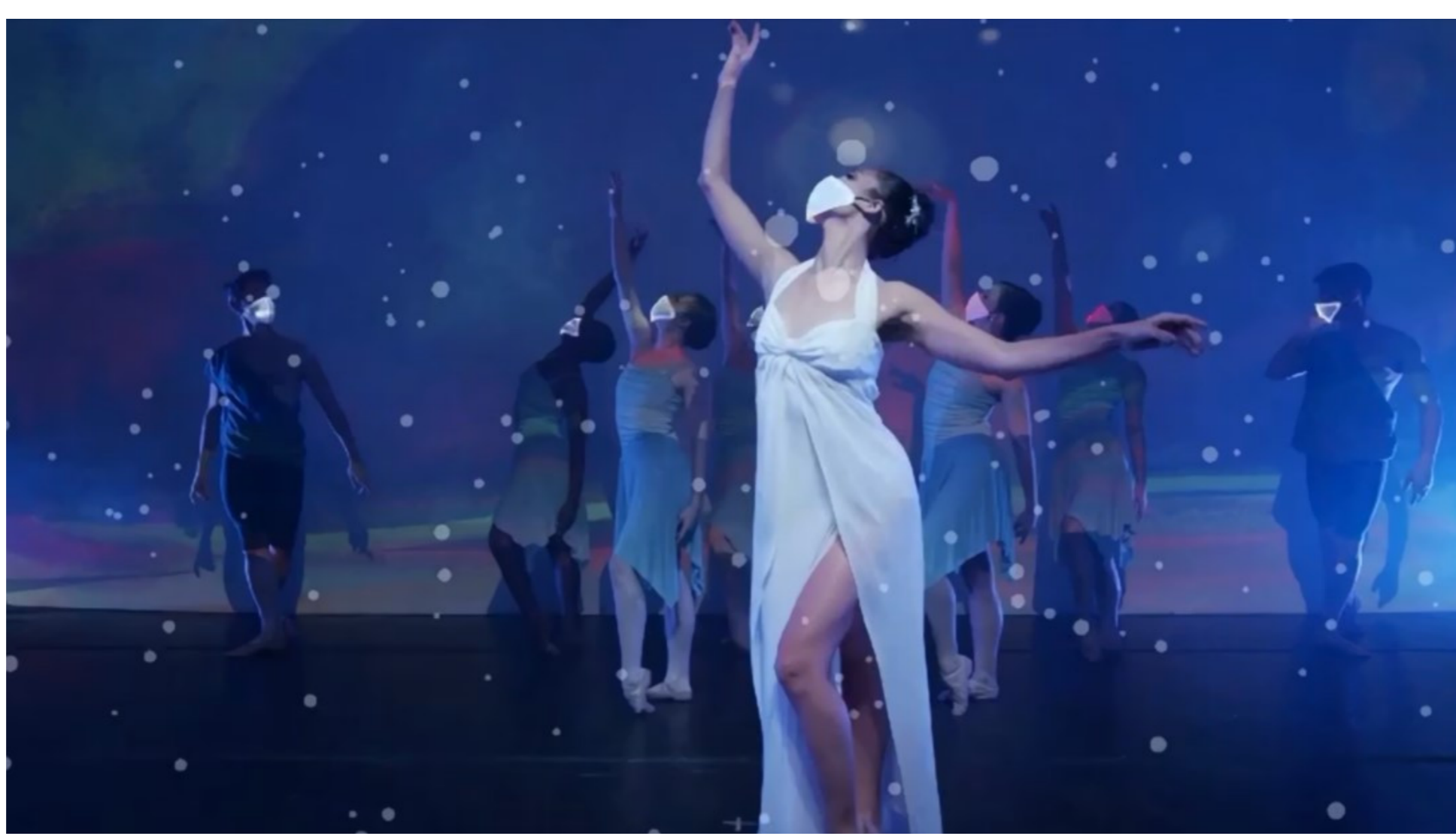


 Cecily Placenti · 3 days ago · 4 min read

Sheep Meadow Dance Theatre

December 22, 2020
Virtual show streamed live from The Plaxall Gallery, Queens
Choreography: Billy Blanken
Dancers: Billy Blanken, Kenny Corrigan, Alexa DeBarr, Kevin Garcia, Michelle Mercedes, Ellen Mihalick, Danielle Shupe, Amanda Summers, Kara Walsh
Production: 10K Productions

2020 was a tough year for the arts. Theaters have been dark since March, dance studios moved their programming online, and most companies have been on a long hiatus. Artistic Directors of both large and small groups faced new choices: adapting their work for online platforms or holding onto resources for a time when theaters can reopen.



