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'Variations'

Innovative dance concert opens at SMC Nov. 19

By A.K. Carroll



Image provided

There comes a moment in the lives of most college seniors when they are asked to prove themselves, to put their skills to the test and evidence the result of four years of exploration, effort and learning. For 10 dance students at Saint Mary's College, that moment is now.

From Thursday, Nov. 19 to Saturday, Nov. 21, SMC dance majors and minors will share with the public the culmination of their efforts in "Variations," two distinct dance programs, and four total performances, that are entirely student-led.

"The students do all of the choreography, the PR, the advertising, costumes, lighting design, and set design," said Dana Lawton, director of the concert. "They arrange all of the tech schedules and the spacing of rehearsals. Essentially they're programming."

Though the senior recital – or "dance concert" as it is called – has been a tradition at SMC for quite some time, there is always room for innovation. This year the students have split the concert into an A and B performance, with half of the dances on Thursday and Saturday evening, the A program, and the other half on Friday evening and Saturday afternoon, the B program. Each program will include five to six performances, and run an hour long with no intermission.

"It's a new trending model in contemporary dance," said Lawton. "Rather than dragging on with an in-

termission, we hold them captive (with the performance)." The A and B programs are intended to create one cohesive concert, though it isn't always possible to make it to more than one performance.

"We found in the past that the students were getting exhausted and our concerts were getting incredibly long because of the amount of talent we had to showcase," said Lawton, who has nothing but praise for this year's slew of performers, deeming them "the most technically proficient students we've had in our 18 years."

"Our students are very vibrant and rhythmic, able to attack material in a way that is on level with professional dancers," said Lawton. "The maturity level in rehearsal and preparation is also at a deep professional level. They are very focused and committed to the process and to their choreographer. They come with the same energy they would for a guest (choreographer) or a faculty member."

This season's senior choreographers include Curtis Askew, Allegra Bautista, Coline Buencamino, Katy Fessler, Jessica Lim, Leslie Montano, Courtney Pfaff, Annamaria Santos and Jamie Seibert. Added to the crew is Andrew Merrell, the only one of SMC's 12 MFA students to take part in "Variations." The cast and crew are comprised of the 15 majors and minors in the program.

The title, "Variations," was chosen by the students and pays homage to the

historically famous dance piece by George Ballantine. "They all have very different personalities and variations and styles," said Lawton. "This particular group is really interested in individuality, which you'll see in the ways that dancers express themselves, even in group choreography, developing a sense of community within the work. It is a celebration of individuality."

The program is comprised of a solo, a duet, a quartet, and various ensembles. All dances fall under the modern category, with one piece leaning toward hip-hop. Because each piece uses its own set of gestures and vocabulary of movement, the dances look very different from one to the next. Still, there is a sense that they all belong together. "I would say the pieces as a whole evolve dramatically from start to finish," said Lawton.

In addition to unique selection of movement, this student concert also evidences deliberate musical choices, employing what Lawton describes as "ambient sound" and "austere soundscapes" more than songs. "Several (choreographers) have been searching and searching and have gone out and worked with composers to have sounds created for their dances," she shared. "Some don't sound like music you'd hear on a radio or put on during dinner." A few students used tools like Garage Band, while others worked hand-in-hand with individuals from SMC's music program.

"Often younger dancers will just go find a piece of music," said Lawton. "This group uses music almost as another dancer, as a part of their process."

The combination of organic sound and technical prowess should make for an evening that is well worth an hour of your time. "We're hoping people will come to both productions," said Lawton. "Though we understand that not everyone is able to."

All performances take place in LeFevre Theatre; general admission is \$5 and is free for SMC students.

Tickets can be purchased online at <http://stmrys-ca.edu/variations> or at the box office one hour before the performance. For more information, call (925) 631-4670.

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YOUR SMILE IS EVERYTHING

The Third Year of Local Arts Contest for Kids

By Charlie Keohane and Samantha Swan



The LYAS team, from left: Samantha Swan, Charlie Keohane, Uma Unni, Zoe Portnoff, Isabel Rurka and Sophia Benveniste

Photo provided

The third annual photography and writing contest hosted by the Lafayette Youth Arts Society (LYAS) to promote the fine arts of Lafayette youth began Nov. 16. The contest, which expanded internationally last year, is open to sixth- through eighth-graders living in Lafayette. This year, in addition to writing and photography, the contest will have a video portion. Hollywood director and scriptwriter Brian Horiuchi will be judging the video entries and Mary Guzmán, a San Francisco filmmaker, will teach a workshop held by the LYAS in January to help inspire kids who would like to enter the video portion of the contest.

This year, the chief writing judge will be Yiyun Li, a distinguished writer and recipient of the MacArthur Genius Grant. The additional writing judges include Alison Burke and

Martha Schimbor, two retired English teachers from Miramonte High School. The photography contest is still in place, though there have been slight alterations. This year, participants will submit three photos in response to the video prompts. The judges and prompts will be announced soon. During last year's contest the LYAS paired with the Tingstrup Skole, a school in Thisted, Denmark. Students in Denmark entered the photography portion, responding to the same prompts as the students in the U.S., though they were judged separately. This was a great opportunity to form bridges with Denmark and was an amazing success. For this year's international contest, the LYAS is in talks with an Israeli middle school that might participate.

Prizes range from \$100-250 and

there will be gift cards for the runners-up. In addition, participants can win fabulous books and, of course, the fame and glory that goes with winning. There are lists of prompts posted this month for those interested in competing. Writing and photography entries must be submitted by Jan. 31 either digitally or to the P.O. Box listed on the website, www.lyas.org.

The LYAS is a kid-run organization with teens organizing, planning and executing the contest and making sure that everything runs smoothly. LYAS is also fully supported by the community, including the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, the Sunrise Rotary Club, the Lafayette Community Foundation, and Lori Legler of the Alain Pinel Realtors. For more information about the LYAS, visit www.lyas.org.

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