

DanceVision: Building the Next Generation of Dancers

By Tammy Duffy



Photo contributed by Melissa Ackerman

Sometimes projects start from a simplistic idea between two people. This the case for the Princeton Dance and Theater Studio, located in Princeton NJ, innovator, Risa Gary Kaplowitz, (former principal dancer with Dayton Ballet, Manhattan Ballet and company member of Houston Ballet) and close friend, Susan Jaffe (former principal dancer with American Ballet Theater). In their professional careers they had positive learning experiences, leading to their success as prima ballerinas. Their teachers were very hands-on; it was a very warm atmosphere. It was like a family. They are giving back to the community and have created a positive atmosphere for the children of Mercer County with their dance company, DanceVision.

Today, ballet artists, Risa Kaplowitz, Susan Jaffe, Cynthia Gregory (who has coached for DanceVision), and Roy Kaiser (who was the Artistic Director of the Pennsylvania Ballet company for 35 years, is a coach at DanceVision) are hard to find. These are the names we all know in the world of ballet, the superstars of dance. Sadly, many ballet schools and major companies do not seem to be doing enough to preserve ballet's greatest asset, its ability to transcend words and transport an audience into their world. Ballet technique that explodes with meaning is vastly lacking. DanceVision is creating dancers who dance with explosive technical meaning. The children who perform in this company have the opportunity to be the next superstars of the ballet world. They are being taught by the superstars. DanceVision has created this opportunity for them.

In 2005, DanceVision in NJ was founded by Susan Jaffe, who was a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater, along with artistic director, Risa Kaplowitz. During her professional career, Ms. Jaffe danced with Mikhail Baryshnikov. DanceVision is a ballet company that brings together dancers from the ages of 5 to 18, to share in the freedom of self expression through movement and music. The students are pushed out of their comfort zones in both acting and dancing. The expectation is that they move with authentic pure technique and strength.

The principle roles are played by the children in the performances. The children are very well trained and some are thinking about having a professional career in ballet. The children carry the shows; they are not in the background. There is a participation fee per performance that the children pay. Fee prices range from \$200 to \$280 per child, depending on their age and type of program they sign up for. No child is ever turned away because of inability to pay the fee.

In January 2011, DanceVision partnered with The Parkinson Alliance to bring free dance classes for patients with Parkinson's disease and their caregivers. Over time these classes evolved to serve patients with various physical disabilities and are currently offered for free to the residents at the Merwick Care and Rehabilitation Center in Plainsboro, New Jersey.

August 2013 marked the first DanceVision Dance Camp. This was a free one week long camp for children from Trenton's Homefront organization. Homefront bused the children to the Princeton studio. This was funded by a generous grant from the Church & Dwight Employee Giving Fund, Inc. The camp featured lessons in ballet, hip hop, jazz and tap. Other activities included crafts, lectures on dance history; lessons in stage make up, and costume creation. It was held at the Princeton Dance and Theater Studio. This camp will be repeated this summer.

DanceVision Performance Company presented the ballet *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Their first performance was Saturday, May 3rd at 7 PM and Sunday, May 4th at 2 PM at the Kendall Main Stage Theatre at The College of New Jersey. It was a magical performance, where Fairies, Sylphs, and Sprites make mischief with the lives of unsuspecting, love-struck Mortals. At no additional cost, audience members are invited to arrive one hour prior to each performance for a fun and educational pre-performance program. Audience members attending the talks were also able to hear a preview of the story; learn the process of translating a story into a ballet, and meet dancers from the performance.

Take a look at their website at <http://www.dancevisionnj.org/>