



South Bay Ballet.

Dance preview

Bracing for BRAVO!

Diane Lauridsen and South Bay Ballet present their eclectic repertoire

by Krystal Ridgway

Tambourine-wielding, tutu-wearing ballerinas held their final pose, with toes pointed and chins held high until someone from the front of the room yelled, "Blackout!" After delicate curtseys, the nearly thirty boys and girls ran to Artistic Director Diane Lauridsen to report costume malfunctions. Since it was their first dress rehearsal in full costume, there were bound to be a few.

Lauridsen promptly called for the dancers in the next routine to take their place. She runs an admittedly tight ship. "I do like things a certain way. I want them to be done right." With their presentation of BRAVO! The Classical and Contemporary Ballet Experience fast approaching, there was some perfecting still to be done. After all, these ballerinas are training to enter a world where perfection is demanded. "There is no room for inexactitude, hesitation or uncertainty," wrote parent volunteer Catherine Jacobson, the president of South Bay Ballet, in the company's *Nutcracker* program.

It is this insistence for perfection that has made South Bay Ballet Southern California's leading pre-professional ballet company. The company boasts alumni like the prodigiously talented Misty Copeland, who is now an American Ballet Theatre soloist, and has consistently placed dancers in professional contracts with exalted companies across the globe, including Ballet Austin, Corella Ballet of Spain, and St. Louis Ballet.

Many of those professional dancers maintain a close connection with their South Bay Ballet roots. Even with prestigious professional contracts and demanding schedules to balance, former students are frequent visitors.

"A lot of [my former students] come to class [at Lauridsen Ballet Centre] for a tune up and to just be here and say 'hello,'" Lauridsen said.

"My friends here are close as family," said Evyn Nicole Davis, a senior company member and an emerging choreographer. "Diane's like the mom,

and we're all siblings."

Lauridsen noted that many of her former students maintain close friendships that began in her studio years ago. "They see each other's premieres, and a lot of times they fly in for each other's birthdays," she said.

Lauridsen was a professional dancer and taught at several other schools before opening her own in 1978. Dissatisfied with the lack of discipline and techniques being taught, she decided to do things her own way at Lauridsen Ballet Centre in the heart of Old Torrance. Looking back on these early years, she admitted, "I'm kind of appalled at what I didn't know when I started."

What Lauridsen did know for certain was that she wanted to reform traditional ballet techniques. "I wanted to find a more physically organic way of doing ballet." She faced plenty of skepticism from traditionalists, but the results she turned out quieted the cynics. "At that time, some people considered it sort of insane, and some people considered it bad, but it's become very cutting edge."

The dancers take classes that teach them about music, kinesiology, nutrition, choreography, and most importantly, how to work together. "There are a lot of professional modern dance companies that have a second company, and the job of the second company is very often to see how a dancer gets along with the other boys and girls before they hire them permanently." So, Lauridsen takes it upon herself to teach her students about some of life's hardest lessons like humility, respect, and perseverance.

Davis adds that among the many lessons she has learned while at Lauridsen, time management is one of the most important. Still a junior at South High, and dancing upward of twenty hours a week, she makes use of every spare moment.

"If I have to sew pointe shoes, I bring them with me [to school], and if I ever have free time I sew there." The discipline and dedication Davis has been taught to apply to her dancing, she also applies to schoolwork. "I try to get as much homework done during class as I can. I always have my books with me, in case I have an extra minute."

Torn between the historically opposing commitments of school and ballet, Davis manages to excel at both. She knows that eventually, however, she may have to put one before the other.

"I really want to go to college," she said. If she completes a college education, she likely sacrifices her opportunity to be in a professional ballet com-

pany because of their typical preference toward young dancers. (Most ballerinas retire in their 30s, while modern and contemporary dancers have much longer careers.) Davis is well aware of this reality. "If I go to college first, I'll probably end up getting into a modern company because age isn't as important."

Davis was just accepted to the Juilliard Summer Intensive in New

York City, as well as a two-week program in Washington called Craft of Choreography. Her interest in choreography sprouted at a young age. "I actually said when I was really little that I wanted to choreograph before I actually knew what it meant." Davis will make her choreographic debut in BRAVO! with a piece entitled, *berceau*.

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"This is the first time [my choreography] will be performed on stage, so I'm a little nervous."

Davis said of *berceau*, "I didn't want to do the typical teen angst dance, because that's what they expect. I wanted it to be happy." She explained that "berceau" is the French word for "cradle," and that the way the dancers relate to one another reminds her of Newton's Cradle.

BRAVO! is an exhibition of the South Bay Ballet's eclectic repertoire. It is meant to appeal to a wide audience

and prove that ballet is an accessible, relevant art form. "A lot of people who know that they hate ballet have never seen one, which is really a shame," Lauridsen said.

The two weekend performances open with choreographer and Santa Cruz Ballet Theatre Artistic Director Robert Kelley's premiere of a classical ballet entitled *Given*. Choreographer Francisco Gella premieres a contemporary piece entitled *White Noise*. According to Davis, "Mostly what we do is ballet, but that one is really out of our box, so it should be interesting." Both *Given* and *White Noise* were choreographed specially for South Bay Ballet's current company.

Other pieces in BRAVO! include a

reprise of Sacramento Ballet Artistic Director Ron Cunningham's ballet *Incident at Black Briar*. The energetic *Tarantella*, by South Bay Ballet's own Assistant Artistic Director (and Davis's mother) Candice Davis follows. Orange County High School of the Arts presents *No More Breathing Space*, and the show closes with David Lichine's spectacular one-act story, *Graduation Ball*.

When the curtain falls on Sunday's performance, things will go back to "normal" for Lauridsen, Davis, and the rest of the dancers. But for Lauridsen, the excitement continues. "I'm primarily a teacher. That's the thing that I enjoy the most." Her rewards are not monetary. "Obviously the money's not

ever going to be great when you combine arts and education." What thrills her most and has kept her going all these years is the magic that happens in the studio.

"I really live for the students that do well. To watch a dancer turn into one of those amazing dancers is very rewarding," she said. "And even when I see one little step of it, one day in class, one student that really accomplishes one little thing, that picks up my day."

BRAVO! will be presented this weekend only, Saturday at 7 p.m. and Sunday at 2p.m., in the James Armstrong Theatre, 3330 Civic Center Drive, Torrance. Tickets, \$20. Call (310) 781-7171 or go to southbayballet.org. **ER**