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DANCE

Risks and Balancing Acts For a Small Black Troupe

By JENNIFER DUNNING

JOAN MYERS BROWN has done a lot of interviews in the 32 years since she founded Philadanco, one of the nation's leading small modern-dance companies. Now it was time for another one, as this predominantly black, Philadelphia-based troupe prepared for a New York season opening on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater. The specter loomed once more of having to respond to questions like that ever-recurrent one about defining "black dance." But instead her interviewer asked what she'd like to talk about.

Quicker than a reporter could flip open her notebook, Ms. Brown came up with a slew of "ideas," as she put it. Let's talk, she said, about selecting choreographers for a repertory company and keeping that repertory diverse. Danco, as Philadanco is affectionately known, will present a wide-ranging program at the Joyce of works by Ron Brown, Bebe Miller and Jawole Mays. It also includes a premiere by a lesser-known choreographer named Christopher Huggins, a former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

All are black, but Ms. Brown has commissioned dances from white artists as well, including the hot young Trey McIntyre most recently. "I have no problem

using white choreographers," she said. "It's just finding the right choreographer."

Ms. Brown had her eye on Mr. Brown (they are unrelated) for four years, waiting for him to "stretch out," she said. Now immensely popular, Mr. Brown has created several pieces for Danco, which is known for its sleek and vibrant movement style. His "Exotica" will be performed at the Joyce, Ms. Brown said, because her dancers wanted New Yorkers to see them in it. Mr. Huggins's "Enemy at the Gate," set to music by Steve Reich, was created for the company's annual choreography workshop and later expanded.

Producing new dances is risky. "Even with all the right ingredients it doesn't always work," Ms. Brown said. But it has also been difficult to find solid young choreographers, she said, because the AIDS plague wiped out so many of the artists who would have been their mentors.

Next on Ms. Brown's list was the problem of having to compete with the larger and better-known Ailey company for the limited slots that dance producers provide for black dance groups. "We're always an afterthought," Ms. Brown said. "I think more presenters should be more risk-taking."

She talks of the producer who told her proudly that he would bring in the Ailey one year and Philadanco the next. "Is that a backhanded compliment?" she asked



Michael Branscom for The New York Times

Christopher Huggins guides members of Philadanco in "Enemy Behind the Gates."

him teasingly. "Why not the Ailey in January and Philadanco in June?" Another producer wanted to schedule back-to-back seasons for the two companies and call it a black dance festival.

Ms. Brown talked of the risk of keeping her company out of New York last year, fearing overexposure. An annual New York season is still considered crucial, she said, despite the healthy dance world beyond the city. Successful, highly professional modern dance and ballet troupes have sprung up throughout the United States in past decades. Witness Philadelphia, she said, which today has 46 dance groups, a busy dance home for new dance called the Painted Bride and regular dance seasons at three established theaters. "It's a beehive of activity here," Ms. Brown said.

Established companies outside New York tend to

Philadanco

The Joyce Theater,
Eighth Avenue at 19th Street, Chelsea.
Tuesday through next Sunday.

provide their dancers with a more substantial work experience than many dancers have in New York. Philadanco, for instance, offers a 52-week contract, considerably more than the norm. "I think people still think New York is important, though," Ms. Brown said. "If you are successful there and get good write-ups, it's like a stamp of approval." She sighed. "All of this is very confusing, but I think about it."

She also thinks a lot about the fact that Philadanco has been losing dancers to New York, particularly to the Ailey, for years. "They come to Philadanco looking to make that next jump," she said. "They know they'll get looked at here. And they learn high-caliber work ethics."

Eight of her 16 current performers have told her that they plan to audition for Ailey. She has told them that their contracts will not be renewed. "I've never done that before. I've always said to come on back. But I want this to be a place they want to be, not a place they've got a job until they get to Ailey."

She is immensely pleased that her dancers also tend to come back to work with the company once they leave the stage. Today, 80 percent of her staff is made up of former Danco dancers. "That makes me feel they have a vested interest," she said. "They appreciate what they got here and want to give back."

"It's very comfortable," she continued. "And it's so important for the children in our school, especially the Afro-American children, to see them come back, to know that they've gone around the world on tour and seen other cultures. To know they have a history." □