

## Summer Study Guide: Springing Ahead

By Kena Herod

With only three days left before performing for prospective employers, the dancers of Springboard Danse Montreal look surprisingly calm and seriously focused. In Compagnie Flak's downtown-Montreal studio, contemporary choreographer José Navas rehearses a piece he made on these dancers just the week before. Across town, Susan Gaudreau, rehearsal director of BJM Danse (formerly Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal), puts her group through their paces in Aszure Barton's all-get-out *Jack in a Box*. And at other studios throughout the city, dancers are hard at work with boundary-pushing artists Catherine Viau, Laurence Lemieux, and Andrea Miller.

For three weeks each summer, approximately 60 dancers come to Springboard from across North America to work with sought-after choreographers and be part of a rigorous creative process. At ages 19 and up, some participants are already dancing professionally but seeking new opportunities; others are students at top conservatories like Juilliard and NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Many come away from the program with a job; since its founding in 2002, Springboard has placed more than 80 dancers in professional companies. But for everyone, the intensive does just what its name implies, propelling dancers in new directions and helping them make career-shaping connections.



Photo by Michael Slobodian

Founder Alexandra Wells, who is on faculty at Juilliard, created Springboard with her own students in mind. “I was a third-year advisor at Juilliard,” she says, “and I kept hearing from my students, ‘Where do I go after this?’ ” To help them find out, she wanted to expose them to a range of companies—different styles, aesthetics, artistic processes—within a short period of time. “Dancers are very likely now to lead a freelance career, to have to swing across different styles, from downtown-y, to Complexions-ish, to Nacho Duato. Not many will find one full-time job and stay in one company. How do you make them aware of that? At Springboard, we drop them right into it.”

Each year Wells enlists four or five companies, mostly Montreal-based, to set existing work on Springboard participants or create new pieces. Her selection depends largely on which companies are looking for new members. “If someone is looking for a whole new company,” she says, “that makes them high up on the

roster.” Wells chose Montreal because of its vibrant contemporary dance scene (“They have more than 45 government-funded companies,” she says) and its affordability. “It’s a very rich place creatively, and more financially manageable than New York.” (See “Across the Other Border,” Oct. 2008.)

While a typical day at Springboard starts with modern or ballet technique, Wells emphasizes that “this is not a training program. It’s for dancers who already have stellar training. I’m looking for movers—movers who are extremely strong physically and malleable mentally, who will try everything.” During the first week of Springboard, dancers take workshops with all four or five artistic directors, who by the weekend have made up a cast wish-list. With oversight from Wells and general director Susan Alexander, each selects a group to work with for the rest of the program, leading up to an invitation-only showing.

Not all dancers come to Springboard with the purpose of landing a job. For many, the experience is simply about exposure to new challenges and ideas. “There’s the possibility of becoming employed,” says Rachelle Rafailedes, 22, a two-time participant and 2009 Juilliard graduate. “But the way it’s set up, that’s not really on your mind. The emphasis is on the process.”

For Rafailedes, who worked with BJM Danse last summer, Springboard offered a more intimate glimpse of professional life than other summer intensives she’d attended. “Some programs bring choreographers through, but you’re not immersed in their atmosphere,” she says. “Springboard is unique in that way. Working with BJM, the rehearsal director was there, the company members were in and out; you got a real feel for the company.”

For dancers in their mid to late 20s, Springboard provides valuable time for “career development,” says Wells. “They have three whole weeks to look into new types of movement and meet new artists. At that point in your career, it’s a gift to yourself.”

With dozens of talented, adventurous participants, Springboard is as beneficial for choreographers as it is for dancers. “It’s interesting to start from zero with people I don’t know, who don’t know each other,” says José Navas. “It’s a good choreographic exercise. We don’t normally have that opportunity in the real world, where we have to make pieces that sell on the stage.”

Through Springboard’s Emerging Choreographers program, a few dancers get the chance to make and present their own work, holding evening rehearsals with a cast of fellow students. Rafailedes’ strongest professional connection came out of working with “E-Choreographer” Kyle Abraham in 2008. Abraham (a 2009 “25 to Watch”) has since invited her to freelance with his new company on two projects.

Perhaps it’s the emphasis on artistic process that, according to 29-year-old dancer Autumn Proctor, keeps “edgy competition” to a minimum at Springboard. “Everyone here is so involved in learning and achieving goals we all share,” she says. “I’ve done a lot of summer programs, but I’ve never felt such a positive energy.” Rafailedes agrees: “It felt like you had your own personal journey, while supporting everyone else in theirs.”

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