



Slava Doval. Photo: Joel Pelletier

SLAVA DOVAL | DANCE FUSION

by Bill Metcalfe

Slava Doval likes to take her dance students outside: outside the studio into the open air; outside the recital hall to the street where the people are; outside the usual boundaries of classical, modern, ballet and folk into a fresh world she calls DanceFusion.

Those of us in the West Kootenay who go to festivals and events like Starbelly Jam and Market Fest know this. Suddenly, in the midst of music stages, food trucks and craft vendors, we're aware of some new fascinating musical mix, maybe a mingling of Balkan folk and hip hop and electronica. Then, at ground level, not up on a stage, a burst of colour and youth, and Slava's dancers are among us.

"Starbelly Jam, Keep the Beat, Unity Fest, Tiny Lights Festival, Market Fest, Redfish Fest—we feel so unbelievably proud there and it feels too right," Slava said.

"Dancing like that, we see people close up, we have eye contact, and people are already celebrating or dancing themselves, so it is really unifying. They take it in more corporeally than just going to sit in a theatre in the middle of their busy, crazy lives."

Paul Hinrichs, who books the acts for Nelson's Market Fest, said Slava's dancers are the perfect way to kick off the evening. "They are so authentic," he said. "The crowd is mesmerized,

nobody talking, all eyes are on them, and when they are done the audience erupts and the parents of the younger dancers are all in tears."

Slava describes DanceFusion as "a blend of contemporary, jazz, Bollywood, hip hop, ballet basics, folkloric, Balkan, Afro-Colombian, urban, breakdance and more. Our style is a fusion of old-world roots and new-times appeal."

She teaches this style to all ages, from tots to young adults. She's gone from 5 to 140 students in five years. A core of those dancers forms the troupe that goes to festivals and events.

Slava is not a traditionally trained dancer, and the story of how she got to DanceFusion is an eclectic travelogue. She's studied Indian dance with a teacher from West Bengal and explored flamenco, contemporary, contact improv and belly dance in Mexico and Colombia; studied ballet with Lynette Lightfoot in Nelson and discovered a variety of ethnic dance styles in San Francisco; trained as a yoga teacher and travelled several times to her own ethnic roots in Slovakia.

Some of her learning has been on the street. "In Mexico I saw this klezmer band that played at all the local cafés and theatres. I just showed up with a skirt one day and danced on the side. They invited me back and I became part of their troupe while I was living there."



Slava (foreground) and company bust a break dancing move. Photo: Joel Pelletier

She said her first dance groups in Nelson had a gypsy feel. "At first in Nelson we were known as the skirt dancers, but I am not a gypsy folk dancer really—we used that term liberally. We were using hoops and kerchiefs and big skirts with floral prints and lace, which denotes 'gypsy' in the minds of North Americans. Then I changed the name to Folk Fusion, which we were for years, and then about two years ago I realized even that is too small.

"So we have gone into hip hop and break dancing. They are folk dances; they are for the people and by the people. But bigger than folk, so now we call it DanceFusion."

People often ask Slava for playlists of her unique music mixes. She said her music tastes come from her upbringing on the East Shore of Kootenay Lake. "My parents did not listen to any pop music. I was raised with Frank Zappa, Daniel Lanois, Bob Dylan, Miles Davis and folk music. My dad would sit down with his guests over espresso and they would have to be quiet and listen to the music. 'Listen, track number seven...' and you would have to take it as an experience. It was not something to be consumed and gobbled up."

Slava said her choice of music draws in and holds her students, especially the older ones. "We are not that far apart in age, and I am picking music they connect with." Slava, at age 32, says her relationship with her dancers is partly maternal, because there are so many details to be taken care of—music, costumes, choreography, logistics and accountability. "I tend to be a mother hen. But it is also friendship, because I am young at heart and too young in years to be the mother of the older ones."

Starbelly Jam's artistic director Lea Belcourt likes how DanceFusion gives teenagers, not just adults and children, a place in the festival. "Teenagers can watch and say, 'Hey, maybe I could do that.' It's teen role modelling—showing some awesome, healthy alternatives," she said.

Even though she and her dancers have come a long way in five years, Slava talks as though she's just getting started. "This is the tip of the iceberg of all the possibilities that are happening, like having more teachers and bringing in guest teachers for workshops. I am relaxed and excited about it. I have a lot of creative fire for things that are just starting now."

Website: slavadancefusion.com.

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