

Spring 2018

Ballet Review



with Lumumbaism.”

Later, when the new ruler, Laurent Kabila, was assassinated, Vumi was swept up with others, jailed, tortured, and sentenced to death. Somehow he managed to escape. His account was an important part of *Dinozord*, one element among many with a strong impact. The performance climaxed several times, then moved on to more revelations. Speech, song, dance, and visuals were all important, all contributed to the depth of *Dinozord*. Late, Linyekula danced a solo that seemed both very Congolese in its inventions and also akin to hip-hop dance, to rumba Columbia, to Puerto Rican men's bomba, and much else – a reminder of Congolese dance's many contributions to the African diaspora and the way dance and music move back and forth between Africa and the rest of the world.

So, too, did a fabulously danced solo near the end by Kumbonyeki to Jimi Hendricks' blues *Voodoo Chile*. He, too, seemed to be channeling hip-hop, as well as Congolese dance, as his body and limbs plunged and twisted, making daring new combinations. On the screen we were reminded that we've been part of a “conversation between two worlds” where they converge and challenge. And so they have, deeply and impressively, in the kind of performance that leaves you feeling both full and spent.

Chicago

Joseph Houseal

The Windy City has a range of preprofessional, preparatory dance-training programs available, some with impressive names: School of the Joffrey Ballet, Ruth Page Dance Center, and another ballet school directed by Daniel Duell. Noticeably, one dance program, at The Chicago Academy for the Arts (CAA), has launched more careers than any other.

Not a part of the Chicago Public School System like Chicago's High School for the Performing Arts, and so not victim to the school system's vagaries and systemic problems, The

school academy boasting a full academic curriculum coupled with daily training in the arts. Not yet a boarding school, CAA aims to be one. It should be. Seeing what they accomplish with thirty-six students in the dance program inspires one to imagine what they could do with more.

Peter Martins, director of the New York City Ballet is unequivocal: “The Chicago Academy for the Arts is nationally recognized for its professional level of training. I am delighted that two of our company members are graduates of this outstanding institution.” These two are Craig Hall and Tom Gold. It doesn't stop there: grads have been placed with Lar Lubovitch, Pilobolus, Alvin Ailey, the Joffrey, the Richmond Ballet, the Dutch National Ballet, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, Hubbard Street, Cirque du Soleil, and one is the dance captain for the Broadway cast of *Wicked*. Not bad for a private institution working out of a beautiful, repurposed Catholic school and with a dance faculty of four people.

CAA Director of Dance Randy Duncan puts it like this: “We have had many ‘aha’ moments training young people into professional artists. Nineteen of our dance grads are now working with top companies in New York and abroad, fifteen of them boys. We wanted more ‘aha’ moments, and realized that we must have a program for male dancers. The Young Men's Dance Initiative was launched in autumn of 2017.”

I was fortunate to see some CAA dancers in a concert rehearsal under Duncan's direction and during a jazz class and then to see a men's classical ballet class taught by former Joffrey soloist Patrick Simoniello. The small dance faculty, which includes Graham technique teacher Deborah Goodman, a dancer who worked closely with Yuriko for many years and has taught at both the Graham and Ailey schools, is impressive for its results and warrants a closer look at its core teachers.

In particular, because they both have had exemplary professional careers, Duncan and Simoniello offer themselves as role models to

young men aspiring to similar ones. Duncan has choreographed around the world, from Israel to Hollywood, and his praises have been sung from work on Pulitzer-winning plays to the annual AIDS benefit Dance For Life, for which he choreographs a finale number involving dancers from every professional company in Chicago. Duncan is best known as an original and technical choreographer, and this is how he teaches – as if he is putting movement on a company.

The students, fifteen to eighteen years old, are treated like artists. The choreography is unsparing and difficult, and it becomes the unrecognized teacher, because excellent choreography always teaches. The rehearsal I saw had elements from Graham technique, African movement, ballet, and concert jazz. The music was rich, soulful, and complex. One result, from emphasizing the choreographic demands on dancers and refining their artistry through the rehearsal of choreography, is that the primacy of form – or making shapes with the moving body – is thrown into high relief as the forms come into contact with each other.

I was impressed with what confidence and clarity the dancers threw themselves into the creation of form, striving to feel it in their bodies, not merely mocking a shape. They attack the forms with clarity and power. It was much more than trying to apply the technique from a class into rote, unoriginal choreography – as is done in even the finest ballet academies. Oompah-pah, oompah-pah. There was none of that. Even the beginning and transfer students had a more sophisticated understanding of themselves and their art because of the quality of what they danced and the unwavering, although very kind, professionalism of Randy Duncan.