Billy Blanken, Artistic Director of Sheep Meadow Dance Theatre, chose a medley of both. A true champion for his dancers, Blanken is determined to provide as many opportunities as possible for his company to train and perform. When dance studios closed their doors, Blanken opened his living room for donation-based ballet classes via Zoom for both his ensemble and anyone in the dance community hungry to maintain their practice. On December 22, SMDT premiered its first virtual show in collaboration with 10K Productions and Culture Lab LIC at The Plaxall Gallery in Queens, New York. Blanken met the challenges of creating new work and adapting former pieces during a global pandemic by rehearsing his company online and in public parks and holding all collaborations with 10K Productions remotely. The performance ran live on SMDT's website and was kept online for thirty-six hours, giving audience members flexibility in viewing.

The evening began like a mist hovering above a lake at dusk. Haunting cello chords from Jack Ray's original score waft through the air and kaleidoscopic images of the sky at twilight, painted by Lauren Woods, morph into the pulsing aurora borealis and reflect off the back wall. In *Body Tides*, Woods' paintings, infused with movement of their own, transform the gallery into a forgotten world where ancient tribes met to engage in ritual and celebration. Four dancers enter the space carrying small glowing orbs. They carve their arms through the darkness and circle each other, undulating their backs like water, advancing and retreating like a tide. The entire piece feels like the ebb and flow of water, building to a flurry of movement then slowing down again. Weighted stepping patterns evolve into quick, light jumps. A series of Duncan-esque piques in attitude are punctuated by exuberant elevations of the chest, signifying youth and joy. As the dancers shift the lighted orbs around the space, their movements become meditative and contained, illustrating the moon's control over the tides of the ocean and the tides of the human body. One by one the dancers leave the space, exiting this magical world, reminding us how easy it could be to reconnect with the elemental within, even in a world pervaded by technology.



Ironically, technology is exactly what makes this show so special. Rather than simply filming a performance and presenting it to an audience as if it was a normal pre-pandemic event, 10K productions, owned and operated by Jonathan Parke and Marciel Greene, work their special magic. With three cameras set up on ground level and one

overhead, Greene directs the entire show shot by shot in real time, determining the speed of each fade and the timing of each focus shift. In true collaborative fashion, Blanken expressed the moments he wanted the audience to see and let her vision create the rest, giving the audience an experience as close to live as possible in the virtual realm.

For Blanken's adaptation of *The Nutcracker*, a world premiere, Greene and Parke take the visual art element one step further. Wood's paintings project on the back wall again, but Parke adds a foreground video like a Snapchat filter on top of the live feed. Uninterested in retelling the uber familiar story, Blanken once again puts his dancers first by staging his version of Waltz of the Snowflakes and the Second Act divertissements- the sections dancers love to dance.

Blue, purple and pink clouds like the sky at dusk provide a backdrop as performers dart across the stage in quick waltz turns and long arabesques. Green's camera direction creates the illusion of a corps larger than it is as eight dancers blanket the stage with sprightly bourre's and tight turns. When the lights go out, the dancers glowing masks appear like falling snowflakes and when the lights return there is a beautiful moment of relative stillness highlighted by elegant port de bras. Soloist Kara Walsh dances through the virtual blizzard created by Parke's filter and winds through the corps as they swirl in a circle like the last few snowflakes drifting down after a storm.

For the Grand Pas de Deux, Blanken strayed from the classical male-female partnership and instead danced the duet himself with Kevin Garcia. The choice did not read like the comedy ballet of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, another company Garcia currently dances with, but rather refreshingly as two men dancing together. Blanken is a strong, gracious partner with a gentle yet confident touch. Garcia exhibits a delicate port de bras and eloquent upper back. His pointe work is strong, although his feet lack the suppleness audiences have come to expect from the form, which distracts mildly from his expressive upper body.



Amanda Summers delights as the Sugar Plum Fairy with lush, suspended arabesques and highlights Blanken's interesting musical phrasing. At times she accentuates the familiar tinkling notes of Tchaikovsky's score and at other times she breezes through them effortlessly. Blanken's choreography is based in classical ballet but has a contemporary feel. Each solo showcases the dancer's musicality and presents them as unique artists. Michelle Mercedes in Dance of the Mirliton's plays with contrast as her grounded parallel jumps turn into airy extensions. Kenny Corrigan in the Russian Dance packs tremendous intensity into a short period with bounding jumps, strong fouetté turns, and aerial cartwheels. Greene's camera work during Waltz of the Flowers finds each dancer as they move into the frame like flower petals unfolding. Mercedes and Ellen Mihalick perform a lovely, springy duet with dynamic shifts of weight and quick changes of direction. Their rhythmic choices are pleasantly surprising. New York City theatre's might be dark, but there is still light and magic in this new virtual world.

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