

Considering Choreography

Could an intensive's repertoire offerings be the key to your summer growth?

BY ASHLEY RIVERS

Students of
The School of
Pennsylvania Ballet



Miami City Ballet School
summer students in
Balanchine's "Diamonds"

Ballet students live for "aha" moments, those little revelations that change the way you dance. And surprisingly often, those moments come outside of technique class, when you're pushing yourself in a new direction with a challenging piece of repertoire.

That's just what happened to Madison Young, 16-year-old Houston Ballet Academy student who performed "Kingdom of the Shades" from *La Bayadère* at HB's summer intensive last year. "It opened my eyes," she says. She'd performed her share of solo variations in the past, but this experience as a member of a corps was new. "There were so many learning curves." Not only did "Kingdom of the Shades" teach her spatial awareness, timing and precision in a different way, but performing a long and demanding classical excerpt also boosted her stamina.

Of course, technical training is at the center of the summer intensive experience, but repertoire plays a key role in your preparation for professional life. Studying Balanchine, for example, can help you develop musicality, speed and attack. Variations from *Raymonda*, *Paquita* or *Sleeping Beauty* build your classicism. Contemporary works can teach you to move in new ways, challenging the boundaries of your technique. Especially when you're getting ready to audition for companies, looking at a summer program's rep can help you choose an intensive that will round out your training and discover the kind of works you'd like to dance professionally. "I think by 17, dancers should start honing in on whether they want a company that has more of a contemporary slant, or that's doing all traditional work, or a mix," says Shelly Power, director of Houston Ballet Academy. And for intermediate and advanced dancers, investigating a program's summer rep can help you do just that.

From left: Alexander Liliaev, Courtesy Pennsylvania Ballet; Estefania Garcia, Courtesy Miami City Ballet

"Corps work is one of the best ways in ballet to learn teamwork."

—SHELLY POWER

COMING INTO FOCUS

In recent years, summer programs have begun to bring their repertoire to the fore. "The final performances are developing into bigger and bigger events," says Darleen Callaghan, school director at Miami City Ballet School, "so it has definitely become a greater focus in the program. I think it is important that students begin investigating what repertoire particular programs offer."

Most of the time, however, you won't find a detailed rep list on the website or in the program's information packet. So how can you find out? "If the school is affiliated with a company, look at the company's repertoire," says Arantxa Ochoa, school director at The School of Pennsylvania Ballet. Power agrees: "You might look at the past five years, to see what kind of balance there is from the classics to the contemporary works—and new works."

You can also look to the school's website or YouTube channel for videos of works from previous years, as well as faculty bios. And, of course, you can always contact the program administrators to ask. "It's absolutely appropriate for a student to call and ask that question," says Callaghan. At some schools, administrators may have a summer repertoire list even before they audition students, while at others, they might not know until closer to the start of the program. But even without a specific list, most programs will have a rough idea of styles they'll cover each year. It's important not to jump to assumptions based on one summer's repertoire. Instead, look at the company's reputation and the summer

program's rep over the last several years. You may also want to look at who has created work for the company's studio or second company, as those choreographers' works are often taught to summer students.

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

When researching, be sure to ask how many pieces you'll learn, and what style is likely for your level. In many programs, famous neoclassical and contemporary works will often be reserved for the higher levels, simply to ensure that dancers can perform them safely. For example, Miami City Ballet's summer intensive sets a Balanchine piece, such as the finale from "Diamonds," on its top levels each year, whereas the youngest levels focus more on classics, like *Paquita* or a Bournonville work, or a faculty member might set a new work on them. Franco De Vita, artistic director of American Ballet Theatre's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School, stresses how fruitful learning classical rep can be for students. "Classical repertoire is important because you learn how to dance with less affectation," he says. "The dancer who is clean in style can do every kind of dancing, can switch to modern, to contemporary, to neoclassical, with no problem."

Then there's the meat and potatoes of repertoire—the work that you may not be featured in, but which will prepare you for professional life. Houston Ballet's summer intensive, for example, makes a point of including corps work, like "Kingdom of the Shades" or *Serenade*, for all students. "We want to be sure to give them that entry-level

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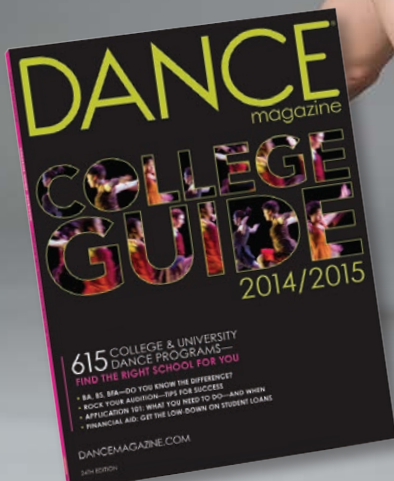


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2015 summer study guide



Madison Young (at left), with Houston Ballet Academy intensive dancers in Act III of Stanton Welch's *La Bayadère*

experience of being in a company,” Power says. “It’s kind of a rite of passage. If you’re coming from a smaller school, maybe you are at the top of your school, and you’re doing tours all by yourself. But working in a corps is totally different. You’re getting the essence of what it’s like to be working with dancers at your level—spatial concerns, stage skills, sensing the people around you. It’s one of the best ways in ballet to learn teamwork.”

If a program offers a mix of styles and you want to focus on contemporary choreography, Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux, artistic director of the Chautauqua Institution’s dance program, recommends asking a school, “How far do you go into contemporary?” At Chautauqua, for example, last summer students learned a piece by Dwight Rhoden and faculty member Sasha Janes choreographed on the students. Pay attention to whether there’s a contemporary element in the audition. If there is, chances are contemporary rep will be a significant part of the program.

And if you don’t have experience with that kind of work, don’t be intimidated. Teachers and directors know that you probably haven’t had access to Jirí Kylián’s or Justin Peck’s works at your home school. “You just have to jump in and try it,” says Bonnefoux. “Go to a friendly, supportive place. You’ll be embarrassed for one or two days, but after that you won’t be. That’s how you progress—you don’t play it safe anymore, you’re not afraid to try something. And at the end of the summer, you’re a different dancer.” ■

Ashley Rivers is a writer and dancer in Boston.

Amitava Sarkar, Courtesy Houston Ballet