

'We use a classical ballet vocabulary, but it's contorted in a very artistic and athletic way': Larissa Gerszke. (Rachel Neville)



Diverse complexions

• By SHAINA OPPENHEIMER

The first thing you notice about Larissa Gerszke is her legs; beautifully sculpted, lean, and perfectly muscular. Her humble demeanor and curls give a rather reserved impression, but she is far from that when she takes the stage.

Last week, the New York based dance company Complexions performed at the Israeli Opera in Tel Aviv. Among the 15-member group was Gerszke, one of the newest and youngest members of the company, who's proving to be a complete force of nature. At age 22, the young virtuoso is just finishing up her

first season with Complexions.

"It started as a bit of a joke," Gerszke chuckled when thinking back on receiving dance classes as a birthday gift from her aunt at the age of five. Soon Gerszke found herself fully immersed in the dance world. She received her dance training in Ontario, Canada before attending the prestigious Alvin Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in New York City. During her third year at Ailey, Gerszke was offered a contract with Complexions, after auditioning four times.

Founded by Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson in 1994, Complexions Contemporary Ballet is finishing up its 21st international season in Israel.

Aesthetically diverse in both dancers and movement quality, Complexions is where Gerszke is finding her new home.

She explains, "Complexions is such a diverse company and it pushes the boundaries of a contemporary ballet company. We use a classical ballet vocabulary but it's contorted in a very artistic and athletic way. It's so physical and uses so much of your body. It's the most rewarding movement I've done in a long time."

A typical day for Gerszke starts at 10 a.m. with a company ballet class. After class they go straight into rehearsal from about noon to 6 p.m. with a 45-minute lunch break and just a five minute break every hour. "It's been

challenging in the best possible way," Gerszke explains. "To go from training all my life and being a student and now finally being paid to do something I love is beyond anything than I could have ever imagined."

The transition from student to professional has served as an experience for Gerszke to grow because the demands went far beyond technical excellence. She explains, "There's always so much more to learn. They push you to your physical and artistic limits. To be as vulnerable as you can be is something that's really hard for me. When you can get to that emotional place it puts so much more meaning in your craft."

This season, Gerszke has learned about six ballets from Complexions's repertoire. On top of these works, Rhoden set three new pieces on the company. "It's so special for a choreographer to set a piece on you where the movement is derived from you alone. You don't have to try to fit something already in place." The works range from about 30 to 40 minutes long and with no understudies, the ballets demand a lot of physicality from the dancers.

Touring adds another layer of demand to the dancers as they must adjust to being in a new environment, usually with only travel days off. Gerszke adds, "Traveling has a big toll on your body and sometimes you have to compensate and that's where the artistry comes in. That's where it separates the trained dancer from the artistic mover.... At the end of the day the audience doesn't care what kind of day you're having, they came to see a performance."

In addition to performing around the United States, Gerszke was able to travel to Belgrade, Serbia, this season. She explains, "It's always a privilege to be performing our craft so far from home... to be able to go to other places and learn about other cultures. Then for you to also leave an impression on them, in the form of art, is more than I could have ever imagined."

The company was especially excited to be performing in Israel as the evening moved through a wide range of styles with music ranging from Bach and Vivaldi to Stevie Wonder. Gerszke remarks, "Dance is an exclamation of the human condition, and we're portraying something that everyone can feel no matter what language you speak or how different your culture is. Dance is a human thing that goes beyond cultural barriers." The show did more than break barriers, as the audience warmly cheered the dancers with great appreciation at the final curtain call.

"People always tell me, if you're doing what you love then you'll never work a day in your life. And it really never truly feels like work. Art is so fulfilling for my soul and I'm so grateful to be doing what I love, creating, and being artistic everyday. It's one of the greatest pleasures and I didn't know that dance could make me feel this way," Gerszke says.