

Dance Dance Evolution

Stephanie Powell dances to the beat of diversity and helps others do the same.

By Ericka Blount Danois

Sometimes it's an aggressive conga drumbeat, other times it's a somber flute, a calming orchestral piece, or the violins of a Kirk Franklin gospel song that make the dancers move in syncopation. Whatever music choreographer Stephanie Powell selects, the dancers at her school, Baltimore Dance Tech-located in a modest church basement on Greenwich Avenue in Baltimore County's Ten Hills-respond in fluid, mesmerizing unison.

Powell's type of dance is characterized by diversity and storytelling. To her, dance is for everyone; it's a fundamental part of life, not just an art form that should be enjoyed, at arms length, by the elite. And Powell believes everyone has a story to tell. That's why, at her school, you might find a 70-year-old student performing a flawless arabesque, or a dancer working on a choreographed homage to Luther Vandross, the late soul singer.

"As artists, we need to engage the audience," says Powell. "Everything can't be out of reach and esoteric. Sometimes we just gotta dance to Luther."

Powell has performed around the country with her professional dance troupe, Stephanie Powell Danse Ensemble. And the dancers she has trained have gone on to troupes like Alvin Ailey, Philadanco, Dance Theater of Harlem, Memphis Ballet, Cullberg Ballet in Europe, and Broadway plays like *The Lion King* and *The Color Purple*. On November 9th and 10th, Powell celebrates her 25 years of teaching, with a program at the Baltimore Museum of Art, in which former students will dance in her honor.

Powell, 50, teaches at Goucher College, as well as Towson University and Carver Center for Arts & Technology in Baltimore County. She also helped found Morton Street Dance Studio in 1992 and opened Baltimore Dance Tech in 1999. "I look at myself as a midwife, giving birth to other people's dreams," she says.

POWELL, HERSELF, WAS A LATE BLOOMER. SHE didn't begin dancing until her late teens. Growing up in East Baltimore in the 1500 block of Chapel Street, the sixth of seven children, she danced informally at the local recreation center at Rutland Elementary School.

At the age of 18, she watched her niece in a performance of *The Nutcracker*, sponsored by Urban Services Cultural Arts Agency at

Powell with two of her dancers, Stephanie Slade, left, and Shana Joy, right.

Dunbar High School. That night, she imagined herself as a dancer. A year and a half later, she was performing *The Nutcracker* on that same stage.

Powell went on to audition at Goucher College and won a place in their dance department. After graduation, she began teaching—first at Urban Services, then Baltimore School for the Arts (where she taught for 21 years) and Goucher. During that time, she has mentored two generations of dancers.

Seventeen-year-old Brett Lockley is a protege of Powell's. She taught him at Carver and hired him as a teacher at Dance Tech. Last year, he choreographed his own show to a sold-out crowd at Towson University. "I went to her when I had questions about theater space, costumes, or just anything about doing a show," says Lockley. "Sometimes I would need her to stay with me at school and rehearse and she did that for me. You can tell that she really wants her students to do well and to work hard and to really succeed in what they are doing."

All of Powell's instructors at Dance Tech are her former students, including Damien Patterson, who became the first black principal dancer with Memphis Ballet. Patterson came to Baltimore School for the Arts with no dance experience and found that everyone in his beginner's classes wanted to dance like the students in Powell's classes. So he started taking classes with Powell on weekends at Morton Street Dance Studio.

"She would tell me, 'Keep going, son,'" says Patterson. "She would never say anything extra, like, 'You're getting really good.' She knows her students really well and she knows what to say to whom, and for me it was—just, 'Keep going, son.' To this day, I'm 27 and she still calls me 'son' and makes sure I am still going when I want to give up. She really is a mother to her students."

Powell taught him to "dance from the inside out," he says. "She taught me to be myself."

Patterson, disillusioned with being the only black principal, eventually quit Memphis Ballet and returned to Baltimore, where he languished for months. When word reached Powell, she phoned Patter-



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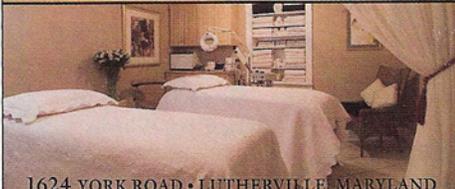
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son. "She said, 'Son, what are you doing?'" Patterson remembers. "She told me to meet her on York Road and that I would be taking class with her on Monday."

Patterson met Powell that Monday morning and signed up for her class at Towson. He later started teaching at Dance Tech.

