

Rehearsal space with “karma”

New York dancers come to the Kirkland Farm

Kathryn Finegan Clark

For generations art has sprung from the soil of Kirkland Farm in Springfield Township. The 150-acre property was once owned by playwright, Jack Kirkland, who adapted Erskine Caldwell’s “Tobacco Road” for Broadway and wrote “The Man with the Golden Arm.”

It was the first home of his daughter, the celebrated dancer Gelsey Kirkland, who partnered with Mikhail Baryshnikov in the American Ballet Theatre.

That artistic tradition continues today with Silo/Kirkland Farm, a dance residency program that encourages the creation and development of new work and showcases it for the local community.

The brainchild of Robin Staff, artistic director of Dancenow NYC, the farm offers two things to urban dance artists and professionals -- an inspirational haven and rehearsal space. What it offers to area residents is “the best of the best in dance,” said Staff.

Robin Staff and her husband, Marty, bought Kirkland Farm eight years ago. Since then, she has turned it into the no-profit dance residency program that has booked more than 200 dance groups.

It provides, spiritually, a temporary escape from the pressures of city life for urban dancers. Its more practical aspect is free rehearsal space and low-cost housing for a few days or weeks. “Rehearsal space in the city is extremely expensive,” explained Robin.

While at the farm the dancers live in the guest house, which accommodates 12 and rehearse in several dance studios.

“They buy and prepare their own food. They love it here,” said Robin. “It’s booked on a regular basis year-round. The fees just cover my own costs. All this is made possible by the incredible generosity of my husband,” she said. Marty Staff is president and CEO of Joseph Abboud, a Manhattan menswear manufacturer.

“Gelsey Kirkland and her husband have actually visited here,” Robin Staff said, “When I was a little girl she was my idol.”

Robin danced for a bit in the prima ballerina’s footsteps and later turned her talent into the artistic-business end of the dance world, promoting and producing ballets. She founded her own company, Dancenow, in Manhattan in 1986.



Carol Dorey and Mary Filiciotto of the Palisades Community Foundation Arts and Culture Committee.

Eight years ago when Kirkland Farm appeared on the market, she and her husband bought it. “Creativity is an important part of the legacy here,” Robin said. “Gelsey’s father, Jack Kirkland, wrote ‘Tobacco Road’ and ‘The Man with the Golden Arm.’ Howard Hughes partied here and so did Donald Sutherland and Patricia O’Neal. The karma here is amazing.”

About 40 local arts patrons attended the fund-raising debut of the new Silo Dinner Dance series at the May 22 fund-raiser for the Palisades Community Foundation. It featured a rehearsal of “ShowDown” presented by choreographer David Parker and the Bang Group. The show will have its Manhattan premiere June 6-7 at Joe’s Pub at The Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St.

“ShowDown” combines modern dance and barefoot tap dance set to the songs of “Annie Get Your Gun.” The group tours throughout North America and Europe and is known for its “brainy, funny dances.”

The next performance of the dinner dance series will feature Christal Brown’s Inspirit Dance Co. on July 24. The company brings together young African-American choreographers and dancers.

Carol C. Dorey of Springtown is chairman of the foundation’s arts and culture committee, sponsor of the series. Michael Strickland of Nockamixon is president of the board of directors. He said the foundation, which was organized originally under the name of the Jolly Roger Society, has provided more than \$1 million in projects for the Palisades community.



Robin Staff, founder of Dancenow.



David Parker, choreographer, Marty Staff and Ellis Finger of the Lehigh University arts faculty.



Chris Taylor and Katie Werner.