Going The Festival Route

Spend your summer learning rep from today’s top choreographers.

By Jen Peters

Summer dance festivals are well known as hot spots for world-class performances. But several also offer one-of-a-kind training opportunities for advanced students—including ballet students. With top companies flying in from around the globe, dancers can experience a diverse array of the most current work being created. Although there isn’t as much time spent on technique as at a traditional intensive, learning directly from world-renowned choreographers, artistic directors and principal dancers can spark new career paths and expand movement possibilities.

Forsythe At ADF
American Dance Festival in North Carolina is historically a modern dance mecca. But classically trained dancers come here to tie on their pointe shoes for The Forsythe Project. Taught by Elizabeth Corbett, founding member of and former soloist with William Forsythe’s Ballet Frankfurt, the project teaches both Forsythe repertoire and his improvisation techniques. “Forsythe’s work exaggerates classical lines and épaulement. Suspensions are way off balance and then you quickly snatch into a pirouette,” describes Corbett. “Dancing his choreography, you gain knowledge about classical technique by opening it up to extremes.”

Each morning Corbett teaches a ballet technique class where pointe shoes are optional. During barre, the focus is on getting connected to the floor, and the center consists of contemporary ballet combinations. After lunch, dancers launch into two to four hours of repertoire and Forsythe-style improv work. Each year Corbett chooses different Forsythe ballets to focus on, such as In the middle, somewhat elevated or Artifact. She recommends that dancers wear pointe shoes in rehearsals, since she knows from experience certain Forsythian movements feel more risky and fulfilling on pointe.

Improvisation rarely comes naturally for ballet dancers, but it is integral to Forsythe’s work. Corbett begins teaching improv technique with the Laban cube—a system of body directions—that dancers trace with various body parts. Then she layers on other goals, like reversing or changing levels, so dancers learn to build complexity and richness in their improvised movement.

By the end of the three- to four-week project, Corbett sees dancers begin to take ownership of their movements. “I see dancers leave with confidence, an ability to take risks and move without being told exactly what to do!”