

## Wooden Floor performing at Irvine Barclay

The O.C. nonprofit teaches underserved youth to dance, among other programs. Some 140 children will dance in Irvine production.



Choreographer Chris Yon with students. (Edie Layland / May 22, 2012)

By Heather Youmans, Special to the Daily Pilot  
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The Wooden Floor will showcase new contemporary and experimental dance works during its 29th annual concert "Tuned In," which is playing at the Irvine Barclay Theatre through Saturday.

Formerly known as Saint Joseph Ballet, The Wooden Floor is a Santa Ana-based youth development organization that has empowered more than 62,000 underserved youth since its founding in 1983.

"Thirty years ago, [Beth Burns] a sister of the order of St. Joseph's of Orange decided that she wanted to teach a handful of kids ballet in a church basement as a way to help them stay off the street and out of drugs and gangs," Artistic Director Melanie Ríos Glaser said in a phone interview.

"Since then, we've evolved quite a bit. We've become this larger, multifaceted non-profit."

An oasis in Orange County — the organization delivers dance, academic, and family programs to 375 low-income youth annually.

"Through dance, we get kids to college," Ríos Glaser said. "Our mission is to help break the cycle of poverty and we do that through our intense dance immersion programs."

Since 2005, 100% of graduates from The Wooden Floor have enrolled in college, three times the national average for their socio-economic peers. And, many are first-generation college students.

Each week, 54 free dance classes are offered and 96% of students receive scholarships based on merit and financial need.

Community support enables The Wooden Floor's year-round programs to be offered free of charge.

"The community that has gathered around The Wooden Floor is very generous," Ríos Glaser said. "We use our concert as a campaign to not only underwrite our concert, but many of our programs at The Wooden Floor. All of the money comes from

generous individuals, corporations, or foundations. It's through the generosity of many that we are able to put on a concert of this caliber."

For the past 20 years, the organization has presented its annual spring concert at the Barclay. The performances break down ethnic, age, and socio-economic stereotypes about who can contribute to the genre of contemporary dance.

This year, approximately 140 students aged 9 to 18 will dance in the concert. And for some, it will be their first dance experience. The students have been rehearsing since December and put more than 100 hours into each piece, according to Ríos Glaser.

"I think 'Tuned In' is really going to be an exciting project and performance," Ríos Glaser said. "There is a variety of work on the program that is different and challenging for new audience members in terms of how much we're pushing the envelope. It's work that's accessible, but [it] also has that same rigorous, non-commercial quality to it."

Ríos Glaser keeps her finger on the pulse of the dance world as she consistently commissions new, progressive choreographers.

She has already compiled an impressive list of commissioned dance artists, including Steve Paxton, Susan Rethorst, Donald McKayle, Seán Curran, Mark Haim, Sally Silvers, Scott Wells and Nami Yamamoto.

The 2012 concert gives the students a chance to work with three internationally and nationally recognized choreographers, Chris Yon, John Heginbotham, as well as Melanie Ríos Glaser.

The choreographers have mentored and collaborated with the kids throughout the creation of four newly commissioned works for this year's program; They include "Promenade," "Pieces of Wood," "Waterway," and "Zig Zags of Treachery."

"The work that we try to do here involves them [the students], Ríos Glaser said. "They are co-creators in the process. That really sends a message to the kids that who they are and what they say matters."

And for the choreographers, the concert opportunity is equally rewarding.

"To me, artistically, I get to realize a vision that I never get to do," Chris Yon said in a phone interview. "I don't perceive any time in the near future that I'm going to have a cast of 55 people who are all smart and talented. I'm still just sort of pinching myself that I'm making something on this scale. And, these kids are intensely adorable. It's hard not to just sit there and smile and cry uncontrollably while watching them really step it up."

### If You Go

**What:** "Tuned In"

**When:** May 31 through June 2

**Where:** Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine.

### For tickets and more

**information:** visit <http://www.TheWoodenFloor.org> or call (949) 854-4646.