



“Tu Hanina” performed by (in front row, left to right) Anja Churchill, Hannah Goodwin, (second row) Clare Olson, Emily Pote, Emma Brown, (back row) Madeline Owen, Amelia Merrill and Fiona Boyd. Photo by Daniel O’Connell

A Live Performance Celebrates 25th Anniversary of The Lasansky School of Dance

— by Nancy Griffin

The stage of the Camden Opera House will come alive on Saturday, March 10, at 7 p.m., as a colorful array of more than 60 dancers ranging in age from 5 to 17 celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Lasansky School of Dance.

A tiger, a puppet and a cello player are among the characters that will be represented in the 16 different dances to be performed by students. Five of the dances are new, to be premiered on the Opera House stage. The rest are original dances already part of the Lasansky school repertoire.

Besides rehearsals and performance, students participate in every aspect of the dance, from choreography through creating costumes. This all-inclusive approach to the dance is the hallmark of the Lasansky School of Dance, whose founder and sole teacher is Jimena Lasansky.

Lasansky, who comes from a large Argentinian family of artists in Iowa, studied ballet and modern dance with the best — Jose Limon, Martha Graham, Alfred Corvino and Lucas Hoving — among others. She has been teaching dance for more than 40 years, 30 in Maine, and 25 of those in the seaside studio she built in Lincolnville.

“I began teaching in Harlem when I was 18 and a student at Juilliard,” recalls Lasansky. “I studied with so many different dancers at different studios during the Juilliard years that I learned how different people impart information.”

“Some teach dance as technical elements only and don’t take into consideration who you are. It’s purely physical.” While a few of her teachers fell into the category of technical teachers, a few stood out because they taught from the heart, said Lasansky. “Alfred Corvino really stuck out. He helped you to think through everything. Jose Limon also — they taught from the heart and taught you to go into the heart, to use ‘you’.”



“In the Beginning,” performed by (front row, left to right) Kate Rich, Dakota Ledwith, (second row) Francie Merrill, Sonia Rose Beckstrom, Rosie Lawson, Harper Gordon, (third row) Eva Ritchie and (back row) Duncan Hall. Photo by Daniel O’Connell

“That’s where the desire to teach began — to bring a child’s life into the picture. The technical part gives dancers the tools to express what they want to say,” said Lasansky. “I think there’s a large misunderstanding about ballet, for instance. There are extremely technical elements in ballet. You are presented with a step to learn. You may learn a perfect step, but until you are given a role and the opportunity to do something with the step beyond the technical constraint, such as the placement of the arms and feet, it’s not alive — once you have a character to play, you might stretch the arm out a little more.”

With modern dance, students may be taught a technical vocabulary or a creative method that seeks the movement from within the dancer’s body. “I try to help students find their own body movement and guide them to expand it.”

If teachers fail to take the student’s individuality into consideration, Lasansky believes, “You can end up with students who are master technicians but who don’t know why they’re dancing. Students won’t understand there is something they want to say.”

Lasansky’s students are given every opportunity to learn what they want to say as individuals, but as individuals working within a group. When a group is working to choreograph a piece, the individuals are encouraged to try new things and to express their opinions.

“Then the children watch each other, decide what fits and what doesn’t. They learn how to accept being willing to cut something out, and to learn to repeat,” said Lasansky. “They learn to comment and speak up, even at a tender age.”

“Sometimes you look at something after it’s put together and it doesn’t work, so you take it apart — save the good stuff and put the pieces back together differently.” One dancer in a group piece might find a particular move works for her, while another might say it doesn’t work in his space.

“I ask them, ‘How does it feel?’ and they’ll talk about it. If it’s not working, sometimes it’s the music or the timing. If it’s a bit off, two dancers might collide,” said Lasansky. “The notion is they can be strong in their individuality and still inform the group process. They don’t have to agree to all look alike. They can agree to look different.”

Some pieces start with a piece of music and the choreography derives from it. “In the Beginning” is one of the new group pieces that started with an idea.

“This dance is very technical, but all the original movements came from the creation myth,” Lasansky explained. “We started tossing the idea for it around last year. Some of the kids were studying the ‘Big Bang’ in school. That got it started. Duncan ‘googled’ the Big Bang. I read them some creation myths. We read poetry about the beginning of time and looked at paintings.”

Her student dancers have been working for months to create and rehearse the pieces they will present at the concert.

“They are exposed to the hard elements and the joys of real collaboration,” Lasansky said. “Because they are such a part of the entire process, they are all as excited as I am.”

Each class is different, and age makes a difference. At some ages “it’s all about energy,” she explained. “You can almost see the energy in the studio. If the energy had a color it would fill up the entire space.”

This year, she has added a Latin dance, Paseo des Mujeres (literally, “women’s stroll”), with moves taken from the tango, so the children “are being introduced to another culture, to the body gestures from another culture.”

One of Lasansky’s longtime students with a passion for dance has also developed a passion for the cello. Anja Churchill, dancing since she was 11 and now a high school freshman, will perform Duet for Cello and Dancer with no cello, just the bow. “She will bring both of her passions together.”



Jimena Lasansky going over rehearsal notes with Olivia de Frees La Roche. Photo by Daniel O'Connell

Much of the music for the dances is classical — Brahms, Vivaldi and Strauss — but one dance, “Tiger,” long part of the repertoire, is performed to the sound of voodoo drums.

Students also learn that a concert is more than the hard work of choreography and rehearsal. For this concert, there are more than 450 costume pieces that must be assembled, tracked and cared for. “That’s a lot of coordination,” said Lasansky. One parent volunteered to make all the skirts for one group dance. Six other parents helped alter existing costumes to fit the dances and the dancers, and to create new costumes.

Besides her own pieces, Lasansky has premiered dances created by famed choreographers Ernesto Corvino and Z’eva Cohen and danced in venues as diverse as the Riverside Church in Manhattan and the Maine Festival. For years she has been a member of the Maine Arts Commission’s traveling artists program, performing and conducting classes and teacher workshops throughout the state. The first dancer accepted into the Peace Corps as a dancer after her New York years, she went to Bolivia as a dancer and teacher; she first launched the Lasansky School of Dance in Costa Rica.

The student dancers performing on March 10 come from throughout the midcoast area. Tickets are \$12 for adults and \$6 for children under 12 and are available at HAV II (236-6777) in Camden and at the Opera House box office an hour before the performance.