

In Santa Ana, dance becomes a stepping stone



Lynne Garcia dances during Chris Yon's class at the Wooden Floor in Santa Ana in December.

DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

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"Years ago, I heard about this magical place in Santa Ana," said choreographer Chris Yon, who first worked with The Wooden Floor in 2012. "When I was asked to do it again, I didn't bat an eye ... That building is like a dance factory."

Yon and choreographer Karinne Keithley Syers will present their work on June 2 together with The Wooden Floor's artistic director and co-CEO Melanie Ríos Glaser for The Wooden Floor's 33rd annual concert, "You. Me. We."

The Wooden Floor is a nonprofit service organization that annually supports 375 low-income youths through an educational model grounded in dance. Young people 8-13 years old are eligible to audition each October, with acceptance dependent on financial need and one's desire and ability to excel in dance and academics.

The Wooden Floor's unique approach to dance and education is demonstrated in its annual concerts, which routinely present original works composed by cutting-edge choreographers.

"You. Me. We." will feature nearly 150 students ages 10-18 in a performance that shows dances are their creation as much as the choreographers'. In fact, when Glaser hand picks the guest choreographers she confirms their commitment to a collaborative creative process.

"There is so much more learning involved in creation rather than imitation," said Glaser. "The students feel invested because this is made for them, by them."

The works presented during the annual concert may be, for some audience members, different than the dance typically performed by youths in an annual recital setting. Void of sequined costumes, familiar pop music and narrative development, The Wooden Floor's concerts display abstract modern and contemporary movement that encourages audiences to craft their own meaning.



From left, Chris Yon gives Titania Palacios during a class at The Wooden Floor in Santa Ana.

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Part of what makes the dances in The Wooden Floor's annual concerts unique is the thoughtful and experimental process each choreographer uses to devise the piece. Syers, for instance, started by asking her students to create movement that represented catastrophic events such as hurricanes and volcanoes. Yon pressed his students to think about their fleeting contributions to the history of the universe.



New York-Based choreographer Karinne Keithley Syers worked with students at The Wooden Floor in Santa Ana on a new work called "city swallow sky" which will be performed at the 33rd Annual Concert "You. Me. We." on June 2-4.
CHRISTINE COTTER

"When you're in this type of creative environment, you gain a sense of openness and inquiry," Syers said. "It's a skill and also a gift to enjoy looking and enjoy wondering and to be able to activate your curiosity."

Syers will present two pieces, "city swallow sky" and "An Apostrophe," both of which came out of conversations with the students about their lives. In "An Apostrophe," audiences will hear the children's voices integrated into the sound score.

With this approach, Syers considers herself more of a director and organizer as she activates ideas and choreographs alongside the students.

"I love that when you get into a studio with a new set of people, you can make a dance you wouldn't have ever thought of on your own," said Syers. "I love the surprise and breadth of what we can come up with. ... The world would be better if The Wooden Floor was in

more youths' lives and if all artists had the opportunity to work this way." Yon says he also feels strongly about nurturing young artists' creative process because he is a product of free arts education himself. Growing up in Los Angeles, Yon was introduced to dance through a city parks and recreation program before attending Los Angeles County High School for the Arts.

"It resonates with me to work with these kids, and I hope I'm able to create an environment to inspire the same type of epiphanies I had when I was younger."

Pursuing a Master's of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa, Yon developed his piece, "by(e)•gone," as an extension of his research on the overlap between physics and choreography. And although his ideas of parallel universes and time travel seem complicated and far beyond the scope of youth dance, Yon believes dance actually trains a person to tackle large concepts. His ideas mirror The Wooden Floor's mission of using dance as a tool for success.



Chris Yon is one of the choreographers working with students at The Wooden Floor to create its 33rd Concert, "You.Me.We." Thursday through Saturday.
CHRISTINE COTTER

"Dance breaks down the world in modular, molecular pieces," said Yon. "There are a series of steps, or choreography, for any problem you approach in life. You just have to learn the moves."