

# The Republican Journal

## The discipline of freedom

Thirty years of Lasansky dance

By Dagney C. Ernest | May 02, 2011



*(Photo by: Daniel O'Connell)* Young dancers surround Jimena Lasansky at her dance school studio in Lincolnville.



**Camden** — Thirty years ago, professional dancer Jimena Lasansky made a home, literally, for herself and her son in the woods of Lincolnville. The building was more studio than living quarters and still hosts local students age 4 to 18 most days of the year.

On Saturday, May 7, the current crop of young dancers in Lasansky School of Dance and its Dance Theater Ensemble will present an evening of original works. The 30th Anniversary Concert will begin at 7 p.m. at the Camden Opera House. It will feature 60 dancers from Bristol to Brooks.

"When I think about, it's 45 years I've been teaching. I feel like I'm just beginning," said Lasansky a week before the one-night-only performance.

Lasansky, who arrived on the Midcoast in 1977, began her local sojourn in St. George and then Camden, opening her current studio in 1981. The daughter of seminal Argentina-born graphic artist Mauricio Lasansky, she studied at New York City's Juilliard School under such 20th-century luminaries as Martha Graham and José Limón. She still dances every day, doing barre exercises and Pilates stretching, but her only performances are with her students at their annual showcase.



"I've been there, done that, traveled and performed ... working with children is what inspires me. They are truly amazing," she said.

For example, one of her younger students recently gave her the affirmation she needed for an ongoing transformation. She and her husband, architect William R. Sepe, are in the process of building what she calls her dream dance space next to their Rockport home.



It is larger and natural-light brighter than her longstanding studio in Lincolnville, with a dedicated costume and sewing loft and larger office space as well as a green-engineered circulating hot air system, all housed under a high greenhouse-style roof. It also is a laborious work-in-process — with no given finish date — and Lasansky, who is in her sixties, admits she has been caught up more than once by doubts as to whether it's a good idea. But the other day, she brought one of her younger students home with her to make a parent's pickup schedule easier and when the child saw the white studio perched on blue footings in the woods, she begged to go inside.

"When she saw the windows and the high ceiling and the dance floor [which is 44-feet on the diagonal], she just started dancing. The sound of her little feet tap-tapping a rhythm on the floor told me it was the right thing," said Lasansky.

Lasansky has a passion for the process that leads to the right thing in a work of original dance, a process that involves being open to all kinds of directions, some of which turn out to be the "wrong" ones. The 20 pieces in the concert program range from less than 60 seconds long to five-or-so minutes, and all were choreographed collaboratively by and with student dancers.

The first half of the program alternates short, new works by the youngest Lasansky School of Dance students with longer works by the older Dance Theater Ensemble students. A number of the mature student works are solos, duets and trios and, given the anniversary, many are returning, sometimes reworked, pieces. Given the differences in attention spans over the range of students, Lasansky had some concerns about the younger students containing their excitement during their older peers' performances, but the first run-through of the concert's first act alleviated those fears.

"The little kids were totally fascinated and inspired. One parent said her daughter came home saying she wanted to be like the older dancers, to do that dance and wear that costume," Lasansky said.

While the Dance Theater Ensemble does not abandon ballet, its members are the students who study, create and perform modern dance numbers. Lasansky has a firm belief in a grounding in classic ballet technique; students do not start modern until in their teens and even then, they are required to continue with their ballet technique classes. This policy is made clear at the very beginning and, for some, is a sticking point.

"If it's not their cup of tea, it usually happens right off the bat. I'm not trying to crank out dancers; it's not what I do," said Lasansky.

Lasansky also believes there is no such thing as "a dancer's body." Each student has a gift, she said, and it has nothing to do with being "special" or talented or privileged. It has to do with

getting to know one's "tool" and how to use it.

"The classical training helps you gain a sense of your body — what it can and can't do, when you have equilibrium, how to go off that and back on ... having the discipline is how you arrive at freedom," she said.

In addition to ballet technique, Lasansky grounds her students in the ways of collaborative creativity. From the very beginning, her students are part of what she calls birthing the dances.

"It's the essence of creativity and one of my primary focuses. I love the collaboration: I love the education process. It's lovely when a student goes on to become a [professional] dancer but the most important thing is to have an environment that is inspiring to them and from which they can go on as whole people," she said.

