

Ambitious dance

SATURDAY

Mystic Ballet's 'Fire & Ice' stretches the limits

By **KRISTINA DORSEY**
Day Arts Editor

In his choreography, Sergei Vanaev likes to challenge dancers. Witness the program he has created for Mystic Ballet.

"It's based on strong classical technique. It has very strong elements from modern dance and acrobatic dance. I use every muscle on the body," he says.

He wants to challenge theatergoers, too. He is striving to bring something unique to ballet audiences who might be familiar with, well, just the familiar.

Vanaev sees American dance right now as being "a little bit stuck. It's doing the same things, which maybe is easy to sell ... people doing choreography that is maybe easy to digest, stuff like this."

He wants to create an antidote to that with something that is complex and new. Vanaev choreographed two of the pieces that Mystic Ballet will perform in "Fire & Ice" this weekend. One is set to a Beethoven Sonata, and the other is to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." The third piece on the program is choreographed by Vanessa Duarte de Silva, after Petipa, to Minkus' "La Bayadere."

Vanaev, 40, isn't just creating new dances for Mystic Ballet. He is also the new assistant artistic director for the performance company, which consists of young local dancers and professionals.

Vanaev, who grew up in Russia but now lives in White Plains,



TIM COOK / The Day

■ *Sergei Vanaev is the choreographer of two of the pieces in Mystic Ballet's "Fire & Ice," which will be performed Saturday at the Mashantucket Pequot Auditorium at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum.*

N.Y., with his American-born wife and their two children, met Mystic Ballet executive director Goran Subotic through a mutual friend. They discovered they had similar views of dance.

"Actually, I'm working here because of Goran, because he has visions and energy, and he has a very clear image of what kind of quality of dance it must be," Vanaev says. "He wants to bring something absolutely new, very intensive. ... I think the public is losing a little taste for serious dance, for quality dance. What we both want is to bring some kind of positive shock in this way."

Vanaev graduated with honors in 1985 from the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow. He went on to become a member of the Moscow Classical Ballet, performing principal and solo roles in everything from "Romeo and Juliet" to "Swan Lake."

After working as a professional dancer for six years in Moscow, he signed a contract with a company in Dusseldorf, Germany. He stayed in Germany, most recently dancing with Theater Der Stadt Dortmund from 1997 to 2002 and teaching there from 2002 to 2004, before becoming artistic director of the ballet company Bremerhaven.

He has moved more into choreographing and says, in that mode, "I'm completely independent. I'm independent from other people. I'm independent from the reality of the real world. I create something that is not the real world. It's not escape, it's like a next layer."

The pieces he created that Mystic Ballet will be performing are both about love in a way.

His ballet set to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" is a story ballet about a young woman who is to be sacrificed and a man who has to decide whether to follow the route society has always followed and sacrifice the woman — or to

try to change things.

Vanaev says it is "about personal feelings, about love, about what does it mean, what is important, what is the priority in your life. ... At the end, what is important for one person honestly is important for any one of us."

"Fire & Ice," Mystic Ballet, 3 and 7 p.m. Sat., Mashantucket Pequot Auditorium, Mashantucket Pequot Museum, 110 Pequot Trail, Mashantucket; \$35 show only; show and private reception with Mystic Ballet artistic director Desiree Subotic and new assistant artistic director and choreographer Sergei Vanaev at 5 p.m. \$55; 536-3671, mysticballet.org.