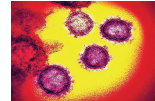




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The Olga Dunn Dance Company will perform Sunday, Aug. 4, at Saint James Place in Great Barrington.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY OLGA DUNN

OLGA DUNN DANCE COMPANY:

Dance in the 'heart of Great Barrington'

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IF YOU GO ...

By Nicolas Davidoff, The Berkshire Eagle

GREAT BARRINGTON — This is a cast of passionate dreamers.

From a young age, the five core members of the Olga Dunn Dance Company have dreamed of making a living doing what they love most — dancing.

What: Olga Dunn Dance Company's "Russian Proverbs"

Where: St. James Place, 352 Main St., Great Barrington

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 4

Cost: Free

Information: www.olgadunndance.org

"I've been dancing with Olga since I was 6, so that's 19 years now," said Hope St. Jock, one of the members. "I haven't really taken a break. Ever since that first ballet class I was hooked. I've done it through high school, college, and while I held full time jobs. Dance has just clicked with me. It's a way for me to express who I am and my feelings and emotions in a different way."

Becoming core members of the group means they are recognized as the most talented and hard working of Dunn's pupils. Now, they hope to put on a performance that will inch them closer to accomplishing their childhood dream. On Sunday, Aug. 4, at 7:30 p.m, St. Jock, Catherine Chester, Julie Webster, Ava Girard, and Rosa Barnaba will move as a one. The free performance, titled "Russian

Proverbs," will be held at Saint James Place in the heart of Great Barrington. There will be a complimentary reception following the show.

"I am half Russian on my mother's side," said Olga Dunn, the performance's director and choreographer. "My mother was a displaced person after the war, so I was born in Paris, France. However, our Russian heritage was incredibly important during my formative years. There are a lot of wonderful Russian proverbs that are often life lessons, as well. And my mother loved using them in daily speech, so I grew up appreciating them and thinking about them naturally and constantly."

Dunn, who taught all five dancers in their formative years, worked alongside them to choreograph and direct the show. Her dance company, which is in its 44th year, is one of the first non-profit dance organizations based in Western Massachusetts to run on a year round basis, according to Dunn. It hosts and headlines a wide array of performances and classes, which include workshops, master-classes, lectures for school children, and outreach programming.

The five core members have to make time for dance in their everyday lives; dancing is not their full time job.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER THESE ADS

"It takes commitment to put the show together," Webster said. "We kind of have to corral each other since we all have things going on in our daily lives. But we all try to carve out this time to come together. Whatever I'm doing, I make a commitment to myself to carve out time and effort to dance. It just brings me so much joy. My ultimate goal is to have my entire livelihood be based in theater and dance. I truly believe that it's possible."

"I've taken many hiatuses, but I somehow always get pulled back into Olga's sphere," said Chester, another member of the group. "I've always been a fan, even when I didn't live around here, I would try to come back for performances whenever I could. I've always loved her style both watching her choreography as an audience member but also performing. It just feels right on my body. There's a genuine expressiveness about it. I learned to dance with Olga Dunn — ballet and jazz to name a few — but I was always drawn to modern dance."

The performance's style is unmistakably modern. Yet Dunn and her dancers like to push themselves beyond the confines of what is considered to be modern or contemporary dance. For starters, 21 Russian proverbs, which were recorded in a studio, will be playing intermittently throughout the show. The cast's favorite is: "One pulls a plow, seven stand with spoons." Each movement, from the swing of an arm to the floating jumps, is meant to mimic the stories and the lessons that have been passed down for generations.

"I like to experiment with all sorts of music and multimedia when I come up with an idea for a show," said Dunn. "Besides using a lot of different music like opera, gospel, classical, hip-hop, I try to come up with ideas for words as a soundtrack for some of my dances. For example, I've choreographed to people talking about their recurring dreams, to commercials, to phone texts messaging excuses, and to ballet terminology. The idea of using proverbs, especially Russian ones, has been on my mind for over a year."

But the performance is still centered around a wide array of music, challenging the dancers and the choreographers with different beats and cadences.

"The music is also quite varied," said Dunn. "There is a Bach piece followed by a collection of Philip Glass pieces. One of the new pieces we are using for this show is called 'Stand By Me' from a group called Ranky Tanky. They are spearheading a new type of music called gullah coming out of Charleston, S.C. It's a new form of spiritual and gospel music. It's been a real pleasure exploring that type of music, which is new and also has real depth to it."

The spirituality of gullah — which roughly translates to "a people blessed by God" — coupled with the dancer's harmonious movements are both fitting to the space in which the performance will be held. Saint James Place has become a home for the arts in recent years. But the pews and stained glass windows are a reminder of the Episcopal Church's former purpose.

"We like the intimacy of this space," Dunn said. "There are roughly 300 seats. I love to be able to feel the audience. My favorite thing about it, though, is the acoustics. It's a wonderful opportunity for artists to perform right in the heart of Great Barrington."