"Birthing the dances" varies according to the age and maturity of the students. The concert's opening number, for example, is a 50-second piece by the 4-year-olds titled, by them, "Baby Birds Look, Flap and Fly." The process began with choosing a piece of ambient music — Dan Gibson's "Songbirds by the Stream" — which Lasansky broke down into its A and B phrases. The children spent a few classes singing and clapping the phrases to really get the music into their bodies, and then considered what steps and movements they knew and could use. Lasansky challenged them to make their dance visible by drawing as a way of codifying it, although with this age group, she said, "you never know what they'll do when they get out there!"

Older students also have a visual method of choreography for their more complicated pieces. Lasansky will string up a clothesline and pin all kinds of things onto it, from pieces of color paper to socks and maybe even a teabag. Each item is assigned a movement; once they are learned, the students start mixing up the choreography by moving items around on the line. For the new work "Bourrés in C," the dancers were challenged to find a way to visually represent the patterns they envisioned for their piece set to one of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" preludes.

"Each class is so different, you never know what they can create," said Lasansky.

She has found one never knows where inspiration will come from, either. The music for the new Dance Theater Ensemble work "Reigning" was introduced to Lasansky by one of her brothers, a lifetime fan of Gregorian chant; Jan Gabarek's "Regnantem Sempiterna" combines chant with saxophone. A visit, with another brother, to the Vinalhaven Land Trust office included Lasansky's being shown a large pair of preserved black bird wings.

"I was awestruck by their beauty and the movement they represented," she said.

She shared her inspired preoccupation with feathers and wings and back articulation with the older dancers. Advice from a third brother led to the students making bird masks for the number which, at around five minutes, is perhaps the showcase's longest work.

Those dancers who take to her approach generally stick with Lasansky all the way through;

this year's concert will feature a solo-turned-duet, "Chant," performed by Caitlin Throne and Emily Pote, both of whom will graduate from high school, and the Dance Theater Ensemble, this year. And the concert includes several pieces from a suite using John Tavener's "Akhmatova Songs," a suite developed specifically as pieces to be looked forward to and passed on by students over their course of their years in Lasansky School of Dance.

Passing on and letting go is a hard thing for some to do, Lasansky said, "including me." She worked closely with Lily McLaughlin, one of those students who comes along now and then who absolutely lives to dance, on McLaughlin's solo "Gait Disturbance." The work is the first set to music by Alberto Ginastera that was introduced to Lasansky by Liz Hand, whose daughter is a student. "Gait Disturbance" also is inspired by a print of the same title by Jon Fasanelli-Cawelti, an artist friend of her son Richie Lasansky, also an artist.

McLaughlin and Lasansky both had some wild ideas for the dance and one of the teacher's involved a yellow ribbon unspooling across the stage. She became quite attached to the prop even after its use had led the pair into another direction.

"Finally, I had to admit it was time to lose the yellow ribbon — it just didn't work," said Lasansky.

Colors figure strongly in Lasansky's performances, thanks in part to the 30 years of costumes her students pull from to clothe their numbers. Sometimes, new costumes are called for or old ones need to be repaired or reworked or, in the case of a trio number becoming a quartet, replicated. Lasansky has sewn dancers' duds for years and has a dedicated corps of parent volunteers who do the same.

"When it comes time for the concert, parents really pitch in and make it possible," she said.

Thirty years ago, this anniversary may have seemed outside the realm of possibility for Lasansky. Now she has both a new crop of 4-year-olds and occasional phone calls and letters from people decades older who fondly recall their time in the Lincolnville woods.

Lasansky's work with local children also includes poetry — "I love playing with ideas and developing concepts in different mediums" — drama and the visual arts, especially during her summer workshops. Among her former students are some professional dancers, as well as movement therapists and writers and others who have brought Lasansky's training in creativity to a range of fields. She has served on the Dance Advisory Panel to the Maine Arts Commission, as an assistant professor of dance at the University of Maine at Augusta and as a movement specialist with the Artists in Education Dance Component Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. For all these laurels, Lasansky said she finds her dancers, and dance itself, the most inspiring.

"Dance is truly a life force ... the truth is, it's all I want to do. I love it and I'm just not done," she said.

Tickets for the 90-minute performance are \$14, \$8 for those younger than 13. They are available at HAV II in Camden and at door. For more information on Lasansky School of Dance, visit [lasanskydance.com](http://lasanskydance.com).

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