

The Wooden Floor Creates Sturdy Foundations



Choreographer Jeanine Durning, left, works with student performers Aubrey Aldana, 11, second from left, partnered with Roland Acosta, 17, and Isabella Orozco, 12, top center, partnered with Alex Perez, 18, during rehearsals for "epic" at the Wooden Floor in Santa Ana. (KEVIN CHANG, Daily Pilot/ May 21, 2014)

May 29, 2014

By Rhea Mahbubani

Jossue Murillo was teased mercilessly in middle and high school.

His friends couldn't fathom why a boy his age would choose to spend his evenings dancing — of all things, ballet — so they mocked and belittled him.

In response, the Tustin resident began imploring his mother for permission to withdraw from the Wooden Floor, a Santa Ana-based nonprofit that offers dance, academic and family service programs to 375 youths annually.

She gave him the option to leave, but in the end, Murrillo chose not to, although the taunting continued.

"I found a relationship with God, and now that I think about it, I'm sure it was him telling me to stay there, to hold on to the Wooden Floor and not let go," said the 18-year-old, who had followed in the path of his older brother, who also participated in the Wooden Floor. "I was going to suffer for a bit, but it led to a greater outcome. I stopped caring about what people say."

Murillo will join nearly 175 students onstage at the Irvine Barclay Theatre through Saturday for the organization's 31st annual concert, "Front door, blue sky."

To Melanie Ríos Glaser, the Wooden Floor's artistic director and co-chief executive officer, the event's title signifies "the world of possibilities of a better life that we offer our students.... Since 2005, 100% of our students have graduated high school on time and enrolled in college, three times that of their socioeconomic peers. Most are first in their families to even consider a college path.

"One of the things we aim to do is to have them be able to access and recognize possibility, to imagine themselves succeeding and ultimately breaking the cycle of poverty."

'An incredible process'

It is a point of pride for Douglas Rankin, the Barclay's president, to have hosted the show for 20-plus years — a relationship that began when the founder of the Wooden Floor, then known as St. Joseph Ballet, sought him out.

"Sister Beth Burns approached me before the building was even opened," Rankin recalled. "Her school was a much more modest affair back then. But she presented her ideas so passionately that, of course, you would respond positively."

The demand before the Barclay's opening led to the creation of a programming committee, which sifted through requests from local organizations and dance schools to present events there. When determining who could be helped and who had to be turned away, the group went with Burns, Rankin said.

"I think that was one of the best decisions that committee ever made," he added. "The reason Beth wanted to be at the Barclay was to expose her company to the larger community and recruit more supporters. And the community's response, whether you define that as audience attendance or members of the families of students at the Wooden Floor, has been consistently strong."

At the upcoming show, guests will view reprises of John Heginbotham's "Promenade" and Glaser's "Billowing Bubbles/REMIX." The roughly two-hour event will also include the world premieres of "epic" and "ODE," commissioned works by New York choreographers Jeanine Durning and Yanira Castro, respectively.

According to Glaser, the concert's routines have been created by the dancers under the guidance of the choreographers.

"The routines are not made up of steps available in a catalog of steps, per se," she said. "They are a newly created movement vocabulary. We commission work from people who will come into the room and get to know who they are working with ... and what they have to say. They will give it that importance and then work together."

Her "Billowing Bubbles/REMIX" was performed at the Barclay last year and has since been recast, restaged and slightly revised. She finds that the quirky name fits well with the piece's energy and effervescence.

The annual concert is taken seriously at the Wooden Floor, Glaser said. It involves four hours of practice six days a week for at least four months. The choreographers are in residence three times for two-week stints, and the students work with rehearsal assistants the rest of the time.

"When our alumni graduate, they claim that the concert experience is their most transformational point at the Wooden Floor," she said. "They realize ... that they've gone through an incredible process — committing, going through ideation, creating, editing, bringing

together of disparate parts and pieces, collaborating, teamwork and community building.

"There are moments of fatigue and frustration, and they have to overcome the difficulty of the process to emerge in a satisfying moment where they get to be witnessed on stage for who they are and what they have to say."

Choreography from scratch

Glaser travels to [New York City](#) and elsewhere on the lookout for choreographers whose work displays an element of risk. Although drawn to innovative spirits, she thoroughly screens each candidate's compatibility with youths.

While a colleague's recommendation resulted in Castro being brought on board for "Front door, blue sky," Glaser said she had followed Durning's career since the 1980s. Until this year, the dancer's busy schedule had precluded a collaboration.

Castro, 42, said she tends to produce routines that are performed in gardens, warehouses and even public bathrooms. During her first visit to the Barclay, the drapes were down and windows open, flooding the space with light. Creativity struck on the spot.

"I wanted to start working with the dancers and bring them in as portraits into this monumental space," the Brooklyn resident recounted.

The process began with the students handing in a list of active words — including running, jumping, hopping and leaping — which were then assimilated into phrases. Castro then added structure and direction, and the group began practicing in small and large clusters.

"I couldn't arrive at it by just doing it in front of them," she said of "ODE." "It had to emerge from them. Even if I see that they're afraid, they do what I ask of them. I get a sense of commitment from them that's really powerful."

Durning, also from Brooklyn, likewise didn't begin "epic" with any preconceived ideas. Most of the material was generated when she asked her 33-person troupe for nonstop movement.

Familiar with the Wooden Floor's work for several years, the 47-year-old believes that the organization's effectiveness lies in its comprehensive yet holistic approach to each student.

"Dance, on some level, is an antidote to the rest of the world out there...." Durning said. "It recalibrates who we are in relation to other people constantly, and it makes us responsible and accountable to other people. It's very basic — you lean on or support someone. If you leave them, they fall on the ground and hurt themselves.... It's not about your desire but how it's going to affect someone else."

Murillo, who has mentored the younger male members of the Wooden Floor — at 90, they are far outnumbered by the girls — appreciated the different tactics of both choreographers. He also discovered that muscling through the mental and physical challenges posed by the months-long preparation taught him the importance of focus, determination and follow-through.

Murillo is now gearing up to join Northern Arizona University in the fall. He holds dear the close, meaningful relationships with his fellow dancers.

"I think I'm most looking forward to being at the concert with the other seniors and performing next to them," he said. "More than anything, I'm excited to be there with them from the time we get on the bus to the time we leave."



Students Cristina Solano, 13, center left, and Leslie Mateo, 14, skip in a circle during rehearsals for "ODE" at the Wooden Floor in Santa Ana.



Choreographer Yanira Castro instructs student performers during rehearsals for "ODE" at the Wooden Floor in Santa Ana.