



## **Flash Review 2, 5-19: San Francisco Ballet School Student Showcase**

By Aimée Ts'ao

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SAN FRANCISCO--I had not seen a San Francisco Ballet School Student Showcase in at least a dozen years when I attended the current one at the Palace of Fine Arts Theater, Wednesday, May 17. The last time I went, it was done in the Opera House and my four-year-old son tugged on my sleeve, then whispered in my ear, "Mommy, this is terrible." I missed the better years when Larisa Sklyanskaya set some of the classics for the upper classes, but according to a former student there, things have slipped back down to where they had been before. The program notes proclaim "the country's oldest classical academy offers a program designed to take students from their very first steps through a full course of ballet study... For those who wish a career in ballet, San Francisco Ballet School offers a training program of unqualified excellence." Judging from the printed program, in which the list of donors and volunteers exceeds that of the students, what they really excel at is fundraising and organization. As for the training, both technical and artistic, my rather low expectations are easily met. How sad for these budding dancers and their supportive families that they are not getting a solid dance education given that they attend such a solid well-endowed institution.

Perhaps I would not have felt the lack of excellence so acutely had I not been to see Marin Dance Theatre's Springfest 2000 four days before at the Jewish Community Center in Marin. Artistic Director Margaret Swarthout split off from the Marin Ballet School four years ago and started her own school. I was very impressed by the high level of the dancing and variety of choreography including traditional classical pieces and some interesting work by Julia Adam and Val Caniparoli (both of San Francisco Ballet!), and Lawrence Pech, formerly of SFB and currently director of his own company and Ballet master at the SF Opera. So why doesn't SFB School take advantage of their in-house talent? Despite the miniscule stage, rudimentary lighting and sound, Swarthout is definitely doing something right if she can turn out such a high percentage of good dancers. Even the younger girls worked cleanly and confidently. In fact, only days before, Marin Dance Theatre's own Stacey Klyce had signed a corps de ballet contract with SF Ballet, which had not engaged any of its own graduating women.

But back to SFB. The program opens with the lower grades presenting class work. This might have been interesting with better choreography, but the students have to contend with steps arbitrarily strung together in the most unmusical fashion. That is certainly not

a good way to show them off, struggling with awkward combinations. All the groups of girls has at least one, usually placed in front, who shows a lot of promise, though they are not identifiable from the program which is an alphabetical listing. The real standout is Anthony Huxley, an 11 year-old in Class Five. He has everything: technique, musicality, expression and something that cannot be taught, an innate sense of how to put all those elements together.

Next the Level Seven and Eight classes perform excerpts from Sleeping Beauty. The uniform white costumes, I suspect from "Theme and Variations", do not help distinguish the six solos for the fairies, or create the festiveness of the Prologue. Amy Malepeai and Stephanie Orza do a good job of the Fairies of Tenderness and Courage, respectively, but in general, the dancers' arms lack any recognizable schooling and the women's pointe work looks flabby, for lack of a better description.

As a best piece of the evening, modern dance teacher Ellie Klopp's "rip" gave eight men and Amy Malepeai a chance to cut loose and show some raw energy and presence. I would welcome more original choreography that allows the dancers to explore and exploit their own limits.

After a pas de trios from the Kirov Ballet's "Nutcracker", with the talented Huxley, and the Level Six Class in "Die Fledermaus Waltz", the evening closes with Balanchine's "Donizetti Variations." Malepeai is charming and exuberant, though should learn to nuance her roles more, and Ricky Navarro, as her partner, tried to make up for his lack of polish and technique with enthusiasm and focus. In general, the men are not together much in the ensemble parts and everyone's arms lacked uniformity.

One would think after all these years that the SF Ballet School would have, by some Darwinian process, figured out how to nurture dancers to fulfill their potential. But from what I know, there is no set syllabus and the teachers come from a variety of training backgrounds, two factors that diminish the possibility of consistently turning out good dancers. The students are not to blame, for there is a natural assumption that the longevity of an institution guarantees quality. I am of the Margaret Mead school of thought, believing that a small group of dedicated people can make changes and I don't need to look farther than across the Golden Gate Bridge at Marin Dance Theater.