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Column: DANCE

Memo: Nacre Dance Company

WHERE: The Egg, Empire State Plaza, Albany

WHEN: 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28

HOW MUCH: \$20; \$15 for seniors and students

MORE INFO: www.nacredance.com or 473-1845

A most welcome guest

WENDY LIBERATORE

Gazette Reporter

After 11 years in New York City, choreographer Vanessa Paige Swanson has come to the conclusion that the more abstract your art, the better. "There is a lot of pressure to be weird," said Swanson. "I thought I was weird already, but it is never enough in New York."

That's why it was so refreshing, these past few months, for her to flee the city and return to her old dancing grounds in Albany. As the first guest choreographer of Nacre Dance Company, Swanson was able to create a pure dance -- one in which technique is not something a dancer needs to hide but something to be used and celebrated.

The artistic director of Vanessa Paige Dance and Soundance in Brooklyn, Swanson was invited by Beth Hartle, artistic director of the brand-new Nacre Dance Company. Swanson's new piece, "Watching You Without Me," will be the only new work on Nacre's inaugural program next week.

Back to roots

"I really loved returning to my dance roots," said Swanson, a former dancer and choreographer with Maude Baum and Company Dance Theatre. "In New York, if you do an arabesque or something beautiful, even if it is something that comes natural to the dance, a choreographer won't like it. With Nacre, I am working with people who are really dancing and not apologizing for it."

That's a bit surprising coming from Swanson, as she never fit the mold of classic dance diva. During her tenure with Baum in Albany, she created solos in which she talked as much as she danced. A few remain in the Baum repertory, but they are seldom performed. So quirky and funny is their delivery that they are intrinsic to Swanson. It's doubtful anyone else could pull them off.

"Lynda [Capcefaló] told me I missed my calling," said Swanson, remembering another Baum colleague. "She always said I should write a book. She would say, 'why aren't you writing this down? You ought to be writing this down.' "

Beyond performing and creating, Swanson has always taught dance, too -- all ages and levels. She led classes for nine years at Baum's studio at the eba Theatre and continues to teach at Soundance. The combination of Swanson's good humor, talent and teaching skills made her an ideal choice for Hartle.

"I invited Vanessa to be our first guest choreographer because I value her not only as a choreographer but a teacher," said Hartle, who also danced with Swanson at the Baum company. "I knew she would work well with our young artists and she would provide a positive learning experience both in the studio and on the stage."

That is Swanson's goal, too.

Working with young

"My role, I feel, is to take these young, beautiful Nacre dancers and transform them into performing artists," said the 42-year-old. "I really love working with them because they still have that youthful quality about them. They haven't yet learned to be neutral, to be bodies in space. When you see

them doing the piece, you are seeing them. They have yet to learn how to be a blank page."

Swanson's dance features seven from the all-female company of 21, a mix of professional and pre-professional dancers. It is set to boys' choral music composed by Bruno Coulais that was featured in the film "Les Choristes." Swanson said she can't resist choral music, nor telling a story. In this work, she speaks of loss.

"I do want the dancers to find a place in their lives when they felt these emotions," she said. "I always like to do something with a little bit more emotion. For these dancers, I wanted them to have the experience of connecting the movement with something deeper."

In addition to Swanson's new dance, the Nacre's first outing will feature excerpts or etudes pulled from important historic dances. Among the legendary works will be Doris Humphrey's "Air for the G String" (1928) and Donald McKayle's "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder" (1959). The latter will feature Saratoga Springs singer Garland Nelson.

And while there is a lot of excitement surrounding the new company and the revival of these important dances, many in the dance community are equally happy to see Swanson's return. The feeling is mutual.

Exit plan

"I've done everything I wanted in New York," said Swanson. "I've done the Joyce [Theater], Soho, St. Mark's [Church]. I've been running a dance studio and theater in Williamsburgh, Brooklyn. I have a company. I am now working on a two-to-five-year exit plan. What I'll do is come back to Maude. She's all for it."

And when she returns, she would probably be happy to work with Nacre again.

"Nacre has some great, young, beautiful dancers. I loved working with them because they have no expectations. They are so open-minded. So many times I'm working with professional dancers who know that the clock is ticking on their careers. It's important to them to show what they can do. Working with Nacre, there are no egos to soothe. They do the dance as choreographed and trust that it will look good."

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