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Director of Nacre Dance draws on best in region

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Gazette Reporter

SARATOGA SPRINGS -- Beth Hartle Fecteau sees a parallel between mother-of-pearl and a dancer. Both start small, incubate over years and grow into iridescent beauties. So when Fecteau decided to direct her own dance ensemble, she named it Nacre Dance.

"A lot of people say, 'What does that have to do with dance?' " said Fecteau as she sat in her spacious Saratoga Springs kitchen. "I think nacre is mother-o-pearl. It is reflective of dance. It takes time to grow into an artist."

The name is not the only unusual thing about Nacre. The ensemble of 21 dancers, making its debut on Saturday, Feb. 28, at The Egg, performs a rare repertory. The company revives historic works -- masterpieces by Isadora Duncan, Doris Humphrey and Anna Sokolow. Those ground-breaking works, many forgotten or never seen, are interspersed with pieces from contemporary artists such as David Parsons and Vanessa Paige Swanson. The works are then interpreted by Nacre's mixed cast, a blend of professional and student dancers. Each dance will introduced by the artists who staged the works.

The company is a reflection of Fecteau's varied artistic experience in the field of dance. She was a dancer, performing with Maude Baum and Company Dance Theatre during its heyday in the 1980s. She also directed her own school of dance, Youth Ballet and Dance Eclectic, for 16 years in Clifton

Park. Most recently, Fecteau worked as an administrator, heading up the National Museum of Dance.

Last year, she resigned from the museum and remarried accountant Marc Fecteau. Now the 43-year-old is up for the next challenge, directing and choreographing for her own company.

Q: Why did you want to start a dance company?

A: I had a studio for years. I had a great business. Then I started at the museum part time, helping out. When I lost my studio space in Clifton Park, I started doing programs with the students at the museum. I was working with Carolyn Adams and Julie Strandberg of the American Dance Legacy Institute, teaching students small parts or etudes of these historic works, like Charles Weidman's "Christmas Oratorio." They loved the experience. I would look at their faces and then hear them talk about it, I knew they loved it. It was phenomenal for them.

I had to give a talk about Charles Weidman's "Oratorio" at a library. I had an hour and a half. That's a long time to talk. So I opened it up to these teenagers to talk to and they went on and on about what everything in the dance meant. And then they danced it and you could see how interested the audience was in what they were doing. They were looking for the symbolism in the movement.

Q: What pieces will you dance at The Egg?

A: We are doing short studies on Anna Sokolow's "Rooms" and Donald McKayle's "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder." We are also doing David Parsons and Danny Buraczeski etudes. The thing about these Parsons and Buraczeski etudes is I can take the material and do what I like with it. I can add a line of dancers in the back. I can embellish. I also have the freedom to cut as well. But Laura Bennett, the director of the Legacy Institute, has to come and approve what we are doing first before we can perform it.

We are also doing Doris Humphrey's "Air for G String" and a Duncan piece. I wanted to do this chronologically. So Duncan should come first. But the Humphrey piece is so difficult, I wanted to open with that.

It's interesting though. As the program progresses, you can see how modern dance went from subtle to physical. The newer dances are very physical.

Q: We will also see a piece by Vanessa Paige Swanson, a favorite when she was with Maude Baum and Company Dance Theatre.

A: Yes. Vanessa is so much fun. We reconnected when we both did "From the Horse's Mouth" last year at Proctors. We went out to lunch and I told her about the company. She asked what she could do. I knew she works great with teenagers -- so I asked her to make a piece. It's really lovely. It's set to French music sung by a boys choir.

Q: You have a mix of professionals and amateurs. Where did you find the dancers?

A: My goal was to have the best students in the area, something like the Empire State Youth Orchestra has the best young musicians. I solicited all the dance studios in the area. Some were opposed to it because they thought I wanted to take away their students. I explained to them that they are the teachers and I will only embellish on what they do.

Actually, it will make them look good to have a dancer in a dance company. But I always emphasize to the dancers that I'm not their teacher, I'm the director.

We also have Deb Rutledge and Marybeth Hampshire from Maude Baum's company.

Most of the dancers are from Albany and Troy.

Q: And you have a studio in your home?

A: Yes. But it's too small to rehearse group dances. It's good for a solo or a duet or in an emergency when we need to go over something. Usually, we rehearse at the Arts Center [of the Capital Region] in Troy and Art in Motion in Albany. That studio is owned by a former student and dancer of mine. It's convenient because it is right across the street from the administration offices of Nacre. It's really worked out for us.

Q: Why do you think it's important for these young people to perform?

A: Because in the end, dance is a performing art. Sure, it's fine to take dance all your life, to stay in shape or whatever. But in the end, dance is a performing art.

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