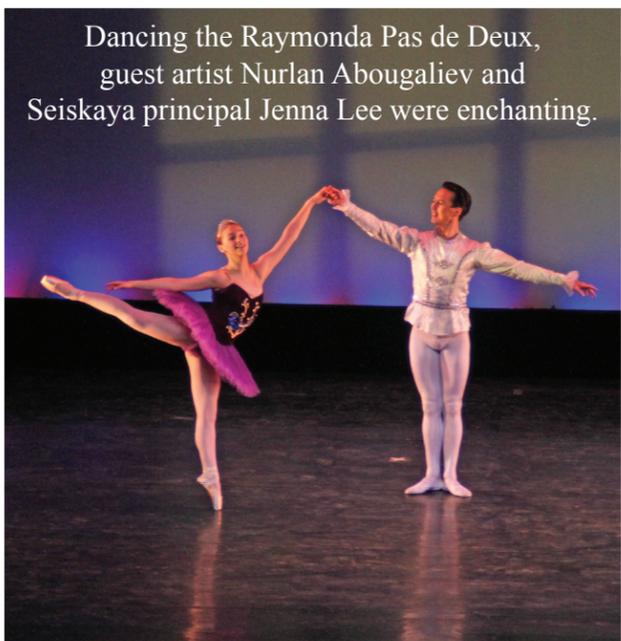
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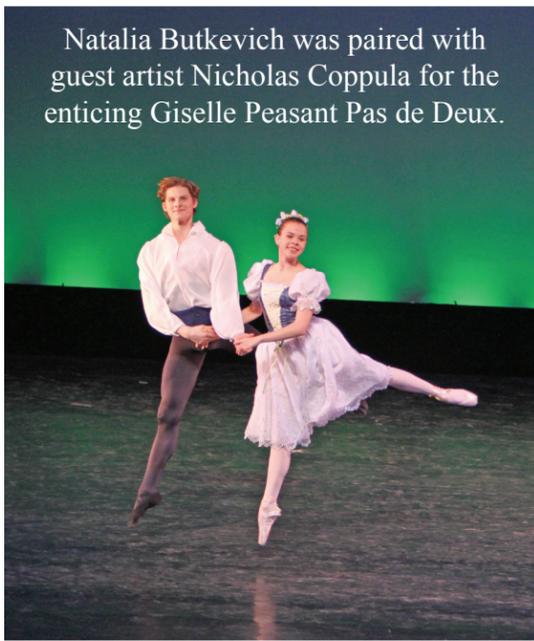
News Briefs

Back to Basics: BESFI Celebrates The Classics & Seiskaya Ballet Originals

Dancing the *Raymonda Pas de Deux*, guest artist Nurlan Abougaliev and Seiskaya principal Jenna Lee were enchanting.



Natalia Butkevich was paired with guest artist Nicholas Coppula for the enticing *Giselle Peasant Pas de Deux*.



The jaunty *La Fille Mal Gardée Pas* featured guest artist Oğulcan Borova partnering Seiskaya's Brianna Jimenez.



By: Christina Pandolfi

The Ballet Education and Scholarship Fund Inc. (BESFI) marked a jubilant 37th year at Stony Brook University's Staller Center, where the Seiskaya Ballet Company danced selections from some of the world's most beloved ballets, including *Giselle* and *La Fille Mal Gardée*. But what's most impressive about this company is the way they attack every piece - with gusto and excitement - and continue to bring new dimension to tried-and-true original Valia Seiskaya ballets.

Principal dancer Jenna Lee opened the show, dancing *Raymonda Pas de Deux* with former Russian National Ballet soloist Nurlan Abougaliev. A handsome pair, the duo played off each other's nuances; Lee, a petite dancer who moves with rapid-fire energy balanced out Abougaliev's methodical approach to movement in an eye-catching manner. In *Kazachok*, a sparkling sea of junior corps dancers marched and kicked with feverish excitement, serving as the perfect counterbalance to precede Mme Seiskaya's mysterious original ballet, *A Night on Bald Mountain*, which reflects on universal themes of time and virtue. A striking Diana Atoian took her rightful place as *Innocence*, a figure of ideal neutrality, dancing with poise and maturity far beyond her years. Aside from her crisp technical ability, Atoian has an innate sense of projection, emoting different feelings effortlessly. Returning guest artist Oğulcan Borova as *Eternity* served as a strong guidepost, letting Atoian shine with every *développé* and graceful pirouette.

Act II paid homage to comedic romance in ballet, starting off with Bournonville classic *Flower Festival in Genzano Pas de Deux*. A beautiful Amber Donnelly danced with an air of calm, focused and tranquil, offsetting Nicholas Coppula's playful, rambunctious energy, which created a sweet pairing that suited the mood of this ballet. *La Fille Mal Gardée* followed, this time pairing Borova with 13-year-old rising star, Brianna Jimenez. I was impressed with Jimenez last spring, but in just one year's time, she has managed to develop into a thoughtful ballerina, using every inch of Hertel's score to extend fully through every movement. Blessed with sculpted legs and magnificent arches, Jimenez danced with self-awareness and charm... I'm excited to see what comes from her in the future. A second Seiskaya original, *Grand Waltz*, let the corps de ballet shine, performing intricate choreography in lovely harmony; you could really sense a feeling of camaraderie, which only helped to serve Tchaikovsky's lyrical score.

Santanella Pas de Deux was up next, a rare treat that doesn't get performed too often on the Staller Center stage. A charismatic Madison Mursch danced fully and with great presence, playing nicely off of Petipa's quirky, left-of-center choreography. Act II concluded with classical standby *Giselle Peasant Pas de Deux*, pairing the graceful Natalia Butkevich with Coppula. A Seiskaya veteran, Butkevich was a vision of control, taking her time through each transition and extending fully through every *penché* to showcase her lovely, fluid lines.

Act III produced the *pièce de résistance* (and a personal favorite): Seiskaya Ballet classic, *Mask*. A playful tale about the Royal Prince seeking his wife-to-be, the strength of this ballet lies in the storytelling, and Seiskaya's choreography gives the dancers the tools they need to convey every emotion. A promising Max Lippman served the role as the Prince with admirable commitment, interacting sweetly with each young maiden and proving himself as a solid partner. Despite best intentions, no maiden was the perfect mate; the *Tipsy Daughter* (a convincing Jamie Bergold) and *Ditzy Daughter* (a charming Eva Pyrros) in particular proved riotously wrong, serving up laughs with every animated movement and gesture. In the end, Maiden Fair was the only choice for him; her combination of sparkling confidence and bravura allowed both the ballet and the entire production to conclude on a most exultant note.

I wish a fond farewell to senior Natalia Butkevich - her presence will be missed on the Staller Center stage.



Max Lippman as the Prince and Eva Pyrros as the mismatched *Ditzy Daughter* garnered endless laughs.