

Kids Around the Bay

BY [MARK MACNAMARA \(/AUTHOR/MARK-MACNAMARA\)](#)

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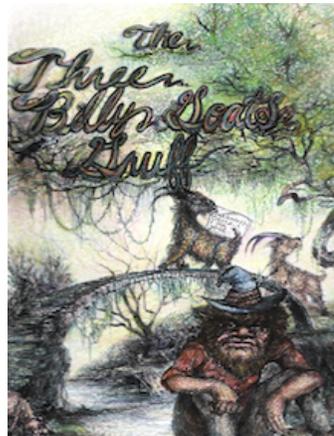
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As public school arts and culture programs have disappeared, the private sector has come to play an ever more intensive role in filling the vacuum. Opera San Jose is at the forefront. And now, Education Director and Artistic Administrator Matt Siek has put together a terrific program for K-5 children.

It's *The Billy Goats Gruff*, set to music by comic masters Mozart, Rossini, and Donizetti, and it debuts Nov. 1 at the Dr. Martin Luther King Library in downtown San Jose. Director John Davies' production incorporates a timely anti-bullying message into the timeless tale, which gives it a little more interest than the run-of-the-mill opera intro for kids.



Siek's adult outreach program also addresses the needs of older children and includes master classes conducted by singers from the opera's residency program. But that has become so popular that he's had to hire local singers, secondary role players, for example — all adults — to staff K-5 performances like *Billy Goats Gruff*.

In the past, the company has done *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Magic Flute*, but this year Siek wanted to do something different. "We decided to have a message behind it. I thought we needed more than just opera, something that would pull kids in for more than just the singing and the costumes." The *Billy Goat Gruff* program lasts 35 minutes plus 10 minutes of questions and answers, and is scheduled for a dozen performances around San Jose.

BUT this is a program that could be played anywhere. So, if you were a PTA parent or principal, or were running a program somewhere in the Bay Area, Siek might be able to arrange a performance. You might also be able to schedule a performance at a birthday party or some private event. Cost is about \$500. The company includes four singers plus a player on keyboard, which they bring. It requires a minimum space of 20 by 30 feet, bigger than most living rooms. But you see the possibilities. Go to [operatales.com](#) for more information about this mini-opera. For more information about Opera San Jose outreach, contact Elizabeth Santana at santana@operasj.org.

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[City Ballet Toes the Line on Technique \(/article/city-ballet-toes-the-line-on-technique\)](#)

The two major ballet schools in San Francisco are run by the San Francisco Ballet and City Ballet. The former includes some 500 students; the latter, 142. Both are intensive programs designed to find and encourage young dancers with the potential to become professionals.

City Ballet School, whose graduates have gone on to dance with San Francisco Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet, Semper-Oper Ballett (Dresden, Germany), and Ballet San Jose, have their Fall Classic coming up later this month. This is a 75-minute showcase of dancers between 8 and 18, doing excerpts from *Swan Lake* and beginning with a “class concert,” musical portrayals of ballet class — as it was explained to us — etudes, riffs on interludes, and “romance” in dance class. You might also think of these as memoirs of Galina Alexandrova, the school’s artistic director. She was herself with the Bolshoi for many years. Her mother was studied with the great actor and theorist, Konstantin Stanislavski.



Jeraldine Mendoza
Photo by Yuri Zhukov

Tuition at City Ballet ascends from \$1200 a year to \$6600 a year. Auditions are serious business. “We don’t take all kids,” says the school’s administrator, Ken Patsel, euphemistically. “We’re looking for physicality, musicality, and a general understanding of what’s required to study ballet. I would say about 50 percent get in.” Last year the school accepted 15 new students; 20 didn’t make it. Some of those that didn’t make it were let go by San Francisco Ballet.

“Our task is to determine what it would take to make a dancer work in our system,” adds Patsel, the husband of Alexandrova. “The question is, does she see them as a professional? Are they capable of reaching that level? That’s the real question and, of course, as these children get older the answer gets more subjective. We tell kids at the top levels that if you cannot keep up with the curriculum we may steer you off to more contemporary forms of dance. But the point is that ballet is the epicenter. If you have strong technique you can go anywhere, to contemporary or jazz or modern; it all comes back to good technique.”

One student that the school is especially proud of is J.P. Viernes, a dancer from Half Moon Bay who had tried out for a Broadway show, was told he needed stronger ballet technique, came to City Ballet for more training and is now on the national tour of *Billy Elliot The Musical* playing Billy Elliot.

City Ballet also takes children as young as six, and entry is not nearly so restrictive. “We don’t put kids that age at the bar,” Patsel told us. “We do like in Moscow: a lot of rhythmic gymnastic training, strengthening. And then at 9 they might work at the bar. At these early ages, we’re looking for physicality and focus, and for those that can do the exercises. We had a young girl who tried out and was a little overweight, but her mother is a former dancer and we had the sense that this little girl’s body was going to change, and she could move. So we felt she was a keeper.”

For a look at City Ballet dancers, go to YouTube to see the [selections](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgWOiK5yBFg) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgWOiK5yBFg>).

City Ballet School Fall Classic, Oct. 20, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m., Cowell Theater.

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