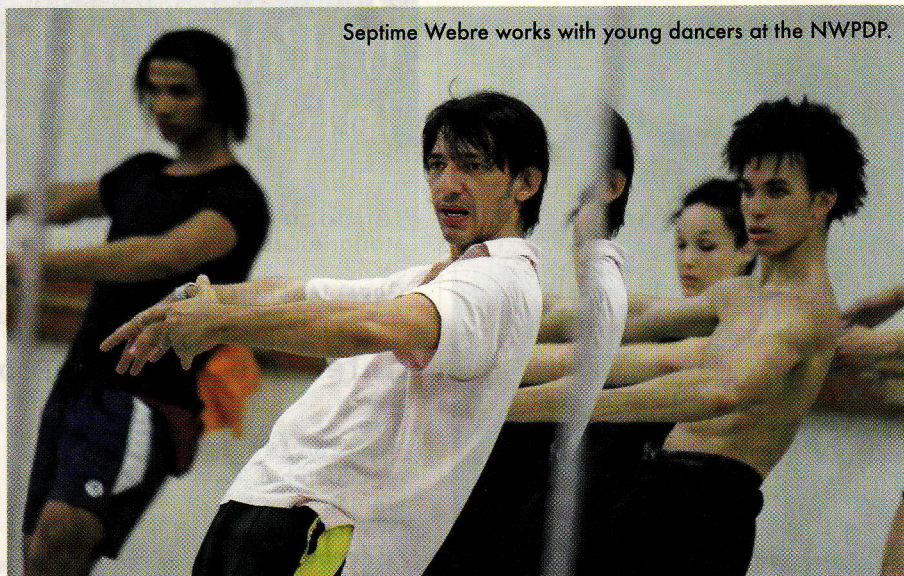


Septime Webre works with young dancers at the NWPDP.



PROFESSIONAL TO PROFESSIONAL

BY MARTHA ULLMAN WEST

“The contraction is above the waist, not in the pelvis,” says Sarah Slipper to six dancers on a steaming hot day last August. Slipper, co-founder and artistic director of the three-year-old Northwest Professional Dance Project (emphasis on professional), is teaching them a light-hearted piece to Chopin’s music for *Les Sylphides*. The dancers are working their “popos” off in the un-air-conditioned BodyVox studio.

Earlier that day, in a studio across town at Jefferson High School, choreographer Josie Moseley explains to nine participants, “It’s not a gesture of the hand. It’s the whole body speaking.” They are learning *In Her Bones*, a modern solo for the summer program’s gala nine days later. Although only one dancer will perform it, Moseley, an integral part of Portland’s contemporary dance scene, made a gift of the solo to the remaining dancers to use as they wish.

Slipper, whose work can be found in the repertoires of Cincinnati Ballet, Nashville Ballet and other companies, and Steve Gonzales, a MOMIX dancer and artistic director of The Jefferson Dancers, founded the Northwest Professional Dance Project in 2004. They built the program to give professional dancers and advanced students exposure to teachers, choreographers, and artistic directors while on summer

layoff, and choreographers the freedom to experiment, and even, as Slipper put it, to fail.

“It’s an unusual idea for students to work with choreographers at the level of Paul Vasterling and Septime Webre,” says Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin. He was at the program setting two pas de deux to Spanish and Latino music. “It’s good for choreographers, too,” he says. “We get to hang out with each other and network.”

Mills was one of 10 choreographers, four of them Portland-based, who created new pieces for the NWPDP gala and showcase. In tones ranging from softly directive to a parade ground bark, they instructed, cajoled, coaxed, and demanded the undivided attention of the program’s 35 dancers. Choreographic styles ran the gamut from Gonzales’ jazzily propulsive movement, Luca Veggetti’s stressed elegance, to James Canfield’s sexy pas de deux on pointe, and Vasterling’s lyrical classicism. Rehearsals and workshops took place in studios all over Portland. NWPDP participants began long days with company class at 9:00 A.M.

Webre, artistic director of Washington Ballet, was a guest artist the first week, along with Donald McKayle, John Alleyne of Ballet British Columbia, Jamey Hampton and Ashley Roland of BodyVox, and Louis Robitaille and Susan

Gaudreau of Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal. For many of the dancers (selected in auditions held last spring in five cities) workshop week was the most valuable part of the experience because of the exposure to the artistic directors involved. Many were particularly interested in Robitaille and Gaudreau because of their company’s innovative energy.

At the beginning of the second week, dancers auditioned for the choreographers by performing new movement phrases full-out. “Give me technique, use your technique,” New York’s Thaddeus Davis demanded as his colleagues observed from the edges of a basement studio at Jefferson High School known for many years as “The Dungeon.”

Kelly Ann Barton, three-time veteran of the program, and Keelan Whitmore gave it their all. Whitmore, very much in demand because of his partnering skills and long-limbed body, had just finished a five-year stint with Kansas City Ballet. He came to NWPDP to work with specific choreographers as he made the shift from ballet to more contemporary movement. Barton, a recent Jefferson High School dance program graduate had been accepted by SUNY Purchase, but was in the program because she was itching to start her performing career. She was hoping for an apprenticeship with a company like Hubbard Street, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal, or Chicago’s Luna Negra.

Whitmore ended up working with Lucas Crandall and Vasterling. Barton worked briefly with Moseley and as an understudy for Crandall. She also worked with Slipper, performing her *Sort of* and *A Fine Balance*, which premiered at the first NWPDP and was nominated for the 2006 Benois de la Danse International award for choreography.

Although participants don’t get to work with all 10 choreographers, Barton says that you get seen by everyone. “You learn how certain companies work. You make connections,” she says. “You learn what kind of movement you like best, and how each choreographer creates work and pulls work out of you.” ✱

Martha Ullman West is a DM senior advising editor.

Blaine Covert Photography. Courtesy Northwest Professional Dance Project