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Alessandra Grimaldi for The Wall Street Journal

Katarzyna Skarpetowska will see her work, 'Cuore Sott'olio,' premiere on April 2: 'A preserved heart; that's how I like to think about the whole piece.'

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

A Choreographer's Palette



Katarzyna Skarpetowska is living proof that you can rebound from a bad review, no matter how impressionable your age.

"I got into this musical that came to Broadway at the Minskoff Theater in 1992," she remembered. It was called "Metro."

"Frank Rich was the [New York Times] critic at the time. He gave us this horrific review."

Ms. Skarpetowska, who had traveled from her native Poland with the production, was 15-years-old, the cast's youngest member.

"We were all at the party at Tavern on the Green when somebody brought in the paper," she said. "That was the end of the party."

Not to inflame old wounds, but here's the first line from Mr. Rich's review: "What's the Polish word for fiasco?"

The dancer has recuperated nicely. After the musical flopped, Ms. Skarpetowska, whose father was a Polish diplomat stationed in New York, enrolled at the High School of Performing Arts.

From there, she went on to study dance at Juilliard, and to a career as a dancer and cho-

reographer. It has included stints with the Parsons Dance Company, Battleworks, and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, with whom she still dances occasionally.

On April 2, Ailey II, Alvin Ailey's second company, will premiere her half-hour work "Cuore Sott'olio," which translates as something like "heart submerged in oil."

"A preserved heart; that's how I like to think about the whole piece," Ms. Skarpetowska explained when we met at Ailey's West 55th Street studios last week.

It involves a female figure remembering her past relationships.

"These memories are unfolding in front of her," the choreographer said. "Characters are tumbling from her past. She observes it and sheds it and at the end of the dance emerges from this tumbling memory world."

Ms. Skarpetowska lives in Astoria with her husband, Fabrizio Caputo, who works in theater production.

"There is nothing autobiographical in 'Cuore,'" she stated.

In that case, she has a vivid imagination. I was taken with the piece when I saw a preview in January—especially the way the choreographer uses folk

music, given a contemporary flare by composer Vincio Capossela, to create something beautiful, magnetic and sexy. It felt fresh, lacking any pretension.

My obvious inadequacy at describing dance was part of the reason I had suggested we get together when I encountered Ms. Skarpetowska at an open house after her preview. Of all the arts, dance is perhaps the one whose creative process most baffles me.

'You hope for people with poetry in their bodies.'

I can understand how inspiration migrates from a writer's brain, through pen or computer keyboard, to paper. Or from a visual artist's to paintbrush and canvas. But how does it travel into the bodies of, in this case, six dancers?

"Lars has a visual background," Ms. Skarpetowska said, comparing herself to Mr. Lubovitch, a mentor. "He was a visual artist before. He'll come in with drawings. He's a genius at moving groups around, of painting with people."

"I also see things in pictures," she went on. "I find my music before anything else. I listen to the music over and over again and I start to see pictures, imagining what happens in the dance. The bulk of the creative work is done before you come into the studio."

Does that mean she draws pictures? Or performs tour jettés around her apartment and hopes the downstairs neighbors don't complain?

"Many times, yes," Ms. Skarpetowska said to the dancing around her railroad flat. "I try, it out on my body a little bit but I don't want to influ-

ence it too much before I get in there with the dancers."

I suspect human beings are a bit more unwieldy than a pen or paintbrush.

"You hope for people with poetry in their bodies," Ms. Skarpetowska explained. "You want somebody to collaborate. The idea is yours. What happens after is the coloring in the lines."

"The greatest things that happen in choreography are by accident," she added. "Sometimes it's a dancer's physical reaction to the last step that informs my brain and leads to the next one. Or how a group of dancers happens to stand together, or if they fall out of a lift, or accidentally try a different grip that creates a window of opportunity and gives direction to what should happen next. This piece was full of accidents because these dancers are extremely creative and love to play around."

It might have also smoothed the process that, at 37 years old, Ms. Skarpetowska is closer in age to her dancers than a lot of choreographers.

"We can joke around," she agreed. "But in the end it's about the work, the product."

Another opportunity to bond might have been over the tattoos that many dancers, Ms. Skarpetowska included, are wearing these days. When she dances, depending on the formality of the piece and the dance company, she said she'll disguise them with makeup.

One of those tattoos, on her right arm, is a cross-section of a tree and its rings. "It might or might not have something to do with my aging as a dancer," she joked.

My hunch is that if the rings also document her emerging career as a choreographer there are many left to ink.

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