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'INSIDE/OUT' PERFORMANCE SERIES

The best seat in the house

Locals, tourists enjoy free evenings of dance in relaxed setting

Posted Wednesday, July 3, 2019 2:58 pm

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By Nicolas Davidoff, The Berkshire Eagle

BECKET — Children run around their parents asking for another piece of candy, couples hold hands while they take in the dramatic scenery, families and friends crowd around a picnic spread all while enjoying the performance of a group of internationally acclaimed Armenian dancers.

"I don't think that tree used to be there," Jim Beagan said, as he pointed to an oak tree at the far right end of Jacob's Pillow's dramatic Inside/Out stage. "It used to look like the dancers were going to fall right off the ledge."

Beagan and Robert Burke have been coming every summer for more than 20 years to the dance festival tucked away in the woods, driving all the way from their home on the Eastern shore to enjoy the art and scenery the area has to offer. Their last stop is always Jacob's Pillow, which they kick off with "Inside/Out."

"It's just beautiful watching people move and act as a unit," Burke said. "Something that is so rare in our country nowadays."

This past Friday evening, the free outdoor show, which runs for the duration of the summer festival every Wednesday through Saturday at 6:15 p.m, featured the Sayat Nova Dance Company — a Boston-based Armenian dance group.

"The 'Inside/Out' Performance Series is one of the most democratic stages in the U.S," said Jacobs Pillow Director Pamela Tatge in an email. "Where else do you have a free performance Wednesday through Saturday, each one different and reflective of another dance style, form or cultural tradition? Our goal with 'Inside/Out' is to make dance accessible and approachable to everyone, all while celebrating the natural landscape we are so grateful to be in dialogue with."

The meandering paths on the Becket campus take you from one theater to the next. But this is no ordinary theater stage. The woods that line the gravel paths open into a clearing, offering an immersive view of the Berkshire Mountains. Flanked by trees on either side, rows of wooden benches are lined up on the hill as you continue to descend toward the stage, which is lighted by the setting sun.

"I really appreciated the cultural aspect of the performance," said Jess, a regular attendee of the Inside/Out performances. "I got a little taste of what seems like a very rich culture and dancing tradition. And that's part of the reason I come here — to learn something.

"I can't even count the times I've been here," she said, while enjoying a glass of wine with her friend, Carolin.

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Many of the other audience members also brought a variety of picnic items to enjoy while they watched the Sayat Nova Dance Company glide across the stage. A family came in with steaming pizza boxes, a group of friends grabbed beers out of a cooler, a couple shared a bowl of fresh berries. Most strolled in at around 5:45 p.m., picnic basket in hand, hoping to get a seat close to the stage. A few of the seasoned viewers brought their own folding chairs, others chose to sit on the wooden benches directly in front of the stage, some families enjoyed their picnic on the tables that flank the stage, and some even brought blankets to lay down and comfortably enjoy the show in true picnic fashion.

The performance, which lasted just under an hour, ranged in theme and tempo. From the dramatic movements of the blue-veiled female dancers to the lively jumps and shouts of the male performers. The audience was engaged throughout the show, some joined in by clapping to the rhythm of the music.

"We dance because Armenians always need to dance," said Apo Ashjian, the director of the Sayat Nova Dance Company. "After everything we've been through as a people, we are still dancing," he said.

Each song was an ode to Armenian culture, a chance for the families and friends in attendance to get a glimpse into a rich and vibrant dancing tradition. The 24 dancers moved as a unit, magically changing into elaborate traditional garments between every one of the five songs performed. They filled the stage, holding each other's hands and smiling throughout. The stage itself stands, floats almost, on a clearing overlooking the Berkshire Mountains.

"I'm so surprised at how green everything is here," said Lidia, who traveled all the way from Buenos Aires with her husband, Mario, to visit their daughter, Marissa, who works in Boston.

"I used to be a professional dancer when I was young," Lidia said. "I performed internationally, and I think I learned to dance a few Armenian songs at one point in my travels when I went to Yerevan."

"I don't like watching dance performances, so much," Mario said. "I only liked to watch when my wife was on stage. So, I brought a book with me."

Some children, like Mario, took advantage of the casual atmosphere, running around the woods, far from the stage, playing tag as their parents enjoyed the show. Others were absorbed in the performance, eating hotdogs and watermelon next to their parents as they gazed at the dancers in awe.

"This show is a great place for everyone, really," Jess said. "It's such a varied crowd of people who just want to enjoy themselves. Whether it's families looking for something new to do or real fans of dance, it works for everyone."

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