"I love dancing and every time I'm not doing it, I die a little bit," says Patterson. "and Stephanie knows that."

WHILE POWELL NURTURED OTHERS, HER OWN life was touched by tragedy. On June 6, 1996, Powell was singing around the house with her two nephews, Adrian and Tyrone, whom she had taken custody of five months before. Adrian, 9, was practicing "Joyful, Joyful" (from the movie *Sister Act II*), a song he was planning to perform at his school's carnival. Powell and Adrian's older brother, Tyrone, were helping him out and singing and dancing.

Later that day, Powell finished teaching at Baltimore School for the Arts and decided to pick up the boys after school. They normally walked the few blocks home, but they had had such a fun morning that she wanted to surprise them and do something special.

But when Powell arrived at the school office, something was amiss. The secretary pointed toward the window and Powell saw paramedics putting Adrian into an ambulance. He had run into the street and been hit by a car. When the ambulance driver wouldn't let her sit with him in the back, Powell knew that the 9-year-old boy was already gone.

"I thought to myself, 'What if I had gotten there earlier?'" Powell says. "You feel like someone has cut your heart out. You tell yourself you can't go on, I will not recover from this. This was the first time I realized that there are things that are outside of your control. Things you cannot change."

She channeled that grief into choreographing a piece inspired by what had happened.

"Elegy" began the healing process. For music, Powell chose Handel's *Sarabande*-classical and stately with drums underneath and a heavy pulse. The piece began with three women on stage. Each one, in turn, danced solo under a spotlight. Then the music swelled, there was a huge crescendo, all three lights came up, and the women danced as a trio. The performance

featured a range of footwork and partnering between the women and ended with them sitting on the floor and reaching out with their arms.

For Powell, it represented three stages of grieving: shock, acceptance, and resolution.

"The intention and the idea is that sometimes life intervenes," she explains. "But even in those times that you are absolutely devastated, you can go on. At the time, you don't know it, but you can go on. That piece helped me see dance as cathartic and something that will spur me on."

"There is no separation of who is a dancer and who is not-all shapes, sizes, cultures dance."

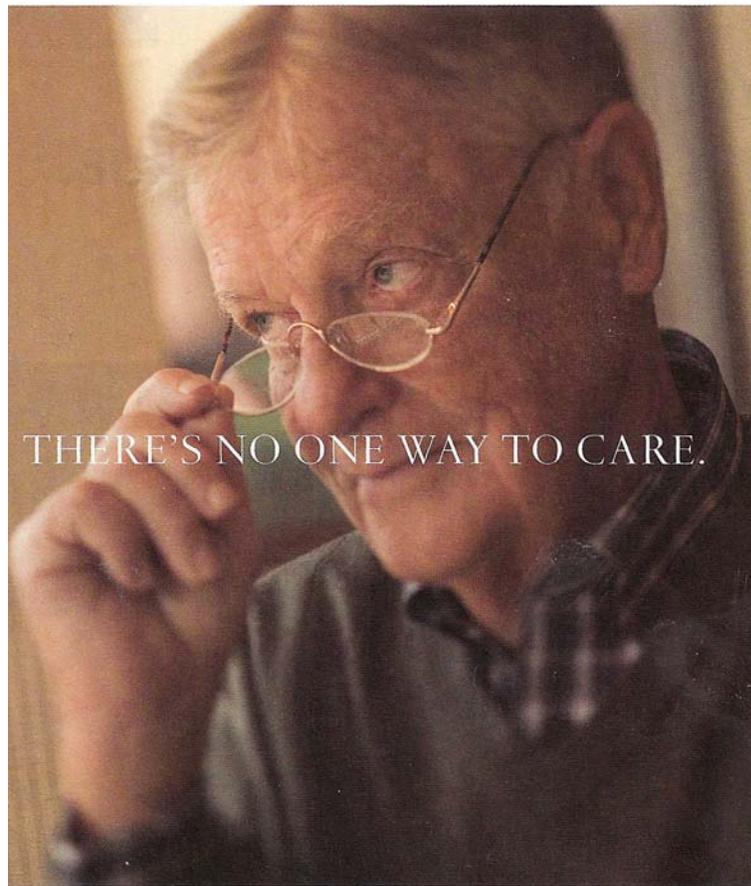
DESPITE SUCH CREATIVE BREAKTHROUGHS, Powell and others in the local dance scene are aware that Baltimore has never been known as a "dance city" like Washington, D.C. or New York City. Some think the city doesn't get the kind of attention it deserves because it doesn't have a professional ballet company.

