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# DANCE *Studio* LIFE

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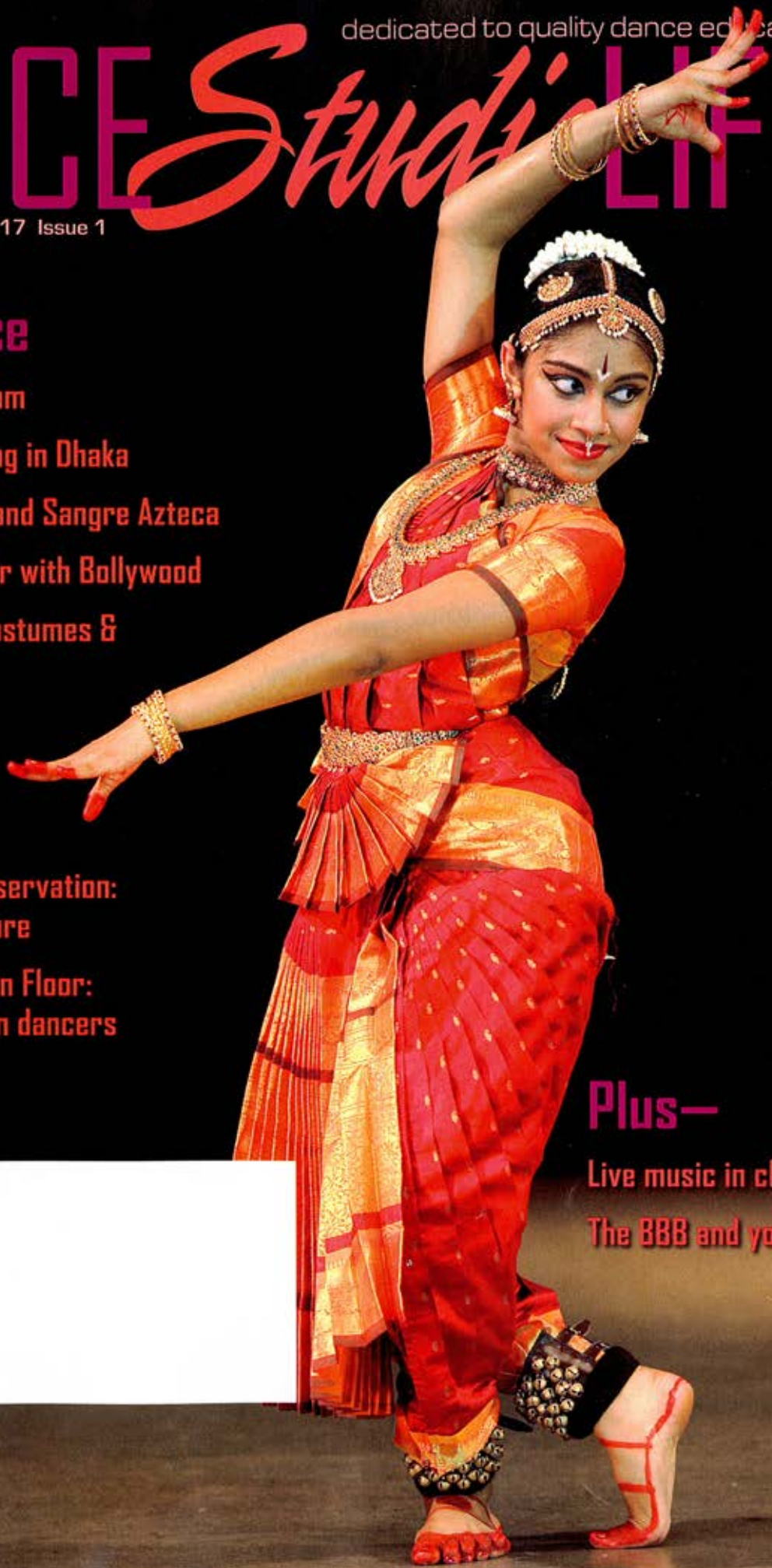
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# Poor Kids, Rich Prospects



Dance is a springboard out of poverty at The Wooden Floor

By Jennifer Kaplan

Melanie Rios Glaser is nothing if not bold. Bold enough, in fact, to say, "Dance can help end poverty in this country." She points to the successes she's seen and instigated at The Wooden Floor, an organization where dance remains at the foundation—the floor, so to speak. But it has become far more than a place to learn pliés, tendus, and jetés. The Wooden Floor is an essential com-

munity resource and support system for hundreds of low-income residents of Santa Ana, California.

