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# Ballet Benefit Was A Dazzling Affair!

by Michelle Isabelle-Stark

Great artistic collaborations seem to come in threes. Think Three Tenors, for example. Last weekend at The Staller Center the non-profit Ballet Education and Scholarship Fund (BESFI) of St. James dazzled audiences with an internationally infused three-act program featuring a spectacular trio of renowned male ballet stars. Boyko Dossev from Boston Ballet, David Hovhannisyanyan from Milwaukee Ballet, and Evgueni Tourdiev formerly with Moscow Ballet partnered an extraordinary cast of ballerinas from the Seiskaya Ballet Academy, a venerable classical ballet institution located in St. James. Spanish, Russian, and Asian dance influences punctuated the program, which featured the choreography of Petipa, Nijinska, Fokine, Bournonville, Merante, and Seiskaya.

Like Spring itself, Act I opened with principal dancer Danielle Morano emerging from the wings, a sparkling vision in powder blue for the *Sylvia pas de deux*, set to the enchanting score by Delibes. Partnered by Mr. Dossev, Ms. Morano conveyed a beautiful and delicate quality, while exhibiting technical fireworks – a real joy to watch. A corps of young and exuberant dancers, dressed in jewel colored costumes then filled the stage to perform an Asian inspired character dance, melodically miming sewing and other domestic activities – a fun interlude. Featured soloist Stephanie Scutari was the flirtatious devil in *Satanilla pas de deux*, exuding charm in a flourish of piqué and fouetté turns, alas in vain, to win her partner, the regal Evgueni Tourdiev as Count Fabio.

Another character dance, the dramatic flamenco style *Paso Doble*, featured the Seiskaya corps in gorgeous faired skirts, rhythmically performing the percussive footwork and curved arm movements of the classical Spanish dance form. Equally as dramatic

was the pairing of the dynamic David Hovhannisyanyan with principal dancer Liliana Janson, in *Le Corsaire pas d'esclave*. Ms. Janson, with long, tapered legs, beautiful pointes and amazing flexibility looked like the iconic picture of a ballerina as she performed a series of lifts with her partner high overhead. She was just lovely.

Act I finished with *Siberian*, a spirited Russian style character dance and *La Fille Mal Gardée pas de deux* with featured soloist Mariana DeMarco partnered by Boyko Dossev. Ms DeMarco, a petite but incredibly strong dancer, perfectly captured the playful spirit of young love investing her jumps and beats with both technical precision and a joyful airiness.

*Las Damiselas*, a balletic comedy of errors set in turn of the twentieth century Spain, with choreography by Valia Seiskaya, was a delight in Act II. Mme. Seiskaya delivers a wonderfully ironic narrative with a series of dances centered on an arranged wedding and all of the festive parties that come with it. Alma Zamora has been promised to Ricardo Vargas, but Ricardo really loves Alma's sister Teresa. Luis, a friend of Ricardo's is in love with Alma. And so, a plot is hatched! Vincent Marra as Luis Acosta is a powerful and expressive dancer with a gift for comedy, who infiltrates the wedding party dressed as a woman to find out about Teresa's feelings for Ricardo. In the meantime, Liliana Janson as Teresa and Stephanie Scutari as Alma both don wedding veils and create a deception, pretending to be each other. Oh it's oh so confusing! But so fun! One

scene features all the male dancers who have been merrymaking a little too much. This is mime at it's best – very funny. The entire cast was outstanding.

Act III opened with the iconic



Guest artist Evgueni Tourdiev partnered Seiskaya Ballet featured soloists Stephanie Scutari (*Satanilla Pas*) [top] and Christina Pandolfi (*Flower Festival Pas*) [right].

choreography of Bournonville in *Flower Festival en Genzano pas de deux*. Featured soloist Christina Pandolfi is absolutely alluring, with a clarity and artfulness in her technique that makes her dancing appear effortless and spontaneous. Featured soloist Kristen Troyano was an elegant vision in white tulle in *Les Sylphides pas de deux*, a romantic ballet with bourees and flowing arms and lifts that are well suited to Kristen's pure and expressive style.

The *Paquita grand pas* was a perfect ending to the program. Each of the soloists shined, exhibiting some remarkable strengths – Ashley Cook's exuberance, Karissa Kralik's precision, Victoria Loza's musicality. And Alexis Lucena, a fiery thirteen-year-old sprite, amazed the audience as

she flawlessly executed her solo, even as a technical glitch abruptly halted her music. There was no pause, no confusion, no doubt – she nailed it! In the *grand pas* Kiersten Engel once again shows us what an accomplished dancer she has become.

Finally, a fond farewell to Ms. Engel who is off to start her professional career with the Alabama Ballet in September. Like so many before her I have had the pleasure of watching her blossom under



the tutelage of Valia Seiskaya. She started at Seiskaya as a talented, but somewhat reserved young teenager. She is now a confident, sophisticated, exciting performer, and a gifted teacher and coach to young dancers. She is a real tribute to the tireless work and dedication of Mme. Valia Seiskaya. Brava Valia!

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