Up close with Diane Newman

BY ANDREA MARKS

While many dancers don’t get their first taste of modern until college, students at Happendance School in Okemos, Michigan, start modern technique classes as young as 8, and by the time they reach the ninth grade, many are working seriously on their choreography skills.

Diane Newman, who studied dance and zoology at Michigan State University, takes an interdisciplinary approach to her advanced composition class. She chooses a broad, challenging focus for the year’s explorations—anything from visual art to the written word to women’s studies. (More obvious themes, like music, are used for the school’s beginner composition classes.) During the fall semester, dancers spend large portions of class developing their creativity with nondance activities related to the theme—composing haiku and collaging. Throughout the year, they journal based on prompts from Newman. It helps dancers think about what inspires them, she says. “They’re worried about global issues. They’re writing about gender identification and feminism, but also the beauty of the natural world” and other topics.

During the second half the year, Newman splits dancers into small groups of three or four to create final pieces for the school’s spring performance. When they play with movement phrases, she challenges them to approach their choreography from every angle. “I’ll have them embellish, invert and retrograde the phrase. Explore all the different ways to manipulate the motif they’ve developed. Then they write all that down.”

Just as important as making the dance is learning about the collaborative process. Newman stays largely hands-off as students discuss and set their final work. “I’ll go from group to group and check in, but sometimes I’ll step out of the studio and give them freedom and space.” She encourages each group to assign a leader who will make the final call if they reach a stalemate about a composition choice. It’s fine to argue to an extent, she tells them, but as performance day approaches, any decision is better than none. “It inspires them to look forward to a time when they are the only choreographer. That often happens when they go to college,” she says. “By the time they finish the collaborative works, they are thirsting to be a solo choreographer.”

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