

**Reflections from the Mirror to the Stage"**  
**New Albany School of Ballet and Dance Arts,**  
**May 17, 2008 at Magnolia Civic Center**

Agnes De Mille, the innovative Broadway choreographer, wrote in her "Dance to the Piper" a rather telling statement about dancers and mirrors. She said something to the effect that dancers were always in danger of "drowning" in their mirror images. Anyone who has studied dancing knows that mirrors, used properly, can be a dancer's best friend. You have to be able to see and correct the minute things that finally establish your mature dance style. Does the arabesque end in the upswept foot? Is the attitude devant properly and beautifully bent on the front lifted crossed leg? Are the port de bras perfect as you move through the various arm positions? The teacher can tell you, but only you can establish the kinesthetic memory that makes it so.

So it is a felicitous idea, the idea of reflections, perfectly suited to classical dancers who have to look beautiful in everything they do, every move they make. Weaned from the mirror, the dancer has to depend on his/her kinesthetic memory. She/he has to listen and watch carefully. It's a big step from the mirror to the stage, and the future New Albany Ballet Company is beginning to emerge from that transition.

Let me quickly correct one thing: this is, for the present, a dance school recital; Justine Ward Stewart, its founder and director, has dreams of a ballet company sometime in the not too distant future. It begins, as do most of these ventures, as a youth ballet. But little steps, when taken carefully, become big steps when the time is ripe. Right now, she has one hundred girls who attend classes in her New Albany studio; she has taught for fifteen years, and the majority of her girls have studied dance seriously from one to three years, averaging two lessons a week. I can tell you from my own experience, in my early days as a young dancer, five classes a week was the minimum for a serious student, and this did not include the de rigore character (stage folk dance) or Spanish dance classes. Justine is an excellent dancer herself as well as being a fine teacher: She cares very much for her girls and is very proud of them, and she has every right to be proud; there are a number of very fine talents among her more experienced girls especially.

Excluding the opening three numbers, performed by her more advanced students, the first part of her program highlighted the littlest girls, three-year-olds to second grade. Here she demonstrates her organizational ability and her ability to inspire all her girls. Who wouldn't be inspired when the teacher, dressed as if she just came from a performance of Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco" and looking every bit the ballerina, demonstrates what the girls should do? This was a comparatively long sequence, but not boring to a dancer who has also taught: parents want to see what their children are doing and how they compare with the others. It's a good public relations gesture; in addition, it provides valuable insight into the teacher's style.

About half way into the program, there came a series of dance numbers that varied in their dance approach. A little bit of jazz, some tap, and some more modern movement. And it is here where the ballet company "emergence" I spoke of previously begins. "Imagine" (the John Lennon song, of course) was touchingly realized; "New Girl in Town" was both glamorous and funny (and beautifully costumed and made up). Five more numbers followed, with a variety of movements and fetching costumes, all well-performed, culminating with the dance that for me was one of the highlights of the performance: a lovely ensemble piece called "Spirit Voices," which Justine tells me was based on Native American tunes. The program concluded with a variety of ballet pieces (all on pointe) in strict classical style. The highlight here was the Vivaldi: all the gals were dressed in beautiful green skirts and black sparkling bodices. All the colors of the costumes were beautifully blended; Justine has an eye for color and its use in dance.

Whither to, then? Perhaps, in the near future, a good comic ballet; most certainly a "white" ballet (a la Balanchine's gorgeous "Serenade"), generally an all-female ensemble. Original solo works created for the dancers, either modern or classic. Certainly, major solos, pas de deux (dance of two, generally a man/woman duet), or small ensembles, from the great ballets.

And, most certainly, male dancers. Adding men adds a whole new dimension to dance. Unfortunately, and it's just as true in New York as here, men dancers who are any good, and who will come, rehearse and perform, do have to be paid. O brave new world!

P.S. The large and appreciative audience loved it.

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