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Dancers Growing Onstage and Off

A free ballet school teaches its students to see the big picture.



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By GIA KOURLAS

She put up with the giggles for a while, but they would not stop.

Finally, Dionne Figgins took a break from rehearsing a group of eighth graders for their coming performances at the Joyce Theater to give a mini-lecture. But what started out as a talk about disruptive giggles soon became something more expansive: a consideration of the audience-dancer relationship.

"If a giggle is taking over the performance, you're not doing the show anymore," said Figgins, who is the artistic director of Ballet Tech, a tuition-free ballet school in New York. "Dance is a service."

The students stopped talking. Their twitching ceased. "The patron is our boss," Figgins said. "Does that make sense? So you have to care about the experience of the audience, so it doesn't involve a giggle — unless a giggle is what we're providing. And there are giggles in there!"

She meant in the dance they were rehearsing, "Homeland," a lively new work covering an array of cultures and dance forms including West African dance and ballet. "Homeland" will be given its premiere by Kids Dance, the student company of Ballet Tech, which began celebrating its 30th anniversary at the Joyce on Thursday.

"It's six sections, and we're traveling around the world," Figgins said in an interview. "Every year we've done new works because I did want to start developing some repertoire of my own. Next year we're going to cool our jets and do some rep. Because I'm driving everyone insane! This is a big one."

For Kids Dance, repertory refers to the dances of Eliot Feld, the prolific choreographer who formed Ballet Tech in 1978 to provide opportunities for children in New York City public schools to study dance. And now those dances are available to everyone: Feld, who choreographed his first ballet in 1967 and in the ensuing years stretched the notion of classical dance, has recently put his work in the public domain. (He and Ballet Tech have also donated archival materials to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.)

"We really want to make a push to see his work being done in professional dance spaces and in university spaces," Figgins said. "Because the work is just good."

In addition to "Homeland," Kids Dance will perform Feld's "Apple Pie" (1999), set to bluegrass; and Bebe Miller's "Rain," with a guest appearance by Tamisha A. Guy, a thriving contemporary dancer and a Ballet Tech alumna.

Figgins, 44, took over as artistic director of Ballet Tech in 2021, after a career that included performing with Dance Theater of Harlem and on Broadway. Sharp yet warm, with a no-nonsense briskness, she insists that her students pay attention. Etiquette is important to her on and off the stage. After the rehearsal, a student dancer, Addis Pace, 14, summed up Figgins's outlook: "Always carry yourself with respect and discipline. Don't just think that when you're not dancing that you should act a fool."

Bogdana Kuzmenko, 14, said that Figgins's speeches are frequent and meaningful, helping the students to "view life differently."

"She always energizes us," she said. "When we're in a bad mood, our mood is always lifted."

As Ballet Tech's artistic director, Figgins continues its mission: to audition children in New York City public schools for dance training, identifying potential students in the second and third grades. But she is also broadening the organization's reach with Ballet Tech Across New York, a new initiative that is funded by the Ballet Tech Foundation.

"The previous process really was audition based, meaning they would have a little audition, make cuts from that audition, and then they would have a longer kind of callback," Figgins said. "And what I really wanted to see was that all of the students have some sort of experience with dance, regardless of whether they were going to be a fit for the Ballet Tech training program."

Now a class, 45 to 55 minutes, is offered to all public school students in second and third grade, regardless of their talent level. Schools can choose between two options: "Dance for EveryBODY," geared to students with little exposure to dance, or BT Ballet Basics, for more experienced students. And Figgins has larger ambitions. She would love to have designated schools beyond Ballet Tech that could offer, say, a six-week session. "I really would like to grow that program so that we're going into schools and doing lecture demonstrations," she said. "These are all things that I did when I was at Dance Theater of Harlem. We were always going into the public schools."

Figgins would like Ballet Tech "to stand in the same conversation as some of these conservatory programs," she said, citing Ballet Academy East and the schools at Alvin Ailey and Dance Theater of Harlem as examples.

But Ballet Tech, also known as the New York City Public School for Dance, isn't just a dance school; it's an academic one too. A collaboration between the New York City Department of Education and the Ballet Tech Foundation, the school — on Broadway and 19th Street in Manhattan — is for students in fourth through eighth grades. After, students scatter to different high schools, including Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, though dance classes are available for alumni.

"Because they leave in eighth grade, you want to be a part of their development," Figgins said. "It's my way of trying to remain in the lives of our alumni so that we can help make sure that we are getting them to the places in the dance field that they want to be."

Figgins hopes to open minds to the possibilities of careers in dance apart from performing. There are opportunities for students to learn about lighting design and set design. And there is a residency program in which dance groups use Ballet Tech's studios in exchange for teaching the students different disciplines and repertory from their companies. "There's a lot of engagement for the students," Figgins said, "so that they have an idea of their next step."

Figgins herself studied at the esteemed Jones-Haywood Dance School in Washington and joined Dance Theater of Harlem when it was still under the artistic direction of Arthur Mitchell, the first Black New York City Ballet principal, who was inspired to form the company after the assassination of



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DIONNE FIGGINS

the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Mitchell was a taskmaster, but one who drove Figgins to want to be in the front of the room. When she left for Broadway, it was not with Mitchell's encouragement, she recalled: "He said, 'Well, you're going to be in the corps over there — I'm trying to make you a star.'"

But his lessons seeped in. She emphasizes teaching her students the complete picture of dance: how to be a good professional in the studio, how to be the kind of artist whom choreographers and directors want to work with. "Mr. Mitchell wouldn't let us sit down," she said. "He was like, 'If you're not learning somebody else's thing after you've learned your thing, you're not doing it right.'"

She is trying to work out — as so many dance educators are — a more humanistic approach to training. When she was growing up, Doris Jones, her teacher, had a cane. "We call it the method of the stick," she said. "You use the stick on the floor, you use the stick on the thigh, you use the stick on the ankle."

Now there is an evolution happening, she said, and that kind of abrasive discipline is no longer acceptable.

At the same time, she said, she wants to cultivate in her students, who are generous with one another, "what it means to be competitive in the space," she said. "And to me, it

looks like a singular focus."

The students have issues that bother her. They don't like to sweat. The smell of the studio makes them recoil. "They're like, 'Oh, it's gross in here,' and I'm like, 'No, no, no, you need to get used to this,'" Figgins said. "This is what it's supposed to smell like. This is the evidence of your work. This is what we want. But they're spending a lot of time trying to avoid the product of the hard work, which is the sweat and the exhaustion and the muscle."

Dance, she said, is a lifestyle, and there are no shortcuts. In class, teachers at Ballet Tech wait three or four seconds before an exercise begins; the same pause is in place for the end of a combination. Students must remain still "so that everybody is in one mind," she said. "You get in the habit of being one team. It's the same in football. You can't call the play if everyone's still straggling about. It doesn't work in dance, either."

Lately Figgins has been thinking about *révérence*, the bow or the curtsy at the end of ballet class to show admiration for the teacher. "It's a *révérence* for our practice. It's a *révérence* for our teachers, for the musicians, the gratitude for just having a studio to be in," she said. "I love the studio. I'm trying to get the students to understand that every second you have in it is precious."

Top and above, students rehearsing at Ballet Tech in Manhattan, with the school's artistic director, Dionne Figgins, center, instructing them. Kids Dance, the school's student company, is celebrating its 30th anniversary with performances at the Joyce Theater.