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Seán Curran and Company in residence at The Wooden Floor  BY RACHEL CALDWELL

When Seán Curran received an invitation to choreograph work for teenagers at The Wooden Floor, it seemed an offer he couldn't refuse. He likens the opportunity to a farmer doing crop rotation. “For me, going to The Wooden Floor is like an artistic crop rotation. I work in opera. I teach college kids. I make dances for my company,” he says. “To go to a place like The Wooden Floor, where the population is so different, is nourishing, and it reminds me why I do what I do.”

Founded in 1983 to provide free dance, academic education and social services to low-income students in Santa Ana, California, The Wooden Floor invites guest choreographers to set new work on its student body each year. Curran, founder and artistic director of Seán Curran and Company and chairperson of dance at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, was invited with members of his company for a three-week summer residency in 2017, his second visit to The Wooden Floor. In addition to teaching master classes, he co-created with the dancers Reaction Yield, a 16-minute abstract dance for 23 students ages 12 to 18. This past spring, he expanded the piece to 20 minutes and added new dancers. The resulting experience was symbiotic for both Curran and the students.

**Experiments in Movement**

“Our goal here is to use dance as a developmental catalyst for change,” says chief executive officer Dawn S. Reese. “Our long-term goal for our students is for them to develop into their full potential as young people.”

If you were to have peeked into Curran’s rehearsals last summer, you would have seen groups of 6 to 10 students doing what Curran calls “creative problem-solving”—dancers choreographing their own “name phrases,” teaching them to each other and then finding ways to manipulate the combined material, like changing the level, facing or direction. “I wanted them to have a sense of play and a sense of shared authorship,” says Curran. “I took a lot of their experiments and put them together in this abstract dance.”

He wanted to challenge them physically and creatively, but also mentally. To do so, he gave his cast writing prompts, like “What does an idea feel like?” “They’re really living in the world of ideas,” he says. “I told them Yvonne Rainer’s idea that the mind is a muscle, and we make our minds stronger by exercising them.”

He was surprised and delighted by the students’ spirit, curiosity, humility and love of dancing. The majority come to The Wooden Floor without any dance experience whatsoever. “They were willing to make mistakes, and mistakes are a great teacher,” he says. “They were also willing to be silly. Oh my God, it was like manna from heaven!”

**Creativity and Community**

There were challenges at times of working with such a large group split all over the studio in smaller groups,
while keeping everyone focused and still having fun. Says Falon Balzellar, artistic director for The Wooden Floor, “Oftentimes the students can hold back a little bit and be shy. But the choreographers do a lot of beautiful work with them and students come out of their shells and become choreographers. It's exciting to see them in that way.” Curran established rapport by exchanging jokes with students and even let them teach him a Mexican folk dance. (Seventy-eight percent of the Santa Ana population is Hispanic.)

One of the most positive effects of the choreographic residencies has been the close community that has developed within such a diverse student body. “There's a flying section in the dance, where the bigger, older students lift the tiny ones. There was an element of danger and risk in that, but the care they took of each other was really astonishing,” says Curran. “They are in each other’s lives. They’re so interconnected. There were fifth-graders, and there were those who were about to go to college, and they were all equals there. Everyone looked out for each other.”

The project with Curran and his company was the first full residency the organization had hosted in a while. It was such a success that they plan to use it as a model for future artists. “The philosophy of the organization is that if we provide the best to the students, they rise to the best,” says Reese. “So our goal is always to bring the top caliber of artist to co-create pieces with the students.”

Rachel Caldwell is a Dance Teacher contributing editor.