

DANCE SHOWCASE

Steffi Nossen celebrates dance with all-new movie

By DEBORAH SKOLNIK

For 84 years, Steffi Nossen School of Dance has been known for turning out highly accomplished hoofers. This past pandemic year, however, the school was involved in a different sort of fancy footwork: figuring out how to showcase and celebrate its most accomplished students.

"In a typical year, we would have a gala at SUNY Purchase, at one of the concert halls there," explained Shelley Grantham, Steffi Nossen's executive director. The spring fete traditionally features show-stopping dance performances by students in the school's master classes, its pre-professional program.

84th Anniversary Gala drive-in movie experience

When: May 22, 8 p.m.

Location: John Jay Homestead
400 Jay Street, Katonah

Tickets: \$100/car

Concessions: \$25/movie treats in souvenir tote bag (presale only)

Info: <https://bit.ly/3f0Fmh4>

Of course, a large indoor gathering was out of the question this year. So in the winter, Grantham consulted with artistic director Jessica DiMauro Marks and the school's executive board, and arrived at a solution: they would film the master class students dancing outdoors in spring, and turn the 84th Anniversary Gala into a drive-in movie at the John Jay Homestead Historical Society in Katonah. The screening, which takes place May 22 at 8 p.m., will even have concessions available for pre-purchase (\$100 per car, concessions extra; visit <https://bit.ly/3f0Fmh4> for tickets).

Grantham and her team quickly hit upon a perfect site for filming. "We instantly called up Greenburgh Nature Center and started talking about this collaboration," she said. "It was a perfect relationship right away, where they were very intrigued with bringing live dance into their green space."

The school also had a videographer at the ready: Bryan Russo, a retired TV director and the father of a Steffi Nossen alum, had created a number of videos for the school over the years. "They approached me to see if I would be the camera operator for the actual shooting of the kids dancing," he said. "The choreographers edited the individual dances themselves, then I compiled what they did into something that could be presented at the gala."

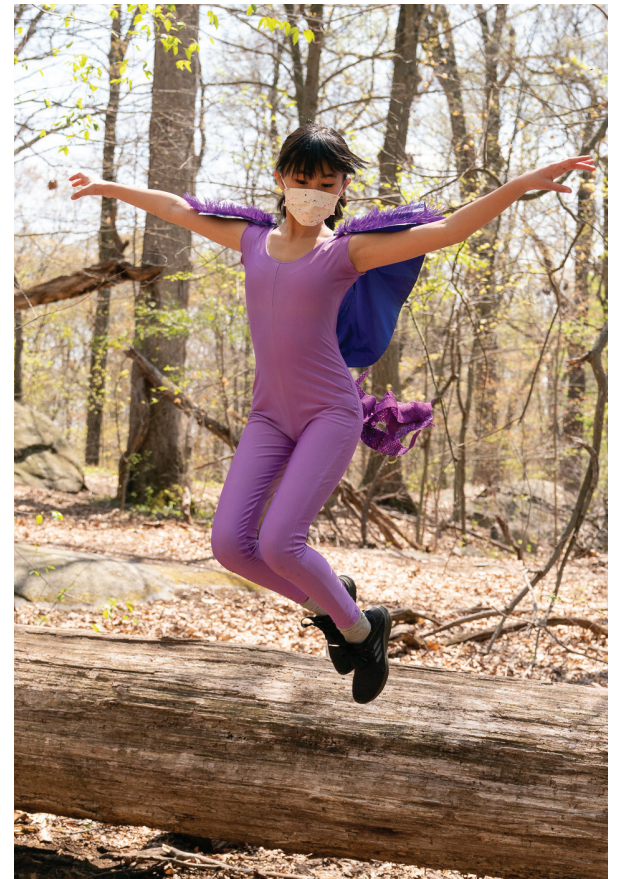
Dancing in front of a screen was nothing new for Steffi Nossen's master class students, who have been taking lessons via Zoom since March of 2020. They rehearsed the numbers featured in the film remotely as well, though they were able to meet in person for run-throughs for three weeks prior to the performance. These gatherings were held outdoors in early April, at a school in Chappaqua. "It was chilly and sometimes rainy, but we were there, dancing," Grantham said.

