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The Passing of the Old Guard

By Michelle Isabelle

Summer is here! And if you are looking for an acclaimed summer ballet program for your talented son or daughter look no further than St. James, home to the Seiskaya Ballet Academy. The Ballet Education & Scholarship Fund (BESFI),



Anna Craddock is an explosive performer and was cast as the 1st Bacchante in *Walpurgis Night*

a nonprofit entity, will offer six weeks of world-class instruction by internationally renowned guest artists in their spacious air-conditioned studios from July 19 to August 27. BESFI has been supporting the training of talented ballet youth since 1981.

Each year in the spring BESFI features a weekend of performances at the Staller Center at SUNY Stony Brook to raise scholarships for gifted young performers, in order to keep the cost of instruction affordable. This year's performances on March 26 and 27 featured professional male guest artists partnering the most advanced students of the Academy. Act I opened with principal dancer Karissa Kralik partnered by guest artist Boyko Dossev in the *Black Swan pas de deux*. As the wicked enchantress Odile, Ms. Kralik expressed the right note of haughtiness with nuanced head gestures and beautifully executed arm movements. Two other Petipa choreographies were included in Act I; the seductive *Le Corsaire pas d'esclave*, danced with agility and brightness by featured soloist Danielle Troyano partnered by guest artist Matthew Prescott, and; a BESFI premiere of *Pharaoh's Daughter pas de deux*. As the Pharaoh's daughter Aspicia, principal Marianna DeMarco had a wonderful platform to exhibit her extraordinary technique and articulated footwork. She and guest artist Steven Melendez exhibited a charming partnering chemistry, dancing in perfect synchronization.

Rounding out Act I were a number of folk inspired character dances. The corps did a fine turn in the flamenco style *Carmen* and a rollicking, stomping *Siberian*. In the *Gypsy Pas - Character Dance Miniature* the soloists Alexandra Harrington and Ashton Hsu made for another delightful partnership. Ms. Harrington has a serene and assured on-stage presence, powerful leaps, and a graceful upper body. Just as splendid was the performance by Mr. Hsu, who continues to evolve as an elegant, confident partner and technically advanced dancer in his own right.

The dramatic principal Alexis Lucena was featured in *La Esmeralda pas de deux*, which opened Act II. Partnered by guest artist Boyco Dossev, Ms. Lucena exhibited her stunning technique on-stage presence with great flair. She possesses extraordinarily beautiful legs and arched feet, delighting



Alexis Lucena and Boyco Dossev were stunning in the *La Esmeralda pas de deux*.

the audience with sculpted extensions and lifts.

A lovely, flowing *Swan Lake pas de trois* featured guest artist Matthew Prescott, partnering featured soloists Danielle



A vibrant performer, Alexis Lucena imbues the character of *Esmeralda* with verve.

Kistulnec and Isabelle Stark, beautifully rendered in turning jumps yielding billowing clouds of tulle. Ms. Kistulnec, danced with a refined precision, particularly articulated through her quick footwork and beats. Ms. Stark, who possesses a lyrical grace and beauty, exhibited a sublime quality in her upper body and arm movements.

Gypsy Dance - Character Dance

Miniature opens on a tableau of brightly costumed gypsies in repose. Enter Nicole DiFiore, who demonstrated a natural dramatic ability and flexibility in her dance with a scarf as she awakens the gypsies. Rhythmic, spirited dancing ensues, ending with a flourish of turns led by Justin Meyers. Also of note was the adorable *Oriental - Character Dance Miniature*, featuring a group of colorfully attired younger students who happily showed off their ensemble and miming abilities, and *Alexander the Great*, a modern solo piece choreographed and danced by Karissa Kralik.



Danielle Troyano was partnered by guest artist Matthew Prescott in the seductive *Le Corsaire pas d'esclave*.

Victoria Loza clearly enjoyed performing this fun fusion of Greek, jazz and hip-hop styles.

The finale of the evening was *Walpurgis Night*, a spirited ballet choreographed by Valia Seiskaya, drawn from the opera Faust. Depicting the celebration of Bacchus, the audience was treated to a number of dances by a cast of Bacchantes, Satyrs, and Nymphs. The radiant Anna Craddock, a 13 year old ballet prodigy, danced the lead Bacchante, with all the artistry of a professional. Her flexibility, expression, and technical abilities are nothing short of extraordinary. Partnered by Ashton Hsu as Bacchus, they are exemplars of the level of achievement one can expect from the rigorous classical training of the Seiskaya Academy and The BESFI Summer Intensive.

And I would personally like to wish all the best to Mariana DeMarco and Karissa Kralik who leave to pursue BFAs in dance, and Victoria Loza as she leaves to pursue her dream of becoming an elementary school teacher. They represent more than thirty years of Seiskaya Ballet and Staller dance experience. They will all be greatly missed even as new stars emerge and carry on a great tradition.

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



Danielle Kistulnec and Isabelle Stark were perfectly matched with partner Matthew Prescott in the jaunty *Swan Lake pas de trois*.

Another Petipa work, the romantic *Raymonda pas de deux* completed Act II. Principal Victoria Loza was partnered by Mr. Melendez, who performed magnificently in a series of lifts. The lovely Ms. Loza was resplendent in royal blue, dancing with keen strength and balance, most notably in a series of turns during her variation.

Act III opened with *Opa-Opa*. *Opa* is an energetic exclamation for joy and happiness and this piece delivered! Dancers Mariana DeMarco, Alexis Lucena, and Victoria Loza clearly enjoyed performing this fun fusion of Greek, jazz and hip-hop styles.



Ashton Hsu as Bacchus opposite rising star Anna Craddock.