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35 Years Young: BESFI is Filled with Splendor & Panache

By Christina Pandolfi

Kicking off its celebrated 35th Season of the Ballet Education and Scholarship Fund, Inc. (BESFI) at Stony Brook University's Staller Center, the Seiskaya Ballet Company took center stage with confidence and bravura. Under the careful tutelage of Mme Valia Seiskaya, aspiring dancers are given the often-rare opportunity to perform classical ballet standards, sprinkled in between with sassy character dance miniatures, for a theatrical treat you would be sorry to have missed. BESFI proves that the ballet scene is certainly thriving and exciting on Long Island.

Starting the three-act program with a practiced poise and nuance was First Soloist Jade-Alexis Donnelly in the exquisite *Le Corsaire Pas de Deux*. Her long, slender limbs lent a fluid grace to each *développé* and *jeté*, punctuated by the sheer masculine strength of Guest Artist, Carlos Lopez. A spunky Seiskaya Ballet classic, *Syrtaki*, followed and was perfected by the company's sizzling synchronization and a truly infectious beat, finessed with a surprise appearance by Seiskaya herself. What fun!

Setting the stage on fire with her undeniable presence was First Soloist Ginamarie Carrero-Sagona in the always-exciting *La Esmeralda Pas de Deux*. With each shake of the tambourine, her eyes lit up with conviction, elevating her lightning-fast pirouettes. Oğulcan Borova kept the fiery pace lit, complete with explosive split leaps that made your jaw drop. Followed by pint-sized little darlings in the vivacious *Kazachok*, Seiskaya's petite crew smiled and danced into our hearts, accompanied by lively folk music that made you want to get up and dance right along with them.

Rising with a palpable dramatic tension, the curtain unveiled Guest Artist and former Seiskaya Principal Dancer Anna Craddock, who is a vision to behold. Having the privilege of seeing Anna grow from a petite, ebullient dancer to a mature ballerina has been more than an honor. Her take on *Nikiya's Variation from La Bayadère* was true melody in motion; each graceful gesture of a hand, of a foot, of the deep yearning in her eyes, were all beautifully balanced by powerful leaps and gorgeous footwork. She is a true star in the making.

Completely commanding the stage as *Kitri* in the *Don Quixote Pas de Deux*, Principal Dancer Alexandra Palma finished off the first act, deftly partnered by the statuesque Stephen Hanna. Gifted with an effortless ease of movement, Palma has

been a fixture on the Staller Center stage for many years, treating us all to her impeccable extensions, grand *jetés* and a final dizzying series of 32 *fouettés*, finished with an ease akin to a professional ballerina. Is there anything she can't do? The answer is no.

The second act allowed the audience to take delight in the polished beauty of First Soloist Ashley Chenery. The *Coppelia Wedding Pas de Deux* was the perfect piece to complement Chenery's gorgeous feet and undeniable grace. She and Lopez made a lovely pair, exuding a sweet chemistry throughout the entire dance. The ideal counterpoint to the delicate *Coppelia* was the fast-paced, lively *Flames of Paris Pas de Deux*, danced by First Soloist Kristina Diaz and returning Guest Artist Borova. Fierce turns and jumps were the star of this *pas de deux*, as Diaz challenged Borova to match her impassioned elevation. He returned the favor, delighting us with his raw power and his seeming ability to defy gravity with each stunning

leap. The spicy *Gypsy Dance* lent a brief interlude between each *pas de deux*, giving the corps de ballet a chance to let their hair down and show off a more sultry side.

Lissome First Soloist Lauren Kerr was up next, partnered by Matthew Dibble in the joyful *Giselle Peasant Pas de Deux*. Fluid transitional steps and a masterful control of each movement made the dance elegant and delicate, a stunning interplay between musicality and charming *joie de vivre*. Closing out the second act on a high note, Principal Dancer Danielle Lovetro made waves with her impossibly long legs in the challenging *Diana & Acteon Pas de Deux*, wonderfully matched with returning Guest Artist Hanna. Complemented by Hanna's athletic, yet fluid lyricism, Lovetro is skilled far beyond her young fourteen years and shows tremendous promise, gracing us with her perfect arabesques, fluid extensions and a distinct grace of movement. Watch out, world.

The program ended with the oh-so-charming ballet, *La Boutique Fantasque*, set to original choreography by Mme Valia Seiskaya. Responsible to tame their magical toyshop with a mind of its own, feisty shopkeeper Kristina Diaz and her playful assistant, beautifully danced by Soloist Brianna Jimenez, made a stunning partnership, keeping each other in check with Diaz's spry pirouettes and Jimenez's exuberant leaps. Amongst a deck of the loveliest cards you ever did see, four mechanical dolls enlivened the stage, moving with an impressive synchronized precision. While a pesky thief joyfully strolled on through, danced by the delightful Madison Mursch, two little poodles



Seiskaya Ballet principal Alexandra Palma opposite partner Stephen Hanna in the *Don Quixote Pas de Deux*



Anna Craddock in *Nikiya's Variation from La Bayadère*

were true standouts, brimming with self-assurance and facility far beyond their years. Anya Caraiani moved with genuine speed and purpose, highlighting Diana Atoian's almost unbelievably controlled pirouettes that couldn't help but leave you smiling. The ballet concluded with a mischievous pair of *Can-Can Dancers*, Carrero-Sagona and Dibble, escaping from their buyers while flirting and flouncing their way into the finale.

It is with great pride that I wish Alexandra Palma a fond farewell, as she heads to college later this year. We will certainly miss her mature, consistent performances each season on the Staller Center stage. But her remarkable ability only further reminds us that Seiskaya Ballet turns out truly talented stars, which I'm sure will continue for many years to come.

Christina Pandolfi is a professional copywriter, freelance writer and an accomplished dancer who attended NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.



Kristina Diaz and Oğulcan Borova in the *Flames of Paris Pas de Deux*