

Teaching Hairy Guys in Tutus

Continued from previous page

not mainstream. But today, a lot of the dancers come in with a high level of mindfulness, and that mindfulness informs their art."

Gussied up in full diva makeup, ornately jeweled costumes and outlandish stage names, the Trocks still go for the laugh, peppering their routines with a stumble here, a splayed-leg kerflop there, 28 years after starting out in the West Village as a smartly comic but minimally trained drag dance ensemble. The leg, chest and armpit hair remains. But the "galumphing humor," as Ms. Dunning has called it, has been traded in for a more genteel slapstick.

"Ballet is about good taste, and I'm here to keep the boys from going over the edge," Ms. Pribisco said. When Robert Carter, as Mme. Suphphozova, cracks his gum as he whizzes across the studio floor in "Paquita," it's a stunt for rehearsal only. "A corps girl in the last row could snap her gum, but never a prima ballerina," Ms. Pribisco said primly. "We have decorum to maintain."

She would know. A founding member and principal with her hometown Cleveland Ballet, the impeccably mannered Ms. Pribisco, who refused to divulge her age and named Jacqueline Kennedy as a role model, resembles nothing so much as a knockout soccer mom: slender frame elegantly erect, lined face buffed with just a hint of makeup, glossy chestnut mane pulled back in a ponytail.

In 1980 she packed her point shoes and moved to New York, where she picked up teaching gigs at the Joffrey Ballet School, Ballet Hispanico and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center as well as yoga classes at the White Cloud Studio; she also served as a rehearsal director for the American Ballroom Theater.

In 1983 she met Mr. Dobrin, then a dancer with the Trocks, who used her floor-barre classes as balm for an injury. "Her class was so brilliant, so clearly explaining this technique, getting into the depth of it, that I started taking it every day," Mr. Dobrin said.

A friendship emerged, and soon Mr. Dobrin and a couple of his fellow Trocks were adding atmosphere as backup dancers in a variety act Ms. Pribisco was performing as a lark in SoHo. Several years later, she found herself up for the position of the Trocks' ballet mistress.

"No one does this job better, more thoroughly, more quickly in any company," Mr. Dobrin said. "Because of her explanation of point work and her classes, the point work of the dancers has grown 100 percent."

But as all real women know, with gain comes pain.

"Pam began teaching us these point classes, the kind you would teach to young little girls," said Paul Ghiselin, who was already a member of the company when Ms. Pribisco came on the scene. "During the year it takes you to get into the shoes, you have your good days and your bad days. Initially for me, they were all bad because I had not yet developed corns and bunions. I left class screaming."

Still, he continued, "after just a few grueling weeks I felt so much change come into the company. It was a huge transition: we

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were so much cleaner, so much stronger. And she understands the stage very well. She's not one of these big drama people."

Fernando Medina Gallego, aka Sveltiana Lofatkina, thought point looked easy before joining the Trocks nearly four years ago: "When you are classically trained and you see the girls doing it, you think, 'Well, it doesn't seem so difficult.' Then you get the point shoes on, and you know otherwise. When I'm dancing in a tutu, I imagine that now I have to look like a ballerina. But what is telling me I'm a ballerina is the pain in my feet."

Forget, for a moment, feet. Ms. Pribisco's most stellar virtue may lie in her shining example of what every Trock aspires to be: a glorious, full-blown woman, the kind who can analyze the arch of an eyebrow from any angle, who understands the allure of the subtle gesture and the importance of manners in an uncivilized society.

FOR Mr. Ghiselin, at 40 one of the oldest dancers in the company, Ms. Pribisco breathed new life into Ida Nevasayneva, his aging old school diva, by helping him fine-tune his feminine mannerisms. "Let's face it," he said. "It's all theory when it comes from a man. But when a woman talks about it, you tend to take their word for it."

Ms. Pribisco, who knows only too well the harsh expectations of physical perfection placed on female dancers by their often male leaders, sees her role as liberator.

"As a ballerina," she said, "you spend your professional life believing you are never quite right — never thin enough, never pretty enough, your legs aren't long enough and you certainly don't dance well enough to protect your spot from the corps girl waiting in the wings. I'm here to tell these men that regardless of their shape, their size or their age, as long as they want to dance and are giving it their all, they are more than enough ballerina for me." □