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Ithaca Ballet Opens Season With Flair

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While Ithaca lacks most of the defining characteristics of a larger city — good shopping, vibrant nightlife, etc. — you don't have to travel far from campus to find excellent performance arts. This past weekend, the Ithaca Ballet opened its 2008-2009 season with a set of matinee performances on Saturday and Sunday, downtown at the State Theatre.



[1]**Sooooo Pretty:** The Ithaca Ballet's dancers, who opened their '08-'09 season last weekend, wowed audiences at the State Theatre with their precision and grace.

The company performed three ballet scores — “Aurora’s Wedding” (from the full-length ballet *Sleeping Beauty*), “Haunted House” and “Snow White.” Past the glamour and whimsical costumes, the dancers showcased strong technical ability marked by precise and sharp movement. Through the three different pieces, the company demonstrated the talent and training necessary to produce such high-caliber performances in the upstate region.

The Ithaca Ballet, which is associated with the Ballet Center of Ithaca, is a training ground for young dancers. Years of commitment lie behind the final, polished performances put on by the troupe. With the exception of the principal dancers and soloists, the company is made up mostly of local high school and middle school dancers who spend hours each day training and rehearsing. The company was co-founded by Alice Reid and is run by her and daughter Cindy Reid, who along with Lavinia Reid choreographed the pieces shown this weekend.

“Aurora’s Wedding” — originally created by Russian choreographer Marius Petipa, and staged for the Ithaca Ballet by Cindy Reid — opened the show. It was a large and enrapturing ensemble piece, featuring mostly younger dancers. Beth

Mochizuki filled the principal role of the Lilac Fairy, showing off elegant port de bras.

With only a white sheet as a backdrop, principal dancer Nadia Drake performed the leading role of Princess Aurora along with Johann Studier as Prince Florimund. Their duet was exciting and proved them to be a well-matched pair, as they executed several complex techniques effortlessly. Drake was especially captivating, and her preceding solo was just as strong as the duet — though it was, unfortunately, hindered by poor audience etiquette. I was reminded of how easily a good performance can be ruined when a man's cell phone rang not once, but twice in the row next to me. Studier danced the only male solo of the show — and while his performance was energetic and earned multiple rounds of applause from the audience, I found myself waiting for his leaps to spring just a little further off the ground.

Younger dancers also performed well, although a few occasionally struggled to execute more difficult steps. Noteworthy performances include high school student Katie Taylor (whose dramatic miming lent well to her part) as Little Red Riding Hood and Julia Hellmich as Bluebird.

Following “Aurora’s Wedding” was the seasonally-appropriate “Haunted House,” choreographed by Alice Reid, and set to music by Modest Mussorgsky. More charming than spooky, the piece provided a short but delightful contrast to the very classical first ballet, and was aimed towards the younger members of the audience. Scenery and costumes added to the roles, and the costumes for one trio of skeletons in particular fit the choreography very well.

The final, and titular, ballet of the matinee was “Snow White,” choreographed by Lavinia Reid. The dancing was excellent, while still brief enough to keep the attention of the youngest viewers. Although a familiar story to most of the audience, the ballet included voice-over narration to accompany the dancing and music. Playing the part of young Snow White was Keara Soloway, with Beth Mochizuki as the older version of the character. Both were perfect fits for the part. Drake was also a good match for the role of the Evil Queen, looking into her large mirrored prop while dancing and plotting Snow White’s demise via a large, sparkly apple.

Overall, the company produced three solid performances. While the shorter pieces were aimed towards a younger audience, there’s no doubt that this weekend concluded the start of another stellar season for the Ithaca Ballet.

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