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Annual DanceFest in Stamford is master class for students

By Olivia Just, Correspondent
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STAMFORD -- The brightly lit Palace Theater stage was filled with dancers -- the girls dressed in dark leotards with their hair neatly pulled back, the boys in crisp shirts and shorts, gazing with concentrated and solemn attention at the figure toward the front of the stage. The scenario was clear at a moments' glance -- these students were not yet here to perform, but to learn.

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Susan Jaffe, the teacher for the Advanced/Intermediate Ballet Master Class at DanceFest 2010, commanded the front of the stage last Saturday, standing out in her bright red shirt against the dark floor and walls, her back to the Palace' magnificent auditorium. A former principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre and co-founder of the Princeton Dance & Theatre Studio in New Jersey, Jaffe was there to impart her knowledge

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and experience to this year's DanceFest participants.

"I feel like Madonna," she joked as she adjusted the microphone strapped to her waist, magnifying her comments and corrections to the class, for the benefit of both students and the handful of parents watching from the seats.

For the past eight years, this has been the core of DanceFest, an annual festival of different dance genres -- the master class with an illustrious instructor. Whether it's ballet or hip-hop, Latin jazz or modern dance, the goal is to provide students with an enriching cultural and artistic experience.

Jaffe is just one of the six instructors handpicked for the program by DanceFest's producer and director Carol Bryan.

Each teacher -- Tracy Inman for modern, Brice Mousset for contemporary, Luis Salgado for Latin jazz, Jermain Browne for hip hop/jazz/funk and Lisa La Touche for tap -- boasts an astonishingly accomplished background of experience, which they share with the students during the master classes. Dancers come from all over the area, and as far as upstate Connecticut and Westchester, to participate in the unique experience.

"I think it's amazing that we have that right here in town. Every master teacher brings something unique. It really adds a lot to their dance education," said Jane Frank, whose daughter, Caroline, studies at The Ballet School of Stamford, and participated in Jaffe's ballet

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class. It's Caroline's first experience with DanceFest, her mother added, and it's definitely something she'd like to participate in again.

"She's a great teacher," Frank said of Jaffe, as she watched the instructor on stage.

Weaving between the swaying rows of dancers, Jaffe kept up a continuous stream of instructions, which seemed almost to flow with the music into the students' movements.

"Shoulders back, lift up and out of the waist, keep the chest nice and high. Ribs in, stomachs in. Arms up, stomach up and plie," she intoned as she demonstrated the steps or corrected a student's posture. "Feel the energy in your hamstrings crossing, like two scissors. You have to use both legs."

"It was a good class. I learned a lot," said [Anna Fredeen](#), 11, of Jaffe's ballet lesson. "I liked when we went across the floor. It was a little hard for me, but it helped me strengthen my body." After two weekends of intense master classes in differing disciplines, the students take the stage again to perform. On Sunday, each school will present their dancers in a special performance, featuring original choreography and open to the public.

[Cynthia D'Angelo](#), a ballet and modern teacher at [Armonk Center for Dance](#) in Armonk, N.Y., has brought 27 students to DanceFest this year, and will present two modern dance pieces at Sunday's performance.

"It's good for them to take classes with someone with a different technique," she said of the range of classes offered at DanceFest. "They take away a little piece of each teacher and they come back refreshed. They are more motivated. It kind of ignites that fire."

Following close after Jaffe's ballet lesson is the modern dance class, taught by Tracy Inman, a former member of the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre](#), and associate director of the [Ailey School](#). The movements of the modern class were starkly different from those of ballet - - more angular and loose, with deep side bends and stretches -- though no less meticulous in style or technique. A steady, rhythmic drumbeat underscored the dancers' movements.

"A smile will always help," Inman said as he demonstrated the steps with the help of dancer [Romero Patterson](#).

Though the styles of dancing are disparate, the virtue of combining them in an experience for the dancer is vital.

"For the body, cross-training is great. For the stimulation of the mind, to challenge emotionally and physically, to study different genres," said Carol Bryan. "They may find what they fall in love with. It can lead them to many different paths in the performing arts. These days, choreographers and directors want dancers who can do everything."

Bryan performed as a dancer with American Ballet Theatre, and worked as director of education at [Stamford Center for the Arts](#) for six years. For the DanceFest program, she selects teachers, many from New York City, whom she feels will best benefit the master classes.

"They have to really be right for the this program. They have to have the right temperament and they need to be a generous teacher. I choose very carefully."

Interestingly, Bryan first met Jaffe through teaching -- Bryan was a guest teacher in Maryland for two weeks when she spotted the then-11-year-old Jaffe in her class and recognized something special.

"She was so passionate about dance, and so musical and so precise, that you just knew this was going to be somebody who would rise to the top. So for her to come and teach for me is great." Bryan said.

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