"I don't think of dance as inherently good or bad," Rios Glaser explains, "but there's an approach to how we use dance at The Wooden Floor that makes it particularly valuable in translating into other areas of life. I think it's dance, but I also think it's our approach to dance and how we

apply dance to learning."

The organization has come a long way from its founding 29 years ago as Saint Joseph Ballet. Sister Beth Burns, a Catholic nun and former member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Orange, was a trained dancer. She was supposed to teach English for her order but instead rallied to open a ballet school. While her order didn't balk, it took some convincing before the

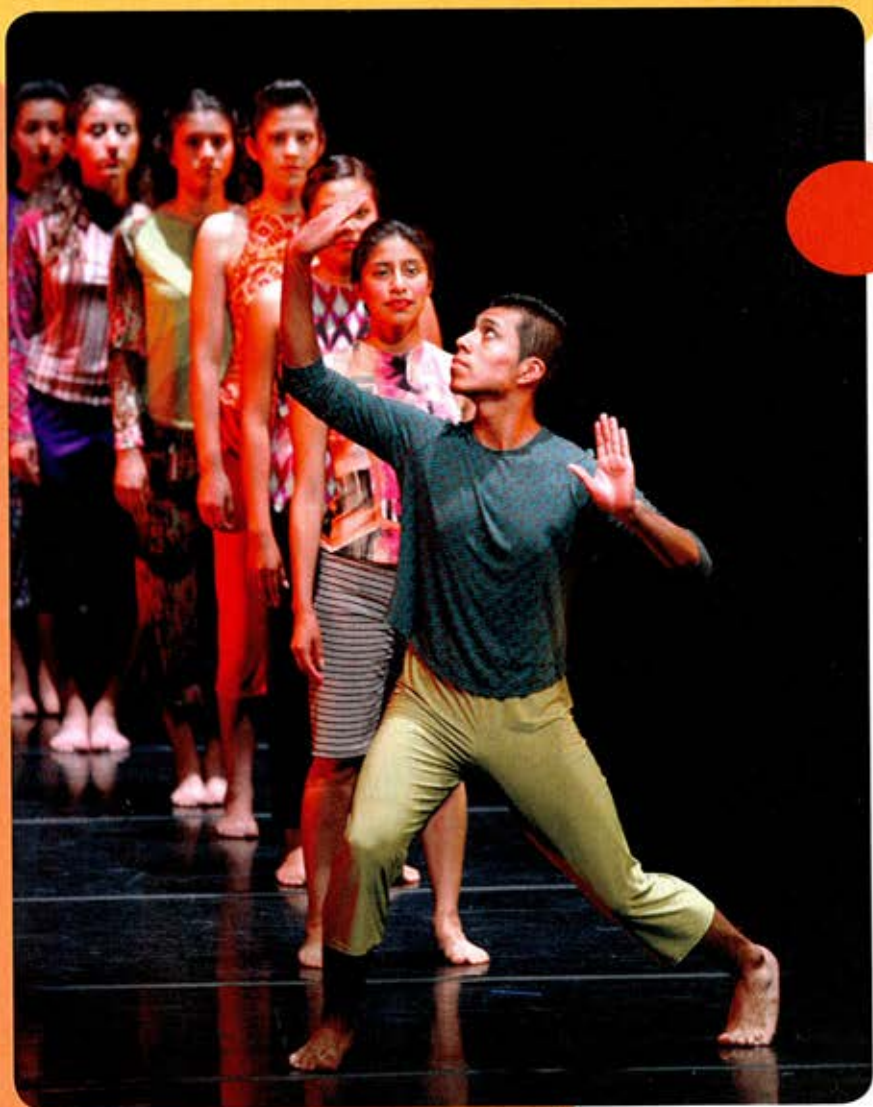


spacious studios with soaring ceilings. The \$6.8 million in construction costs was raised largely from private individuals and corporations. (The Wooden Floor's annual budget of \$2.3 million is covered largely by foundation, corporate, and individual contributions. City and state aid amounts to 2 percent of the budget.) Joining the beautifully appointed dance studios are a fully equipped library, meeting rooms, an academic tutoring center, private counseling rooms, a computer center, and a comfortable lobby where students, their families, and visitors feel wel-

come to relax.

