



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT NEWS & INFORMATION

Dancers in bloom - By Kaley Noonan

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Jimena Lasansky and her students work on their technique at the end of rehearsal. They are preparing for a performance Friday evening at the Camden Opera House.

Jimena Lasansky, dancer, choreographer and educator, points to the Bird of Paradise plant sitting by the window in her studio.

Normally fiery red and glossy, the Bird of Paradise flower has gone by, and is now withered and browned. "If that plant were in a shop now and blooming," she says, "people would buy it." But not now, because the moment has gone, "nobody would want it."

Lasansky has been teaching dance for more than 36 years. Owner of Lasansky's School of Dance, based in Lincolnville, she comments that dance is an ephemeral art. It is all about moments, both ugly and beautiful. What people don't see before the performance is the process, days when students are tired and cranky, they are sweaty and working hard.

"Even that's beautiful because it's real," she says. What an audience gets to see is the moment when the stage lights go up and the curtain is parted. That's the moment when her students, like the Bird of Paradise, bloom.

Friday at the Camden Opera House at 7 p.m., Lasansky and her students will be putting on their annual dance and poetry event, marking the school's 21st anniversary. Her students, who come from all over Maine, study creative movement, introduction to dance, modern dance and classical ballet and pointe.

The one-hour performance will include all these styles, spliced with breathtaking poems written by her students.



Jimena Lasansky gets her students into their costumes at the start of rehearsal. As Lasansky helped her students dress, she taught them how the correct use of their costumes would help communicate their message to the audience.

Her passion for finding the innate talent in children is what has fueled her these last 21 years teaching at her studio. Growing up in a family of artists in Iowa City, Iowa, she says, "creating was like breathing."

She did not dream of being a dancer as a child, she simply just did it every day. Inspired by nature, Lasansky says: "I'd be totally fascinated by the way things moved. If I was by the ocean and I saw the seaweed moving, I was absolutely intrigued by it. Watching the leaves from the trees flip over to the white side in the wind or watching the birds in the sky when they'd soar -- the movement was what I was very drawn to. As a youngster, I'd simply become it."



The girls rehearse "Layers Unfolding," one of three pieces this group will perform.

Already a gifted dancer by the time she was a teenager, Lasansky skipped her senior year and went straight into New York City's Juilliard School, where she did choreography and performances. She learned classical and modern dance there and in private studios, including Martha Graham's. During this time, she also worked with renowned dancers Jose Limon, Alfredo Corvino and Lucas Hoving. "My time in New York helped me so much," she says about honing her technique. Like one of her dance performances, there are layers to Lasansky that take time to reveal. Her parents are originally from Argentina and when she was in her early 20s, she traveled extensively in Central and South America to find her roots. She joined the Peace Corps as a dancer and went to Bolivia to become a soloist and teacher with the Classical Ballet. There, she also became an assistant director of Folkloric Ballet. Costa Rica is where she first started the Lasansky School of Dance. As a girl, Lasansky and her family used to summer in Vinalhaven, where she fell in love with the movement of the ocean. She was about 27 when she moved to Maine permanently, bringing the Lasansky School of Dance with her and opening up a private studio in Lincolnville in 1981. The

studio is testament to Lasansky's love of nature. The garden pathways surrounding it seem inspired by Japanese design with their wooden bridges, and stone walkways. Inside the studio, the entire great room is warmed by light wood, large windows and dozens of exotic plants. Two walls feature mirrors and barres; hanging on a ladder are dozens of children's costumes.



Callie Hand gets a hand from Jimena Lasansky with her costume. There was no problem motivating this group; the girls would take moments like this and rehearse difficult or troublesome passages on their own.

As a dancer, Lasansky often works as a soloist. "The most important thing for me is a statement. I work around ideas that concern me, situations of humanity that trouble me and I create dance pieces to express my opinions," she said. As dance communicates without words, Lasansky often goes for the grit. "We dance not to look pretty, not to wear costumes, but because we have something to say. Sometimes dance can be painful. Sometimes people don't want to receive it, don't want to go there," she says. Last year at the 20th anniversary dance and poetry event, Lasansky did a small performance piece, "Madres," about the political situation in Argentina, where mothers silently protest the government by walking around the plaza with photographs of their loved ones who have been "disappeared." "Did the audience understand specifically understand what I was dancing about? No, possibly not," she says. "What mattered to me was that the audience knew that human suffering is a part of our life and not everything is cute, not everything is pretty. Our lives are not all happiness. There is sadness. Whether or not the adults picked up on this, Lasansky's younger students, sitting in the audience during rehearsal, did. The expressions on her face as she danced so disturbed some of her students that it prompted phone calls from some of the parents the next day. Lasansky had to carefully take the children aside and explain that it was OK to see their teacher sad and in pain. It was the dance. And if anything, the young students learned the power of conveying emotion to an audience without a word.



Looking in the mirror while Jimena Lasansky explains some body language are Gabrielle Benzie, Anya Churchill, and Callie Hand.

"I think children and the elderly go into the heart directly, without so much fuss. Then life takes over and there are distractions left and right and that direct path becomes confused. That is why I work with children. They keep my feet on the ground," she says. "Their response to an image I might toss out is so honest, so crystal clear." As part of Lasansky's program this year, 14-year-old Micah Conkling, a former student, will read a series of poems written by her students over the years. Sixteen years ago, during her first summer workshop, Lasansky chose the word "echoes" as a way to inspire creativity in both poetry and dance. The poems that that word inspired seem to have been written far beyond the young students' years. When she was seven, student Julia Sortwell came up with this one: "The Sound of Echoes , An echo is a dream. When you toss it in a pool of water , You can hear the sound". In dance, the vocabulary of each child comes from his or her body language and movement. One student may spin in wide circles in the studio, whereas another may curl up, chin on knee, and quietly watch everyone else. Lasansky uses each child's natural movements as if it were clay, building upon it layers of technique and discipline. At the same time, she encourages creativity. "I don't want the children to be slaves to technique," she says, "but that's what is so hard to convey to them. You will have freedom eventually, but to get there, you must have discipline. " Within the disciplines of dance, she teaches her students about responsibility, solving problems, honesty, kindness, compassion, generosity, and how to let go of the ego. "It's not about the individual -- it is about an idea and what is being communicated. Of course it is incredible to me that a child is capable of these things and that they're doing it as a community.

" Lasansky's strong belief in community extends to her annual dance and poetry events, which she continues to offer to the community, admission-free. Countless hours rehearsing with the students, designing and sewing their costumes, along with the expenses of renting the Camden Opera House, come directly from her. As she teaches her students to "share" their dances with one another, she also teaches by example, in sharing her enormous efforts with the community. In the upcoming performance, the students have chosen their own music (including Schubert and Hildegard von Bingen) and titles for each piece, as well as participated in the choreography. The program includes eight original pieces, a trio, a duet and three solos. "I will continue to create pieces that have depth to them," Lasansky says. " I feel that is very important for children to understand that dancing is a resource. It is a way through which, they can express themselves."



Anya Churchill displays some of the breathtaking intensity that was prevalent during a recent rehearsal at Jimena Lasansky's studio. (Photos by Daniel O'Connell)