

NORTH COUNTY NEWS

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Dancing from New York to Peekskill

By Abby Luby



Photo courtesy of Alison Jolicoeur
Danielle LaFleur of Putnam Valley, practices ballet with choreographer Scarlett Antonia.

For choreographer and performer Scarlett Antonia, Peekskill is New York City's northern Mecca of the arts. Last month, dance teacher and performer Antonia started up Antonia's Academy for the Performing Arts, a professional training academy at Studio Two on South Street in Peekskill.

"The idea for the academy came from parents who wanted more formal training in ballet for their children," Antonia said. "I had worked in some ballet in a few of the regular classes, but they wanted additional, more formal instruction. We officially began the academy in the beginning of January."

Because the study of classical ballet is more serious, Antonia requires auditions to get in to the program.

The large, well-lit dance studio, replete with parquet floors, high ceilings dotted with stage lights and sweeping red velvet curtains, is a

learning space not only for classical ballet but other diverse classes as jazz, drama, classic musical theater, creative theatre arts and the latest Zumba fitness.

Teaching ballet to youngsters from ages of seven to 10 is essential for basic foundation, Antonia said. But her program adds a must-have layer of involvement with professional dancers and actors in New York City.

“Getting students down to the city to see professional dancers and performers is a way to inspire the youngsters,” she said.

Antonia’s connections include current and former performers from Off-Broadway productions, the Radio City Rockettes, Alvin Alley Dance Company, Ellison Ballet Company to Julliard graduates, many of whom will come to the Peekskill school to teach special classes to the young students.

Now in her 50s, Antonia became a professional dancer at 13 and by 18 she was touring nationally with famed director/choreographer Peter Gennaro. She not only performed regularly, but she also started teaching.

But her career was tragically interrupted at 25 when she was seriously injured in a car accident and was unable to walk or dance.

Rehabilitation through dance, however, not only saved her but became a major transition in her career, setting her on a different creative path.

“Rehabilitation was the best thing because it gave me a chance to think about choreography,” she recalled.

It took Antonia a year to get back on her feet and by then she had formed many original ideas about dance.

“I found myself creating different movements while learning a dance piece,” she said. “I had a strong desire to choreograph.”

Antonia went on to choreograph and direct over 200 international and national performances in such arenas such as Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center and the Kaufman Cultural Center in New York City. She wrote dance numbers and directed productions for the children’s television show “Sesame Street,” “Ushers Onstage at Lincoln Center” and “Wonderland Follies.”

“Dance wasn’t enough,” Antonia said. “There was also theater. There are so many ways to express yourself.”

About seven years ago, Antonia was wooed to Peekskill from her active life in New York City by the artists’ loft spaces and studios created by the city. She moved into Studio Two from a loft on North Division Street five years ago. The stairway up to the second floor

studio is lined with signed photographs by movie stars who knew Antonia's aunt who was in vaudeville - stars such as Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Roy Rogers, Ethel Waters and Carol Channing.

"My aunt is why I am a performer today," Antonia said.

Currently, with the help of the city, she is looking for a larger, commercial space for her classes.

Teaching performance has become a natural extension of the creative process, said Antonia, who has been coaching and directing drama classes at Peekskill High School over the past couple of years where students have followed her direction in such productions of "Grease," "A Christmas Carol," "Sound of Music" and "The Crucible."

On her home turf at Studio Two there are monthly open mic events for live music and poetry readings, staged readings and rehearsals.

"This gives people an opportunity to try out work followed by questions and answers," Antonia said. "It's part of the creative process that is a ground for me."

For information about Antonia art events and the Antonia Academy for the Performing Arts, call (914) 930-7588 or visit www.antonიაarts.com.