In 2005, Rio Glaser became the organization's second artistic director and under her leadership Saint Joseph Ballet rebranded itself as The Wooden Floor in 2009. Although the name changed, the founding principles remained. "While faith might have influenced [Sister Beth's] approach," Rios Glaser says, "it was never really a faith-based organization. Religion wasn't something forced. The values on which the organization was founded could be considered religious, but they're also universal."

Each fall Rios Glaser holds



Mother Superior OK'd the plan. Even then the classes weren't offered in a Catholic church, but in the basement of a local Episcopal one.

The program Sister Beth instituted featured low-cost or no-cost ballet classes for the city's poorest children, many immigrants or children of immigrants from South America, Southeast Asia, and other regions. She believed that dance would help struggling youths gain self-confidence, self-discipline, and a sense of accomplishment.

By 1999 the dance school had opened a 21,000-square-foot educational center with a state-of-the-art theater, a stunning glass wall, and

Adult mentors give the students the support they need for success both onstage and off.

OPPOSITE: Many Wooden Floor pieces were created on the students by top-notch choreographers like Donald McKayle and John Heginbotham.



ABOVE: Choreographer Mark Haim praises The Wooden Floor dancers for their focus, work ethic, and creativity. RIGHT: The Wooden Floor strives to be a safe place where low-income kids can forget about struggles they face at home.

auditions for a new class of dancers. "The word has spread throughout the community that coming through these doors might just change everything," Rios Glaser says. About 300 hopeful children and their parents begin lining up around the block as early as 3am for the 70 spots. "We're looking for extremely low income and that the kids seem to enjoy dance as a medium for growth. That's about it," she says.

Once the students are in, though, The Wooden Floor makes a 10-year commitment to its 375 students, ranging in age from 8 to 18. In exchange for attending classes, participating, and good behavior, the students and their families receive a range of services that include academic tutoring, college prep beginning in seventh grade, family counseling, a full-time on-site social worker available for crises, and opportunities to work with the nation's best contemporary choreographers and perform both at the on-site black box theater and in renowned venues like REDCAT.

If it hadn't been explained to him, Seattle-based choreographer

Mark Haim says, he would never have known that the students at The Wooden Floor all come from extremely low-income backgrounds. (In Orange County, that means a family of five living on less than \$32,000 a year.) A majority of the students are Hispanic immigrants or children of Hispanic immigrants, so often English is not their mother tongue.

Rios Glaser, a proud native of Guatemala, points out that since 2005, 100 percent of alumni have enrolled in college, which is three times the average for graduating high school seniors nationwide from that

was for girls. But my mom convinced me that it would help me do better in school." At 10, he auditioned and was accepted. Last June he graduated from Santa Ana's Middle College High School and received enough credits at the local community college to enter his freshman year with sophomore standing.

"Dance helped me to express myself and helps me with my self-esteem," says Sosa, who describes himself as "really shy." By high school he was spending time at The Wooden Floor nearly every day; he relied on the tutors for help with algebra, the



socioeconomic level. Aside from the excellent state and private colleges and universities in Southern California, The Wooden Floor graduates attend schools like Wellesley, New York University, and Boston College and, due to the intensive college prep program, they have few qualms about applying to Stanford, Harvard, and MIT.

Fernando Sosa, 19, first learned about The Wooden Floor when it was still Saint Joseph Ballet. His third-grade teacher told his mother about the program. "At first I didn't want to go," says the UCLA freshman, "because of the stereotype that ballet

counselors for support, and the annual backpack giveaways for basic school supplies. "It's just my mom, my sister, and me," he says. "We live off one paycheck, so The Wooden Floor really helped us out."

That dance is what makes a difference has become a no-brainer for Rios Glaser. The kids are not simply learning and performing dances, she'll tell you, they're making art. The students' first year is a combination of Anne Green Gilbert's brain-compatible dance education and improvisation; they might also learn a dance or two from other parts of the world. The year is a preparation for lessons to follow

Top photo by Gar Travin; bottom photo by Johnny Hernandez

as well as a chance to discover the joy of dance. Ballet continues and modern and improvisation, among other dance styles, are introduced as the students mature. Improvisation and creative problem solving are always emphasized.

The program has seven university-trained dance teachers. Hours of instruction vary depending on students' age and level of involvement. Younger children attend once or twice a week at the outset, while the most involved older students show up every week-day—and on Saturdays for rehearsals.

