PS21 offers sessions for neophyte dancers

Series gives everyone chance —— with no one watching

Tresca Weinstein
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On a humid late-summer evening, a storm is blowing over Chatham, sending breezes through PS21’s open-air theater and providing a soundtrack of crackling thunder for the dance class taking place onstage. After running the two dozen students of all ages (including a handful of young musicians from nearby Art Omi) through a set of warm-ups, choreographer Liz Gerring begins to construct a dance using simple, accessible movements.
She starts by dividing the group in two and directing them to walk and then run across the stage. Gradually, she builds on additional moves, encouraging the dancers to add nuance and experiment with timing while she continues to tweak the sequence. Along the way, Gerring pauses to offer insight into her choices and edits.

By the end of this 90-minute class in PS21’s Movement Without Borders series, the group — mostly non-dancers — has come together as an ad hoc company of sorts, fully engaged in the collaborative effort.

"It's rare that people have an opportunity to get behind the scenes of someone's creative process and method firsthand, while moving," said PS21’s executive director, Elena Siyanko, who conceived the series, which continues through Sept. 21. "It's something you can't get through the Q&As that dance festivals normally organize to demystify the process of creating and choreography."

Open to all and offered by donation twice weekly, Movement Without Borders has brought leading choreographers and dancers, most based in New York City and upstate New York, to Chatham this summer to teach, including David Neumann, Miguel Gutierrez, Michelle Boulé, Amy Spencer and former New York City Ballet principal Wendy Whelan. The series has run the gamut of styles and approaches, from meditative Feldenkrais practices taught by Gutierrez, to playful improvisation, to a more traditional class led by Zoey Anderson of Parsons Dance, one of the four companies that performed during PS21's monthlong Dance Festival in August.

"Each class is different, which gives me insight into dance and movement, which in turn gives me insight into the dancers and performances I see on PS21's stage," says Chatham resident Deirdre Malfatto, who has attended several sessions in the series.

Because the classes are informal and no registration is required, the group makeup varies. On any given day, it might include tweens, teens, seniors and a few professional dancers, such as recent drop-ins Jamal Jackson and Ephrat Asherie, who have both performed at PS21.

"The idea was to have teachers who are masters and have arrived at a simplicity in their approach that can be richly experienced by all students, even with different levels of movement experience," said Richard Colton of Hudson, who curated the series with Siyanko and is the co-founder and co-director of Co Lab: Process + Performance, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. "The reason people often feel intimidated in the actual doing [of dance] may be because they judge themselves too harshly, and that short-circuits the letting-go that is dancing. These teachers all share the belief that dance is an act of freedom, and they create the right space for the individual to experience this freedom of thought."

Working with nondancers benefits the artists as well, Colton says: It's an opportunity for them to think about what matters most to them about dance, and how they can convey this essential quality within the structure of a class.

More Information
If you go

**Movement Without Borders**

**When:** 6-7:30 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 29 and Sept. 5, 12 and 19; 10:30 a.m.-noon Saturday and Sept. 7, 8, 14 and 21

**Where:** PS21, 2980 Route 66, Chatham

**Tickets:** By donation

**Info:** 518-392-6121 or https://ps21chatham.org/event/movement-without-borders/

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"The community aspect was also important to us—how we move physically and connect as human beings, how the energy changes when you move or improvise together," Siyanko said. "The sense of connection and mental and physical awareness translates outside of class."

That alchemy is evident. As Anderson plunged into her relatively fast-paced class last Saturday morning, a few participants were visibly taken aback. But she encouraged them to stick with it: "David always says, just put your limbs where they need to be," she said, referring to the choreographer David Parsons. "You got this!" Halfway through, each dancer had taken the choreography in stride, adapting it to their own strengths and abilities. After class, they lingered on stage to thank Anderson and acknowledge each others' efforts.

"I grew up taking ballet classes, and haven't danced much since," Malfatto said. "I'm pretty 'curvy,' and it took me a while to go to my first PS21 class, but once I was there, I never felt less than accepted. These classes have helped bring back the joy of movement for me."

*Tresca Weinstein is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*

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