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DANCE STUDIO

Time they are a change in the dance world, but not in the way you might expect. When a dancer walks into Thomas Dance Studio they can expect to be taught a variety of classical and contemporary dance techniques to be passed onto an eclectic work of choreography, but also to give the creative freedom and encouragement to explore their own choreographic talents.

While the entire staff of educators at Thomas Dance Studio pride themselves on engaging students' creativity through a proper understanding of dance technique, the leader of this artistic movement is the Studio's co-creative artistic Director, Lauren Spencer. Spencer, a 1993 Upper Saint Clair graduate and 2008 USC Arts Hall of Fame inductee, oversees the instruction and curriculum of the Studio's student body of more than 500 dancers, including its award-winning competitive dance company. Through the foundational principles of understanding body alignment and placement, Spencer has chosen to shift her dancers' focus away from the ornate, but exact in the dance competition arena and to control focus on the process of how their bodies create movement, encouraging their ability to produce beautiful, collaborative works of choreography.

For some dance instructors, the concept of allowing students to aid in the production of choreography would be unheard of, but Spencer describes it as "a remarkable process to encourage students to see a what direction, different from your own, they'll choose to take it."

Recently her collaborative choreography efforts were highly celebrated when the dance company's oldest group, the Troop, was awarded the 2013 People's Choice Award by the U.S. Federation of Dance Competitions for a piece entitled, Obsession.

Recognizing the "exceptionally creative and hardworking" nature of all the dancers in the Troop, she began soliciting ideas during weekly classes for them to work together and experiment with each other's ideas and movement on a custom-made prop designed by the girls, recording it all on film. With this, Obsession became a work of collaborative movement and on-stage skills that Spencer and the Troop spent over six weeks tirelessly experimenting with and creating collaborative choreography.

"Watching them as they tossed out any idea that came to mind, took some trying movements, then building of each other's ideas in such a harmonious, adult manner completely humbled me as an instructor," reflects Spencer, as she recalls the artistic process behind Obsession as "one of the best collaborations to ever have taken part in."

While their unexpected nomination from the Federation of Dance Competitions for the People's Choice Award, which this year was by a nation-wide popular vote, was exciting and appreciated, Spencer and the staff of Thomas Dance Studio have always maintained dance competitions as a presence in the dance company's curriculum for an

opportunity to obtain critique and performance experience, not awards. Looking back on the Troop's success in 2013, she proudly notes, "They took the opportunity to perform in two really interesting pieces throughout the school year. Not following trends. Not repeating tricks."

The other piece Spencer mentions is a special work of choreography set by Thomas Dance Studio's Old Edwards alumni and former member of the nationally renowned Fusion Dance Company, Lauren Gleason. Bringing its process as established in the concert dance community not only provides her dancers with a premiere experience, but helps them to stay away from the "orthodox dance" reputation that Spencer too often sees students confining themselves to.

Though she will never stop pushing the ideals and history of promotion, professional dancers, Spencer has discovered that her dancers have a tendency to more easily appreciate the history of dancers who are tangible to them. Luckily for the budding artist at Thomas Dance Studio, their personal connections to alumni who were accepted into some of the nation's top university dance programs and who have attained successful careers in the professional ballet, concert dance and commercial world will provide them with intimate means for inspiration.

The 25-member Thomas Studio Dance Company will be traveling to Virginia Beach to participate in their final dance competition of the season in late July. This event is always a favorite as, not only does it allow the dancers to strengthen their bonds and friendships with each other, but it gives feedback from professionals in the industry.

Interested in being a part of this award-winning competitive dance company? Intermediate through advanced dancers can join on July 28th. — Sign for a Summer Camp with your teacher and the Thomas Dance Staff. Guest teachers include Pittsburgh CLO Education Director Kasha Liliana, Penn Park University Professor Javon McMiller, and Chancel Choreographers of Z Company Dance, Zanelia Thomas and Jill Mann. The first camp will finish with an audition for the Thomas Studio Dance Company! For more information please email lauren@thomasdance.com



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