



The Wooden Floor dancers go one step beyond

January 27, 2014

By Karli Komoto for Orange County Register

Tucked deep within the Walt Disney Concert Hall complex in Los Angeles is a sanctuary for innovative artistry. Known as the REDCAT, this theater introduces the public to influential art forms from around the globe.

For most young dancers, performing in this space might seem like nothing more than a dream. However, 70 dancers from The Wooden Floor, a Santa Ana-based nonprofit dedicated to the empowerment of underserved youth, made this dream a reality.

The Wooden Floor's advanced dancers took the REDCAT stage Jan. 17 and 18 to perform "Too," choreographed by Herb Alpert Award-winner Susan Rethorst; "Time-lapse Alphabet," from New York choreographer Ivy Baldwin; and "True or False: I Was Born in the Netherlands," from Melanie Rios Glaser, the company's artistic director.

Through intensive dance education, as well as academic and family support, Wooden Floor aims to instill self-esteem and discipline in its students. Because all dancers come from "very low-income" households, Glaser said, the performance broke down stereotypes of who can perform daring artwork.

"This tells them that who they are matters. They are worthy of working with the best and they can live up to the demands of established choreographers," Glaser said.

Abigail Nolasco, a Nova Academy senior, said The Wooden Floor has given her a sense of accomplishment she had not experienced before.

"They turn coal into diamonds," Nolasco said, smiling. "They look at us as professional dancers. When I was 10, I was already performing in established theaters."

During the REDCAT Theater performance, Nolasco and her fellow dancers traversed a stage on which many globally renowned artists have stood before. Glaser said the show revived three of the most daring and experimental pieces from the group's choreographic repertoire.

Although these dance pieces have been performed in the past, it didn't make the rehearsal process any easier, Glaser said. Without the presence of the original choreographers, rehearsal assistants were vital to preparing new cast members for the show.

"The choreography can be extracted from video, but the verbal instructions of the tone or the overall movement quality are harder to pass on without the choreographer in the room," Glaser said.

To aid in the process, **Roland Acosta**, a junior at Nova, volunteered his time to bring a piece up to par before the show. Acosta was part of the original cast of "Time-lapse Alphabet" when it was choreographed last year. Even though he did not perform in the piece this year, he said helping in rehearsals gives him a sense of responsibility.

To help visualize the movements, Acosta said he was "passing on phrases we used in the original rehearsals, ridiculous things like thinking of a duck that's trying to get out of water. It is surprisingly working."

Although the goal is to preserve the intent of the original choreography, Glaser said, The Wooden Floor's main priority is making each cast member visible as an individual. The new cast members need to bring their own personality into the routine in addition to executing the choreography, she said.

"It's not about making the next person fit into a preordained role," Glaser said. "It's about making that preordained role a vehicle for that next person to become visible."

Sara Quintanilla, a Segerstrom Fundamental High School freshman, first danced "True or False: I Was Born in the Netherlands" in elementary school. Last weekend, she performed the piece again at the REDCAT and said she used the rehearsal process to become more visible.

"When I watched the recording (from elementary school), I couldn't believe how small I was," Quintanilla said. "I used to be in the back and you could barely see me, but now I'm in the front."

While Quintanilla awaited the chance to perform an old dance again, Orange County High School for the Arts freshman **Jocelyn Magana** made her debut at the REDCAT as a new cast member in two pieces, "True or False" and "Time-lapse Alphabet."

For years, Magana has watched her older sisters perform with The Wooden Floor, but it "only goes to the REDCAT every few years, so it stood out to me," she said. "Ever since I saw my sisters perform there, it's been a dream of mine. Now that dream has come true."

