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Visions of Sugar Plum Fairies in Brighton Beach



Photo: Mary Bowers

By *Mary Bowers*

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As the powdered snow falls on Manhattan Beach, inside the yellow walls of the Brighton Ballet Theater, 13 year-old Michele Kaner and her classmates rehearse for next week's performance of "The Nutcracker." It is as if their stage set has suddenly, spontaneously, fallen from the sky, for them: a fairytale gift.

In the waiting room, numerous pairs of tiny sneakers, galoshes and snow boots are strewn over the floor. In less than ten minutes, their tiny owners, less than a dozen two-to-six year-olds, will finish "Jump for Joy," their Sunday morning class, and reclaim their footwear, clumsily pulling on hats, mittens, and numerous layers of clothing.

From the room next door ekes the plunking sound of a piano accompanied by a group of little voices a half-tone flat of the melody. A stubby man with a grey t-shirt pulled over his protruding belly slouches on a chair, muttering in Russian into his cell phone, unwittingly nestling next to a bright pink bag covered with pastel-colored glitter hearts and emblazoned with the word "dance."

Vladimir Lepisko, coordinator of the Brighton Ballet Theater, greets a boy who toddles into the room in his dungarees. "Priviet," he says, greeting the boy in Russian, "How are you?" Lepisko has been here for 14 of the Ballet school's 21 years in Brighton Beach, and he has seen children come, and then enroll their children and young dancers who stay for ten years, become professionals. He proudly plays DVD performances and points to the displays of the news clippings and community awards the school has received over its history. "You should come to our belly dancing classes," he says with an enthusiastic smile, "Very nice, sophisticated, not vulgar."

The smaller dancers make way for their elders who attend classes known as "Fairytale in Motion." Kaner sweeps into the room, along with a girl in a sky blue leotard, a matching flower in her tightly pulled chignon. She will play the principal child's role of Clara, in this adaptation a girl called Mary. Her small arms and legs stretch gracefully, even offstage, as she dives into the locker room.

Shortly afterwards, amidst the parental babble in Russian and broken English, Irina Roizin, director of the school arrives, blonde hair swept back, makeup perfect, coat unruffled, despite the still-falling snow outside. The story of her founding the

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school is another fairy tale.

Having moved to the country in 1976 as a 16-year-old ballerina, she instantly began the life that, she believed, was set for all young female immigrants to America. She forgot ballet, enrolled in beauty school and got married, all within six months. It was only eleven years later, when she tried to enroll her own daughter in ballet school, that fate, she says, caught up with her.

The school was run by famous Bolshoi Ballet choreographer Galina Rybak, whose Jewish husband had been forced to migrate to America in order to find a job, something almost impossible for Jews in Russia at that time. Rybak was forced to leave the Bolshoi and come with him, demeaned to setting up a school in her living room. It had three pupils.

When Roizin appeared, she says, Rybak insisted that at their second meeting she should bring her clothes and dance for her. "She encouraged me not to become a regular person," says Roizin, she said, "I'm going to make you a great teacher." From that moment, Rybak subjected her to a daily regime of four to five hours of daily instruction, not only teaching her how to dance again, but how to teach ballet according to her "Vaganova" method. The method is designed to strengthen the muscles of children and prevent injury. They created a special program – the current "Fairytale in Motion" that is mandatory for the school's 400 or so pupils. The school opened in 1987, with Roizin at its head. Eighty percent of the pupils are Russian, but even these are mostly second-generation. She now envisions Brighton Ballet Theater becoming a professional school, in the future perhaps even a training academy.

Roizin is often asked the difference between Russian ballet and its other forms. "American ballet is close to gymnastics," she says. "It produces stronger dancers who can perform five to six pirouettes and unbelievable lifts." Russian ballet, she continues, is less about technique. "Pirouettes are done but with more emotions, with theatrical performance. Its storytelling, it's watching a movie."

In the adjacent room, Kaner flutters in a circle in front of a wall of mirrors that create multiple images of her and each of her classmates, as the snow falls more lightly now past the windowpanes behind them.

Kaner dreams of going to LaGuardia School of Performing Arts. She has auditioned, and will hear in February whether she has been successful. For now, she envisions herself in her transformation next week into the Sugar Plum Fairy doll, and stretches into an arabesque. For the school is full of dreams and fairytales, and hers is only one of them.

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