Weather notwithstanding, the students were thrilled. "It was a very exciting experience to finally see people in person that we hadn't seen in months," said 13-year-old Grace Allen of Greenacres, a student in Steffi Nossen's Master Class I who also studies advanced beginner ballet, jazz, and tap there. "It was just really nice to dance with someone as a community."

Liam M., 13, from Quaker Ridge, a Junior Master Class and ballet student at Steffi Nossen, was also thrilled for in-person rehearsals. "Learning remotely is a lot harder, because when you're in a studio, you can see everything from three dimensions, but on Zoom, it's only what the camera picks up, so it's a lot harder to get the dimensions and space," he said. Plus, he added, "[Dancing in person] was a lot more fun. I like being around people, and seeing other people dance with me."

The filming of the dances — five in all — at the nature center took place on a single day: Saturday, April 24. DiMauro Marks noted the challenges the students faced: "All the material that they learned [primarily] on the computer, they had to translate into real life, with other bodies in space with them," she said.

For videographer Russo there were unusual factors to navigate as well. "It's not like being in a studio setup, where you can control almost everything," he said. Fortunately, he added, "The weather stayed good all day, and



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Clockwise from top left, Eva Aggarwal and members of the Steffi Nossen Master Class I performing "Seeking Nostalgia," choreographed by Annie Doss and edited by Al Firstenberg; Bryan Russo filming members of the Steffi Nossen Dance Co. performing "a través de sus ojos," choreographed and edited by Jessica DiMauro Marks; Evelyn Leung of the Steffi Nossen Junior Master Class performing "They Can See Light," choreographed and edited by Annie Doss; Liam M. and Paola Parra of the Steffi Nossen Junior Master Class performing "They Can See Light"; Leilani Aggarwal and members of the Steffi Nossen Dance Co. performing "Take Care," choreographed and edited by Daniel Padierna. Costumes by Hennie Bijsmans Fry

the choreographers held the dancers to a very high level."

Then there were the vagaries of the landscape to navigate. "We threw pine cones to the side, but they always found their way back," recalled 15-year-old Leah Vinodh, an Edgemont resident who's in Steffi Nossen's Master Class II and its jazz, ballet and modern dance classes. Though the students were game for the backdrop, it was an adjustment. "I'm getting more used to dancing outside, but it's definitely different, because there's dirt, there's rocks, there's bugs everywhere and stuff," said 11-year-old Evelyn Leung of Edgemont, a student of Steffi Nossen's Junior Master Class, as well as its ballet, jazz and modern dance classes.

Still, Leung added, although she cut her palm on a stick while dancing, the experience broadened her horizons. "My dance teacher used to tell me that she used to have to dance on a boat or dance on the stairs. And I was always fascinated about how she was able to figure that out," she remembered. "I feel like this year, I've kind of figured out how people are able to adapt to their different surroundings."

Liam appreciated the chance to witness what was go-

ing on behind the scenes. "I'm into a lot of creative music-making and film-making, and I like editing videos, too, so it was cool to see these professional cameras and photographers and videographers filming me and other people," he shared. "I think it's actually really cool that we did the filming this year — it was a cool alternative."

The students plan to attend the May 22 gala and eagerly looked forward to watching themselves on the big screen. "I'm really excited to see how it comes out ... it's interesting to see how it will be pieced together," said Vinodh.

Ultimately, the silver screen project was a golden opportunity to test everyone's mettle — and DiMauro Marks, for one, said she feels Steffi Nossen and its students have come out of this period stronger than ever. "I feel very proud of our organization ... being able to pivot on a dime and create these exceptionally unique experiences for our dancers, who are very talented young artists," she said.

For Allen, the film will be a celebration of the art and the school she adores. "I think I love it so much because of the community," she mused. "It feels like family. It's definitely a very safe space."