

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Alexander Iziliaev

Skyler's Then and Now

by Rhonda Moore

Skyler Lubin, newest addition to Philadelphia's BalletX, credits her first season with the company as the impetus behind her infiltration into the world of classical-contemporary dance. As we chat after rehearsal at the Wilma, just days before opening night of *Summer Series 2016*, Skyler's delight at being part of all this is like a breath of fresh air. The 24-year-old petite, perky, and fiery-eyed dance artist is a product of ten years of study at the Rock School, where she achieved prize-winning recognition with participation in the Youth America Grand Prix, the world's largest international student dance competition. "Working in pure classical ballet is really the only way I had ever imagined I would be dancing; after seeing BalletX founder Matthew Neenan's *Sunset* that has all changed."

As Skyler recounts her year-long apprenticeship and four-year collaboration with Miami City Ballet, at the time led by Edward Villella, there is a clear sense of "then"—a much bigger company, complete with classical hierarchy, assigned roles, little to no dancer-generated creative input on choreography or interpretation, and a "totally different concept of upper body movement and boundaries." When referencing traditional ballet companies, these delineators are neither strangers nor enemies, but rather the nature of the beast.

After delighting audiences with spectacular exhibitions as fairy, princess, sylph, nymph and other storybook characters, Lubin decided to make BalletX a part of her journey to "now," clearly indicating this dancer's desire for growth in new directions. BalletX urges classically-trained dancers to new heights and depths of nimbly explorative, bold, and compelling shape-shifting. The company asks them to push the boundaries while dotting and crossing all i's and t's. A round of company classes and a viewing of co-founder Matthew Neenan's *Sunset* left Skyler smitten. Watching the company use their unwavering technique to masterfully weave through the quirky, sensual, daring, and far-from-purely-classical moves and moods of the Neenan piece was an eye-opener. Says Skyler, "I was overwhelmed and amazed at the endless possibilities of what the body can do, and there is an element of humanness at the root of everything."

During a first season with the company that blossomed from earnest seeds into hothouse beauty, Skyler acknowledges her own growth

as well. “The entire process in this company is very different; we don’t just learn steps and reproduce; we are encouraged to access all we know and make the steps our own.” Working with different choreographers—artists purposefully engaged in pushing the realm of movement possibilities beyond traditional classical expectations in an effort to connect with today’s diverse audiences—is a new world for Skyler: “I’m moving farther and farther away from preconceived judgment calls and thinking that I look weird, or maybe I’m finally just accepting weird as valid. I’m discovering that dance can be anything, limitless. My body is moving in new, unaccustomed and not always easy ways, and this is challenging and rewarding!”

Skyler candidly admits that exclusive study and training in classical dance contributed to a certain tunnel vision: “I went straight through classical training to dance with a classical company, really focusing on the repertory at hand. This is all I was used to doing. My comparisons were pretty much apples to apples. With BalletX, the concept of movement is much broader; what I do, how I move offstage in my daily routine, when I go out dancing socially—I can access all those things as food for thought, too. My upper body isn’t just a part that must stay rigidly fixed. That’s been a difficult and wonderful discovery.”

As she describes the two premiere works featured in the July performances, her eyes sparkle, the expression self-probing. Co-founder Matthew Neenan and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa have each crafted pieces that will “take us on journeys through light and darkness, each in very different ways. *Identity Without Attribute* is one of Matthew’s darker works, dedicated to writer and long-time friend and funder Toni Hamilton. Annabelle’s *Bonzi*, inspired by painter René Magritte, is quirky and much lighter in tone. Klip Collective’s lighting and projections add a layer of visual interpretation to both pieces, so there are a lot of components. The results? Just wait until you see the program!”

Skyler’s mood has infected me as well; as we part, I am already sifting through images and situations in my head, crafted from the earnestness and sheer physical intensity of her words.

BalletX Summer 2016 finishes their summer season this weekend through July 17th at the [Wilma Theater](#).

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