

An Evening of Magical Support for Ballet



As fundraising becomes more and more vital for many arts organizations, it was truly inspirational to attend The State Ballet of Rhode Island's 10th annual Summer Soiree: "Earth, Wind and Firefly." While many, understandably so, have less to give, it never ceases to amaze what can be accomplished by some when motivated by a common cause.

On this particular balmy Thursday evening, nearly a dozen food vendors, a wine company, artists and patrons of the arts combined their efforts and talents to highlight the significance of a community coming together to support the arts. It was also amazing to see how some youngsters in attendance represent a family's third or fourth generation of dancers to share the barre at The Brae Crest School of Classical Ballet, the official dance school of SBRI.

Tucked away in the woods of Lincoln, this intimate ranch-style building could actually serve as a nice peaceful retreat if not for the sweaty bodies hard at work on a daily basis within the studio walls. For the fundraiser, a small stage was constructed just a short walk even farther into the woods. Set in a natural amphitheater-like clearing, it appears vaguely reminiscent of Jacob's Pillow, which resides in the thickly settled woods and rolling hills of the Berkshires. Throughout the evening, SBRI Executive Director, Ana Marsden Fox, expertly moves things along. After thanking all the sponsors, she gets things underway by announcing the four recipients of the 2013 Partner with the Arts Award, an award that recognizes the volunteers who are essential to the success of any arts organization.

Then those in attendance are treated to the first of two performances by company dancers. Ms. Fox explains that, "This is a piece from a ballet that Herci Marsden first created in 1981." Now in her amazing 53rd season, Ms. Marsden, SBRI Artistic Director and co-founder, is in attendance and still teaches at the school. Ms. Fox also warns, "There will be no tutus in this piece, which is a tribute to Ms. Marsden's modern vision. But, this is not modern dance."

In familiar SBRI fashion, this ballet features dozens of dancers on stage simultaneously, with a couple standouts - the ever emotive and graceful Emily O'Heir, and SBRI newcomer who is just several months into his dance career, Matthew Annunziata; his poise and extension are especially impressive.

Set to a variety of music styles ranging from futuristic to classical to tribal, this piece offers the more astute observer an opportunity to see how some ballets often influence later pieces and vice versa.

During one segment, with the stage filled with dancers, memories of SBRI's 1990s world premiere "Americana" emerge. When the music turns more tribal and masculine, the dancing becomes reminiscent of "Prince Igor." Throughout the ballet, there are also elements of a more folksy style that prevails in much of Ms. Marsden's choreography.

After a brief performance by Opera Providence, the dancers return for the world premiere of Shana Fox Marceau's "Dance of the Firefly." This piece includes live music, two violins and a bass, conducted by composer Noreen Inglesi, who was commissioned to create the score for this ballet. And while Marceau represents the third generation of Marsden choreographers, "Firefly" depicts a freshness and crispness indicative of Ms. Marceau's individual style and influences.

Wrapped in strands of lights, four dancers take flight as violins lightly fill the evening air. Though not nearly as uptempo as Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee," the music is bright and playful and the dancers are clean and precise. As the music ends, the "fireflies" disappear into the woods, the glow of their lights marking their exit.

After the performance, guests are invited to bid on silent auction items, eat more and dance. Under a tent closer to the studio, singer Kelley Lennon, accompanied by the band Malloi, turn up the heat well into the evening hours.