"Culturally, we think ballet is the only kind of dance," says Nancy Haragan, executive director of the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance. "In Baltimore, we have all different types of dance. Our dance is more diverse than that."

Dance Baltimore-an organization formed by Cheryl Goodman, an arts administrator and consultant-has been promoting the local dance scene since 2003.

This coalition of dance companies and arts organizations is concerned about dance's low profile in Baltimore; it hosts an annual event featuring performances by companies from around the city (including Powell's), as well as dance classes for the uninitiated. During the event's finale, all of the participating troupes-including Native American, Irish, Mexican, and "ageless" (whose members are over 40 years old) troupes-are brought onstage for a collective number.

"In Hawaii, Africa, India, the mountainous and rural areas of Europe and Asia, everybody dances," notes Maria Broom, a mainstay



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on the local dance scene. "There is no separation of who is a dancer and who is not-all kinds, shapes, sizes, cultures dance.

"Baltimore is more like that," says Broom.

"The idea of dancing in Baltimore is more of a do-ers thing than a spectator thing." Committed to the concept of diversity in dance, Powell is one of the do-ers.

A May 2007 *New York Times* article, "Where Are All the Black Swans?" noted that there have been few black women promoted to the rank of principal dancer at major American ballet companies. The reasons vary: fear of losing subscribers, the artistic vision of choreographers, access to dance programs for young people of color.

It is an issue Powell is especially keen to address. Soon after establishing Baltimore Dance Tech, she choreographed *The City Nutcracker*, which now shows annually. Powell uses 135 participants in the piece, including parents of the dancers for a party scene. When she first staged the show, dancers for the lead roles had to be recruited from other schools. But after a year, she had trained her own dancers; now, all of the leads come from Dance Tech.

Last year, 900 school children attended the matinee at Coppin State. Some ended up dancing in the aisles. The students were also able to meet some of the dancers after the show. "I wanted to say to our children that you can be the Sugar Plum or the Snow Queen," says Powell. "But it wasn't just to prove a point. It was also a chance to give children in our community the opportunity to be in a professional production. Our children need to have different experiences." [This year's production of *The City Nutcracker* is scheduled for December 15th and 16th at Coppin.]

IN THE GREENWICH AVENUE CHURCH BASEMENT, Powell and her troupe work hard to make the most of such opportunities. The basement floor is lined with black matting. A side door hangs open for much needed ventilation.

Powell wears a blue T-shirt, black pants, and tennis shoes. She talks and laughs easily with the students, until she turns on her boom box to Kirk Franklin's "Hero." Then, she gets serious. "Okay, feet together, roll up, hang over right, hang over left," she says in a high-pitched, but

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poised voice. "Legs straight in the front, point, flex."

The students' movements are precise. They practice "Duke Ellington Suite," one of three signature pieces they will perform for Powell's celebration at the BMA. The song is "Take the A Train," and the dancers are moving with a mix of modern dance and ballet that incorporates elements from the 1920's and 1930's. They do it over and over.

Powell joins in. After the fourth round, they are all sweaty and exhausted.

Powell is understandably proud of her long-term association with some students. "My family used to tease me and say my students never leave, because I still see students I taught in fifth grade" she says.

Though Powell raised her nephew, Tyrone, now 22, she never had any children of her own. But after 25 years of teaching, she has coaxed, encouraged, and nurtured enough students to come to refer to herself as "a mother to many."

You don't have to look far for proof of that. Sweating along to "Take the A Train" is 34-year-old Gwen Barnes, the principal dancer for Powell's company. She has danced with Powell since she was 10 years old. "To this day, she'll encourage me or say how proud she is of me," says Barnes. "It has been that support and encouragement that keeps me motivated."

Powell got Barnes involved in after school programs at School for the Arts and helped Barnes prepare for an audition for Alvin Ailey School of Dance in New York.

Barnes did well at the audition and was accepted by the Ailey school. On the day she got accepted, Barnes also learned she was pregnant with twins. She traded dance for single motherhood.

But it wasn't long before Powell tracked her down and convinced her to dance again. "She told me, 'You better get back in here,'" Barnes laughs. "She was constantly on me."

Today, Barnes' 13-year-old twins are sitting at a desk in the foyer, while their mother practices with the company, perfectly arching an arm above her head, every movement of her body telling the truth Powell has taught her. ■

ERICKA BLOUNT DANOIS is an occasional contributor to Baltimore.

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