Aside from Juilliard-trained Rios Glaser and Haim, the choreographers commissioned by The Wooden Floor to create new works on the students have included Seán Curran, John Heginbotham, Donald McKayle, Susan Rethorst, Sally Silvers, and Scott Wells. Dance companies in residence teaching master classes and repertory have included José Limón Dance Company, Eliot Feld's Ballet Tech, and Elizabeth Streb's STREB. Plans are percolating for a major postmodern choreographer to set a site-specific work on the kids in 2012.

The first time Haim was commissioned to create a piece on the student dancers back in 2002 he was intrigued—but wary enough to bring along an assistant, having never worked with teens before. "I wasn't sure how it would go," he says. "I just went in with the intention of doing what I normally do. I get a certain allotment of hours to make a piece, so I just treated it like a normal commission."

What surprised him at first was that he didn't need to adjust his methods to work with the teens. It took a day or two longer with the kids, he says, to see what he was envisioning, but otherwise, he treated them like professionals. "And I could," Haim says, a tinge of amazement in his voice. He has made and restaged three original works on The Wooden Floor dancers over the past nine years.

That the students were ready to



"The word has spread . . . that coming through these doors might just change everything," Melanie Rios Glaser (center) says of The Wooden Floor.

work, focused, and able to contribute to the choreographic process is due to the intensive behind-the-scenes support. Each student has a mentor—either a staff member, faculty member, or counselor—to offer whatever support is necessary to get kids into the studio to dance. That could mean finding temporary housing for a suddenly homeless family, helping a kid who lost his bus pass get a ride

home, or finding lunch and a snack for a hungry dancer at the end of the month when food stamps run out.


"With all the problems these kids have, I never, ever had a kid act out," Haim says. "And, if I didn't want to, I never had to know what was going on in their lives outside the studio." That is important. "For those kids, it's a safe place. They come there and forget about what's going on at home, all the problems. The very best thing I could do for them was to say, 'OK, we're here in the studio; we're going to make art, have fun, play, and enjoy what we're doing.'"

"We have a theory of change," Rios Glaser says. "And one of the things we have found that needs to be true is that [we encourage] young people to form long-term, healthy relationships with mentors. So they're making sure kids arrive on time, that they have everything they need, and try to spot any possible problems or crises ahead of time."

Rios Glaser's other fundamental belief in her continuum that dance changes lives and eliminates poverty is that even children, or especially children, can be creative artists. "In the same way children are asked to

"The Wooden Floor really helped me grow into the person I am today. I wouldn't be here [in college] without their help."

—Fernando Sosa, 19



Most students enter The Wooden Floor with no dance skills, yet leave as proficient dancers and creative artists.

Each student has a mentor—either a staff member, faculty member, or counselor—to offer whatever support is necessary to get kids into the studio to dance.

become proficient in math over the years, whether they're good at it or not," she says, "here they're asked to become proficient in dance over 10 years, whether they're good at it or not." In the end, if they stick with the program, they become proficient dancers and creative artists.

That means mastering improvisation is as important as mastering ballet or modern technique. "Improvisation is very important to us starting in the first year," Rios Glaser says, "because we want to make sure that the students understand that all movement is valid." That includes their own. By not forcing them into a specific style or technique early in their training, they become more open and able to explore with the professional choreographers. "Improvisation stays with them throughout the organization as a philosophy, because they're going to work with choreographers who are going to be adventuresome and will draw from their own movement language and from movement language that the kids invent themselves."

In addition to encouraging

physically healthy children, creating a sense of well-being and purpose, building community, and supporting self-awareness, Rios Glaser is most interested in process-oriented choreography that includes the children from the early stages of creation through performance. "We commission people whose work is very much based on inquiry, finding multiple answers to the same question, thinking creatively, gaining self-awareness, seeing the world in a broader light," she says.

These critical-thinking skills are as desirable in 21st-century business schools and science, math, and technology fields as they are in the dance studio. "That," Rios Glaser says with a note of finality, "is the argument about why dance is such a winner, especially in leveling the playing field for low-income youth. But I can't emphasize enough that it's our approach and it's also our 10-year immersion" that make the difference.

Sosa agrees. "The Wooden Floor really helped me grow into the person I am today. I wouldn't be here [in college] without their help." ♦