

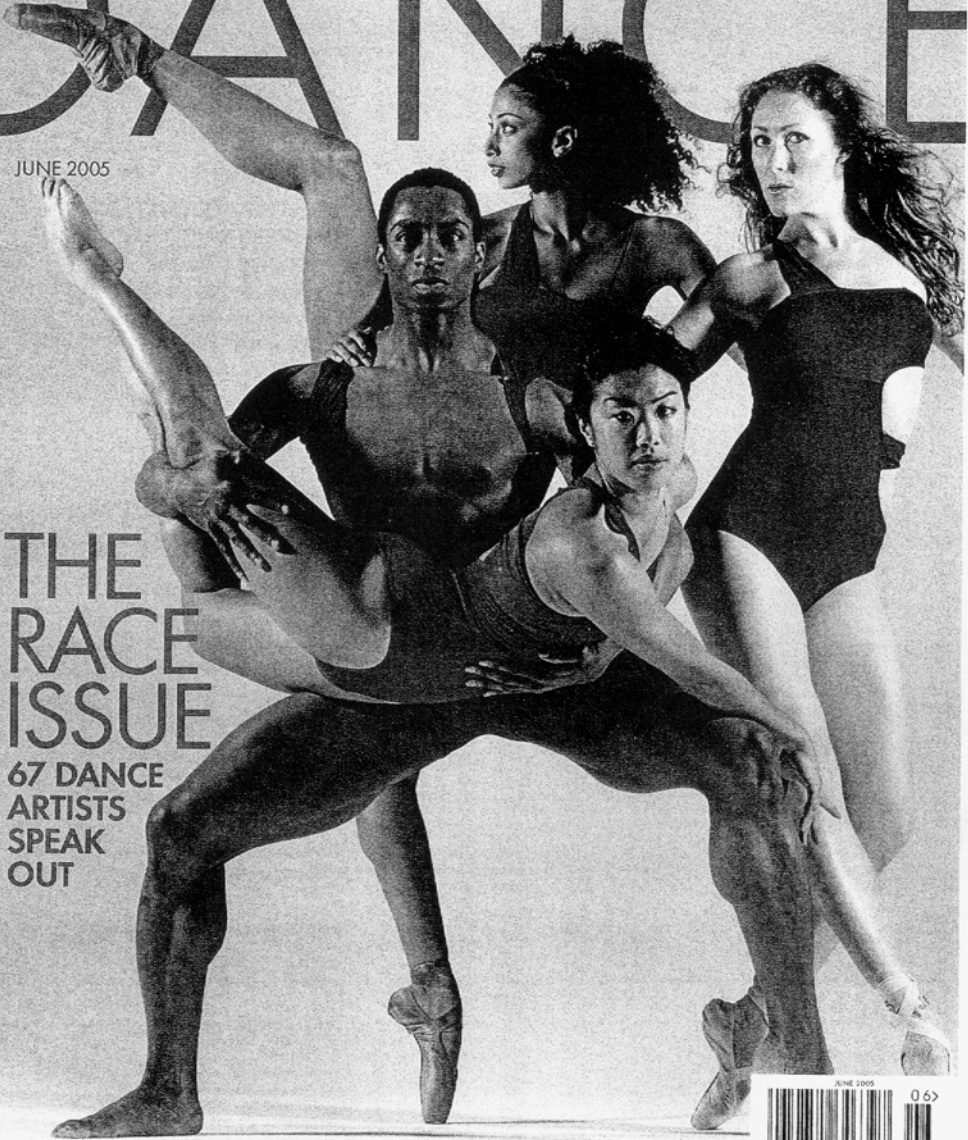
DANCE

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67 DANCE ARTISTS SPEAK OUT

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STUDIO TALK

It's All Good

VALUING PROCESS OVER PRODUCT.

BY RACHEL HOWARD

SIXTEEN HIGH SCHOOL kids catch their breaths in the lobby of San Francisco's Cowell Theater, looking expectantly at Deborah Slater. The students have just finished the tech rehearsal for a dance work they'll perform before a paying audience in five days. Slater, founder of Deborah Slater Dance Theater, is their designated mentor.

"The new duet entrances look really nice," Slater says, as the students smile gratefully. "But own the stage more. You've got to step out there and exude presence."

The piece these George Washington High School students will perform was created by fellow GW classmate, senior Sarah Abd-Elaziz. It's a slinky three-minute dance set to music by Sting combining belly dance with modern dance. Abd-Elaziz and the other students are participants in the Vision Series, a program that is simple in structure and infectious in spirit.

Sarah Abd-Elaziz (right) and George Washington High students take in feedback from Vision Series mentor Deborah Slater (second from right).

It's the brainchild of Donnette Heath, who as a young would-be choreographer felt "traumatized" by nerve-racking auditions and disheartening choreography workshops. So in 1999 she created an education program that would offer young dancers the kind of unqualified enthusiasm she had often longed for. While feedback is encouraged, Heath's written mentorship guidelines state, "This festival is about sharing and giving, not judging or expecting [the students] to be at a professional level."

Here's how it works: High school students perform on a shared program with professional companies. The high school pieces are created by guest artists, teachers, or student choreographers, who receive mentoring visits from veteran dance artists. Each school is paired with a professional company, and they cheer each other on and offer comments on each other's work.

The choreography mentors visit the high school rehearsals twice over a three-month period—Slater enjoys the process so much that she stops in more frequently. "Seeing the high school kids reminds me why I do what I do," she says. "They learn to work together, not to criticize each other behind their backs. This is about life skills—giving direction and taking it."

"She helps us with the partnering and the projection," young choreographer Abd-Elaziz says. "It's some of the same

stuff our teacher says, actually."

"They can hear it from Deborah," GW High School director of dance Nina Mayer chimes in. "They don't always hear it from me."

Mayer says the Vision Series inspired at least one of her former dancers to pursue a full-time dance career, though all the students benefit from sharing the stage with professionals. "The Vision Series has allowed us to expand their idea of what modern dance can be," she says.

The atmosphere at the Vision Series is different from many other choreography competitions. Last year Mayer's student company attended a competition where routines were judged in pre-set categories. "There was no process," she says. "The student choreographers have to create something to hit a big climax, instead of reaching for artistic expression." Though Mayer's students received solid marks, she feels they learn more at the Vision Series.

For the first two seasons of her program, Heath handed out awards. She was announcing the winners at the second annual show when she had an epiphany. "By the fifth or sixth award I was thinking, this doesn't feel right," she says. "I don't want anyone here to feel they're not worth something." So for the next season, she divided the program's modest scholarships evenly among the student choreographers and had the student and professional companies make up awards to give each other.

Though students who go on to the professional level must eventually face critical evaluation, Heath believes that at this stage they benefit more from "loving suggestions" than "harsh criticism." "What matters is that you're going to learn, and you're going to get better," she says.

This focus on positive feedback has not gone unappreciated—the Vision Series is continuing to grow by popular demand. This February, Heath presented two performances with 16 professional groups and 16 youth companies. She also expanded the program to Houston, in April, with a one-night show at the Stafford Centre. "I want to have it in New York and Chicago—that's the 20-year plan," she says. "I want this show to be a big embrace." ■



Photo: Andy Meehan