A High Degree of Success: The Ailey/Fordham Dance BFA Turns 25

By: Stav Ziv

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The story took flight with a chance encounter at the 60th Street post office in Manhattan. It was the mid-'70s and Denise Jefferson, then head of The Ailey School, and Edward Briesnau, then dean of Fordham College at Lincoln Center, would often bump into each other in the neighborhood. At that point, both schools were already looking for ways to expand their relationship, and Jefferson had previously brainstormed the idea of starting a BFA program. While standing in line to buy stamps, Briesnau says, their friendly chat resulted in motion an idea to form a planning committee tasked with creating a BFA program that would change the lives of young dancers.

The collaboration that gave birth to that conversation, the joint Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, marked its 25th anniversary in 2018. Even more accurately, the nascence of the performing arts that was still taking shape. Fordham was adjacent to New York City Ballet’s new home and surrounded by other leading arts organizations. By the time Briesnau became dean in 1991, Ailey had moved into its headquarters half block away on 61st Street.

In its location, there was a sense among Fordham faculty that “the university really hadn’t taken advantage of its potential to expand in all of the arts,” Briesnau says. “There was virtually no music program, and there was no dance program.” NYCB dancers had been showing up to take evening classes for years, and Fordham had reached a similar arrangement with Ailey company members. Professors understood that dancers were “terrific to teach in academic subjects,” says Briesnau.

As the Ailey side, we discovered that sometimes dancers would stop dancing because they wanted to go to college,” Forrey says. “Or, after years of performing, they would have to find a place to start over as freshmen. A partnership between the two institutions meant young artists wouldn’t have to choose between college and a dance career. It didn’t hurt that the university’s president at the time, Joseph C. Vlahos, was a dancer for whom admirers Judith Jamison, the former Ailey superstar who’d taken the reins as the company’s artistic director. When Briesnau and Jefferson brought the idea to their respective leadership, they found support on both sides. It took about two years of planning with a team—working out a financial structure, applying for accreditation, setting up a curriculum and admissions criteria—to make it happen.

“When the first class arrived, it was the realization of a dream for Denis and me,” says Briesnau.

Developing Dancers and Global Citizens

Students in the BFA program have always trained across multiple genres and techniques, such as ballet, poise, Horton, Graham-based methods, Limon, West African dance, jazz, and partnering. They take courses in dance composition, dance history, music, and anatomy and kinesiology, and keep up a full academic load that spans English, social science, philosophy, history, and foreign language. “We’re not just training dancers,” says Melissa Persich, co-director of The Ailey School and head of the BFA program since 2011. “At the core of it, we’re developing who a dancer is.” She says, “Not only as an artist— as a person, a critical thinker, a global citizen of the world.”

The central challenges of the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program have long been balancing hectic schedules, managing the cost of tuition for a private university degree, continuing to strive for diversity in the student body, and keeping up with an ever-changing dance landscape. To that end, Persich says, students always thinking about how to introduce students to contemporary forms, movement languages, and choreographic voices. The program’s enormous breadth “gave me such a sense of versatility as a dancer,” says Danielle Morgan, who became a Radio City Rockette even before she graduated in 2007 and has since returned to teach workshops at Ailey in partnership with the Rockettes. It was important to Morgan to be part of a diverse community while getting a college degree. “Not only did I feel accepted,” she says, “but I also felt that I could learn more about other people and about other cultures. It opened up my world.”

Students have plenty of performance opportunities and regular exposure to Ailey’s main and second companies. Ricardo Zayas, a 2005 graduate who apprenticed with Complexions Contemporary Ballet as a junior and joined Ailey II as a senior, says the program allowed him “to test the waters of what it was like to be a working professional.” Zayas has gone on to dance with companies like Alonzo King LINES Ballet as well as in TV and movies (Steven Spielberg’s West Side Story) and on Broadway (most recently In the Heights). “My resume had begun building itself well before my graduation,” he says, “and I was thankful for that.”

Celebrating Alumni

Jacqueline Harris recalls being starstruck as a student seeing Ailey company dancers in the elevators. “I remember them always taking a moment to say hi to us and be so kind and human,” says Harris, who graduated with her BFA in 2014 and pursued a second major in math. She joined Ailey II and then the main company, where she continues to shine today. “I love being able to be on the other side and hopefully give them a little bit of what I received when I was in school.”

The BFA program’s success can be measured by the success of its graduates, who are thriving as artists, educators—and, of course, as dancers. It’s hard to go anywhere without running into a former student or seeing their name in a program. Persich says, “I wish Harris were up here.” It feels like everywhere I go, I see my family.”

The festivities in the weeks to mark the 25th anniversary included a special evening of dance, a lecture, and a special screening of the film Ailey at the Alice Tully Hall. “It’s just so exciting to see all the dance and all the world that comes with the program,” Persich says. “The celebration of this milestone, she says, is ultimately about “acknowledging the full potential of this program and the artists in—those who’ve come before and those who will come after.”
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“I try to take a lesson with me from each character I play,” says the Jeffrey ballet’s Amanda Assuena.

Dance and the Mind

One of the most intriguing aspects of the human brain is its ability to work in different ways, particularly when movement is involved. In this issue, which focuses on dance in higher education, we delve into the experiences of dual-degree students. In “In the Mix,” these students describe pairing the study of dance with subjects ranging from biomedical science to international affairs. The intersections between the fields are where things get interesting: PhD candidate Mikaela Malin explains how she experienced science-related breakthroughs after modern class, reshaping her ability to understand biology principles and prompting a fresh look at questions she was exploring in the lab. Dance is widely represented in colleges and universities, which raises the question: Should more students in higher ed be dancing?

The Ailey/Fordham BFA Program was launched because of an awareness that dancers also excel academically. Twenty-five years later, there’s an illustrious list of alumni in a wide range of roles in dance—thanks to the program’s broad curriculum—as well as in fields like law and academia. Edward Birnbaum, former dean of Fordham College at Lincoln Center, notes that dancers flourish in the classroom as well as the studio, because they know how to learn.

Hope Boykin, this issue’s cover star, embodies all of these ideals. A captivating mover, she brings a brilliant creative mind to her ever-growing artistry. During her wildly successful performing career with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Philadanco, she also carved out time to choreograph and teach. She’s now in demand as a choreographer and was an artist in residence at University of Southern California’s Glorya Kaufman School of Dance. Her States Of Hope premieres at The Joyce Theater in Manhattan this month.

Boykin has long been committed to making subtle but hugely important changes within the dance world, explaining to writer (and former Aliley performer) Courtney Celeste Spears how she wants to “carve away the things that didn’t work for my spirit, give the things that did, and leave that space with a little more hope.”

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