Another aspect of teaching in this manner is the acquisition of an individual understanding usually reserved for much older dancers: an awareness of the limits and strengths of one's own instrument. To be sure, especially with the young men, they are in the throes of growth and are not done growing. This is not a problem, it is the essence of grow-

ing as an artist at such a fine preparatory school as The Chicago Academy for the Arts. In a racially diverse, artistically well-sourced environment, the students realize what they can and cannot do with their legs, faces, arms, and hands; what freedom their hips provide and what back looseness is needed. Individual specificity of personal bodily control is something that seems to emerge naturally at the academy, and is a defining characteristic of great artists who come to know intimately the totality of their body's expressive range.

I did not expect to be seeing such mature artistic development in fifteen-year-olds. It is not something I have seen, for example, at the School of the American Ballet, where the training is excellent indeed, but where also an anxious competitive spirit is pervasive, teachers can be imperious, and large groups require more generalized instruction. Individuality comes much later for most ballet dancers, but it is in fact the individual who auditions and gets hired. It is here that The Chicago Academy for the Arts students have the proverbial leg up. The range of artistic influences the dancers encounter is coupled with rigorous classical ballet training in technique, *pas de deux*, and *pointe* – every day.

The new Young Men's Dance Initiative is ballet based. Turns, jumps, leaps, and partnering central to men's dancing in classical ballet are the core content of the training. I observed Patrick Simoniello teaching a technique class to six boys in this program. These young men could not have a finer role model than Simoniello. I took advantage of my position as guest, to ask if the students had ever seen Patrick dance. I knew that they probably had not, as he began with the Joffrey Ballet in New York, a full company member who traveled with the company to Chicago after New York.

Patrick Simoniello is one of my favorite dancers, and I have reviewed his dancing many times in these pages. Foremost to his credit is a very beautiful body, with classically ideal proportions; his ballet dancing appears as if a Greek god were doing it. Beyond that he has



Photo: Thom Blain; The Chicago Academy for the

Liam Fitzpatrick, Joey Massarelli, Zachary Gonder, and Chase Buntruck in *Initiation*.

right relationship between teacher and student.

How can two teachers be enough to impart this? In martial arts traditions, one teacher is understood to impart such wisdom in movement. The male students at the academy are doubly fortunate. It is all about the right teachers.

always been a technical perfectionist, bringing a clarity and finish to his dancing that reveals a mastery that allowed the artistry he brought so joyfully to whatever the choreography demanded. Simoniello has danced just about everything during his decades with the old and new Joffrey and a stint with Hubbard Street.

It is easier to understand the rigors and purpose of technical precision when it is embodied before young eyes, rather than merely spoken of while drilling the same exercises demanded of ballet students for centuries. Simoniello's physical beauty and technical quality serve his artistry; they characterize but do not define it. With Simoniello as a teacher of these young men, there is no question about the importance of classicism and the living value of beauty that inspires it. It lives and breathes in him, making a direct transmission of historical values, the finest type of transmission in any dance training.

It is really no wonder that aspiring dancers under the care and instruction of Randy Duncan and Patrick Simoniello should succeed so famously in the professional dance world. Through these two, so many hard-to-claim qualities of the profession of dance – from creativity, to classical idealism and mature rehearsal sensibilities – are the umbrella sheltering these students until they find new homes in professional companies, where they recognize so much of what they were taught. The dance department of the Chicago Academy for the Arts teaches “how to be,” not only “what to do.” Self-possession as an artist

I visited the dance department of The Chicago Academy for the Arts to discover why they placed more professional dancers than any other preparatory school in Chicago, and I could see why after five minutes in Duncan's rehearsal. Above all, there is a wholesomeness there: something characteristically Midwestern and something that sings brightly onstage. It is wholesomeness of mind and self as well; the wholesomeness of understanding oneself as an artist and beginning life's journey with a daring self-realization that one was born to be a dancer and that there is endless profundity, meaning, and purpose in that. The students were radiant . . . and sweaty.

“We'd like to reach more young men in our search for students,” explains Duncan. “The academy offers three 2018 Susanna Sloat full-time scholarships for the Young Men's Dance Initiative, and by expanding the responsiveness of our reach, the talent pool would increase. Think of the magic we can unleash on the world then!” He cannot hide the other secret of CAA: Randy Duncan loves his job and is nourished by the young talents growing in front of him. That the students are similarly nourished is something shining to behold. The results speak for themselves.

Moscow/ St. Petersburg

Susanna Sloat

To see that quintessential Russian opera, *Boris Godunov*, at the restored and very glamorous old Bolshoi after an afternoon at the Kremlin,