A HIP HOP TRIP

Dancers from The Wooden Floor in Santa Ana get time with a 'master.'

By KAITLIN WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Janet Jackson, Britney Spears, Kylie Minogue, Demi Lovato, Michael Jackson and now 41 students from The Wooden Floor in Santa Ana are all connected through one person, Anthony "Tony" Testa.

The boys, ages 12-18, took master classes last month taught by Testa, an award-winning choreographer and creative director. The young dancers wore jeans, tennis shoes and hats – much different from the usual Wooden Floor attire of form-fitting black clothes and bare feet or ballet shoes – as Testa led them through exercises in the hip hop styles of popping and locking.

"It’s fun to do something different," said Eliseo De Loera, 14, Edgar Alvarez, 15, agreed. "It’s good to get a break from ballet and try something new. It actually makes me feel free to dance out of my comfort zone like this."

For Testa, who has many unforgettable experiences coloring his resume, teaching workshops at The Wooden Floor takes him back to before he made a name for himself in the dance world, he said. "I get to see a lot of myself at a younger age in them," said Testa. "I was (dancing) because I liked it even though it was especially rare where I lived."

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Testa, who grew up in Fort Collins, Colorado, said dance was not a typical activity in which boys participated. Ignoring and then overcoming the criticism that came with being a male dancer, Testa now sees teaching as one way he can inspire and support young artists who may be struggling to fully embrace dance.

"I didn’t consider dance as an actual profession until I started taking class from guest teachers and seeing what choreographers outside of my studio were doing," said Testa. "I just want these kids to know that there are people who want to help them reach their goals."

Testa first heard about The Wooden Floor at a Thanksgiving dinner with his family during which someone mentioned being supporters of the nonprofit dance education organization for low-income youth. Since 1983, The Wooden Floor has used dance to “strengthen self-esteem, self-discipline and a sense of accomplishment” in under-served local youth.

Because the mission seemed to align with his own thoughts on the importance of artistic expression, Testa, a so-called “creative activist,” wanted to find out how he could contribute.

"Not everyone is drawn to art, but for me and others that are, it’s like therapy," said Testa. "I think it’s part of our DNA, and it’s important to give yourself permission to express yourself."

Because of this struggles, the boys said Testa was someone they could relate to. "It’s cool because he understands us guys," said Adrian Delgado, 15. "He’s kind of my role model, and it says a lot that he isn’t afraid to show who he really is."

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De Loera agreed. "It feels good to say that I’m the starting quarterback in football and I also do ballet and I don’t feel embarrassed," he said.

Testa, who said he uses movement to say things that can’t be explained with words, believes dance will help the students process whatever emotions they experience in their lives.

"I would say these students are overall more focused (than other students he teaches) because of what they practice at The Wooden Floor," said Testa. "I also see this wonder in their eyes which is a beautiful thing."

Despite the students’ appreciation for Testa’s teachings, several admitted that the hip hop style is not in their comfort zone.

"I like hip hop, but I don’t think I dance it very well," said Carlos Zarate, 16. "I like having guest teachers, though, because you figure out there isn’t just one type of dance, kind of like there are all kinds of languages and none are right or wrong."

Doing away with the idea of “right” and “wrong” ways of dancing is something Testa emphasizes throughout each class. He assures his students that all judgments are left at the door and that the studio is a safe place – a place to be one’s self.

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Said Testa: "These kids at The Wooden Floor, they have a lot to dance about," he said. "I hope they know they have permission to do that."

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PHOTOS: DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

"It’s fun to do something different," said Eliseo De Loera, 14, of the master class taught by Testa.