

Csárdás entertains Romanian guest

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Mihai Babuska, director of the Romanian National Ballet, watches Courtney Gras, a dancer from the Csardas Dance Company, perform at the International Culture Studio in Hinckley Township.

By **CHAD BUTERBAUGH**
Staff Writer

HINCKLEY TWP — For a brief moment, the fate of the Csárdás Dance Company was in question. Its executive director moved to Houston last summer and put the Medina studio up for sale. The company's brand of Hungarian ethnic dancing was on the verge of leaving Medina County. But Toni Gras, Csardás' board president, assumed the departing director's duties and relocated to a smaller studio in Hinckley Township.

Csárdás' youth ensemble received a special visitor Sunday when Mihai Babuska, director of the Romanian National Opera, stopped in to watch a performance as part of his state visit to Cleveland. He toured the city for this week as a guest of the Cleveland Council on World Affairs, which sponsors such visits as part of a national professional exchange program.

Flanked by cultural attaches and a translator, Babuska observed several Hungarian folk dances, which share many steps with dances from eastern neighbor Romania.

Babuska watched the six dancers with his fingers resting on a whiskered chin. He smiled broadly at the end of each dance. The six performers, all girls between ages 9 and 16, bowed low for their small audience. After watching, Babuska was inspired to teach them a basic Romanian step. They picked it up quickly. The children's pleasure shone in their faces, Babuska said afterward.

"Dance is the international language," he said. "With the music and the dance, you don't need to speak."

The Romanian National Ballet has 85 dancers and gives 157 performances a year. It's based in Bucharest but also tours Europe. Babuska spends between one and two months on the road with them.

The open border with Hungary leads to a lot of cultural co-mingling. It's not strictly one culture or the other in the borderlands, Babuska said, and it's the same in the U.S. Multiculturalism will only get stronger, so that's why it's important for American audiences to witness new art forms like ethnic dancing, he said.

Hungarian ethnic dancing is a celebratory form saturated with twirls, stomps and shouts. Dancers in effect provide percussion for the songs they dance to. The music chugs forward like a train, usually on the strength of a repeating fiddle tune. Many songs build to a frantic crescendo with the dancers keeping furious pace.

Blush rose in the girls' faces as they performed Sunday, stomping and shouting as though they were in a concert hall instead of a small studio. They also performed the traditional bottle dance, where dancers balance a bottle of wine — or colored water, in this case — on their heads as they reel around the room. The tradition comes from Hungarian wedding celebrations where young girls would imitate their mothers and aunts who did the same thing.

Courtney Gras, 16, makes the trek from Aurora once a week to practice with Csárdás. She has been with the company for half her life. Gras' great-grandmother emigrated from Hungary to Cleveland. Performances are more meaningful for her knowing these are the dances her ancestors did long ago, she said.

Coming from a background in ballet, tap and jazz, Gras said Hungarian ethnic dancing was immediately different. "Where that's more graceful, this requires a lot more stomping, and it's a lot harder on the joints," she said.

Gras was one of two girls who dared the bottle dance on Sunday. To her credit, she has no broken glass in her past.

The youth ensemble's next big show is Nov. 12 at Severance Hall, when they'll open two shows for the Cleveland Orchestra.

Buterbaugh may be reached at accent@ohio.net.

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