

SF Conservatory's New SoMa Studios

An Expanded Vision for Ballet Education

By Michael Wade Simpson

Summer Lee Rhatigan has just opened a ballet school without mirrors. They teach Gaga. It's like neo-Europe over there on 8th and Folsom, turning ballet dancers into improv artists, melting rigid spines, sending them down onto the ground to roll around for a while and get a sense of earth. Maurice Béjart had his Mudra school, where dance was part of a total theatre movement. Rhatigan is cooking up her own version of a radical education, ballet style.

"This may be an odd time to be doing what we're doing," she said, "but I could not gypsy for another day." Five years ago, retiring from Lines Ballet, Rhatigan, who had always taught, thought, "what if I tried to do my own thing? Alex Ketley, another Lines Ballet dancer, needed a place to work, and Joanna Haigood offered them space at her industrial cathedral-of-a-studio in Bayview, Hunter's Point. Dubbed the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance this experiment was born.

Rhatigan, who danced with the London Festival Ballet and National Ballet of Canada before meeting Alonzo King and joining Lines, clearly appreciates both sides of the ballet equation—classical vs. contemporary. At this point in her life, however, she has decided to do something fresh.

They stayed at Zaccho, their first home, full-time, 30 classes a week, for two years. "Joanna was spectacular, warm, she did aerial work with the kids." After a while it became clear that Rhatigan's older dancers, who often worked odd jobs to support themselves, couldn't afford the hour-and-a-half commute to Bayview each day. So seizing an opportunity, she moved the whole operation over to City Ballet Studio, near the Civic Center District in downtown San Francisco.

Two ballet schools under one roof? "What they do is nothing like what we do," said Rhatigan. "Galina is Russian, she has a very specific curriculum. Most of her students want to become professional ballet dancers. That's not my clientele." Still, she admits, I've been looking for 5 years for a column-free space in San Francisco that was in a safe neighborhood."

The Conservatory's new home reminds many people of New York studios in the 70's and 80's, with tons of light and a second story view looking into other people's apartments. There are two sprung-floor studios, one north-facing, and the other with a cathedral ceiling, "old, lead-paneled San Francisco windows, and diagonal shafts of light every afternoon at 4pm." Most importantly though, it's a home without roommates. "Kids are realizing this is theirs. They're staying after class for an hour-and-a-half. They don't want to leave." Rhatigan says her goal is to create an "atmosphere, an environment for talent to find direction." Certain young people feel drawn by her outlook on ballet technique and what she offers them creatively. "These are mature kids. I give them free reign. I talk to them about their needs, and I try to give them a sense of ownership and responsibility."

I'm interested in choreographers who have their own teaching," she said, like William Forsythe has his "Improvisational Technologies," and Ohad Naharin, the "Gaga" language of movement. Naharin devised Gaga as a source for his own dances, but also a means for non-dancers to connect to movement, and through movement find wellness. Bobbi Smith, a Juilliard dancers who moved to Israel to join Naharin's Batsheva Dance Company, will be in San Francisco this summer offering Gaga classes to the Conservatory dancers, as well as open community classes.

Incorporating classes with these top-notch choreographers and teachers is integral to the teaching philosophy of the Conservatory. "The best way to develop young dance artists is to establish a trusting environment in which highly motivated students come together with highly accomplished artists—dancers, choreographers and musicians—to give of themselves generously, share and respect one another's points of view, develop skills in the language of dance, and study works of some of the world's most distinguished contemporary choreographers."

How does she get these international luminaries to come out to San Francisco? "I get on the phone and ask them," she said. "We had Glenn Edgerton, former director of the Nederlands Dance Theater, Thomas McManus and Alessio Silvestrin, both former Frankfurt Ballet dancers for Bill Forsythe, and from San Francisco, artists like Manuelito Biag, Eric Kupers, Christian Burns, Andrea Flores, Alyce Finwall. "Christian has been traveling for 4-5 years, doing improv every day; he's been influenced by the great improvisers in Europe. Now he's back in San Francisco, coming here full-time, and we're about to ratchet-up the teaching of improv in this city as it relates to performance. I'm so excited!"

It may be turning into a little dance ghetto in their corner of South of Market. Margaret Jenkins Dance Company is next door. Choreographer Ben Levy at Studio Gracia is just a block away. "Margaret was warm and welcoming. Our students are invited to come watch. Ben teaches Release technique, which is exciting. Anybody who wants a job as a freelance dancer these days, will have to know about the floor, about spine and muscle, about melting." And having these artistically various influences nearby must be helpful to provide support for the Conservatory's mission. As it states currently, the studio strives to train dancers in "classical ballet, contemporary dance and choreographic composition while fostering the fascination and passion that are essential components of artistic development and the life-long pursuit of the artist to give of one's self without fear." Last summer, Rhatigan reports,



Conservatory students in Ohad Naharin's DecaDance

"Three weeks of Gaga changed the way the kids approached ballet."

"People say to me, 'Are you a contemporary dancer now?' I'm the same person, the same dancer who would experience Giselle, and think, 'How far can I take this?' People say to me, 'I've never taken a ballet class like this.' If people want to hang on to that exclusive sense of ballet, I'm not the right teacher for them."

Why no mirrors? "I don't want people looking at themselves. It's nothing to do with line," she said. "It's problematic with young people, who may have issues with their bodies. It changes the way people see and learn steps. Nobody in an office spends a whole day looking at themselves. There's a mirror in the bathroom."

Rhatigan was obvious about her feelings of eager optimism for this new location. "I think this is a powerful time for art. People are re-evaluating things, what's important is shifting. This is the time for collaboration. I want to bring enough creativity together so it's possible for people to genuinely share. It's all about sharing."

The San Francisco Conservatory of Dance offers classes for youth and adults, professional dancers as well as community members. Summer intensives are geared towards advanced dancers 14-23. There is a choreographic Apprentice Residency, designed to nurture aspiring choreographers ages 18-23. Open classes for advanced students and adults are held on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The studio is located at 301 8th Street, Suite 205. sfconservatoryofdance.org

Michael Wade Simpson has an MFA in choreography from Smith College, and founded "Small City Dance Project," a community-based modern dance company, in Massachusetts. Before relocating to Santa Fe, he studied in the Bay Area with Anna Halprin, performed with Seth Eisen, and wrote about dance for the San Francisco Chronicle, In Dance, Bay Area Reporter and Dance Studio Life. He is also editor of culturevulture.net