PHYSICS AND PHILOSOPHY
LEAH COX, DEAN
AMERICAN DANCE FESTIVAL

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It’s only a few moments before Leah Cox will begin teaching at the American Dance Festival winter intensive in New York City, and she has just confessed that she doesn’t quite know what will happen. This isn’t a standard technique class, where the typical pattern will do—warm-up, center work, culminating phrase. Solo Forms is a unique offering of the intensive designed by Cox, during which students create a one-minute solo. For the next hour and a half, Cox will casually blow the students’ minds by asking them to write and draw, and to question their assumptions about making movement—all while delivering a running commentary that includes concepts like inertia and stasis, particles and waves, cinematic jump cuts and a “Seinfeld” reference or two. It soon becomes clear that what she’s really doing is supporting 27 strangers as they expose their private creative processes.

It isn’t surprising that Cox is a thinker as well as a mover. Her career trajectory reflects that: The former member of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (2001–09) gave up performing in her prime, when she felt the irresistible call to education. Since then, she’s headed an education program for Jones’ company; organized a partnership between the company and Bard College in upstate New York; and joined the permanent dance faculty at Bard. Now 40, Cox is set to approach her newest undertaking, dean of ADF, with the same strengths that have always served her well: curiosity, thoughtful planning, an ever-present love of teaching and her own (not inconsiderable) experience.

From Performer to Educator
Growing up outside of Houston, Texas, Cox was more serious about piano than dance, until she realized her crippling
stage fright would make a career as a concert pianist impossible. After recalibrating her focus on dance while in high school, she spent her senior year enrolled in the University of North Carolina School of the Arts ballet program. Then, at Texas Christian University, she became an active part of the modern dance program while majoring in philosophy and minoring in religion. “College gave me a lot,” she says. “I was so thankful for having done all of that academic work, because I find it to be such a part of my teaching and my identity as a dancer. I’m convinced it’s why I got the job working with Bill—with him, it was, ‘Yeah, you kind of have to have some ideas about things.’”

Cox spent nearly a decade dancing in Jones’ company, until she had the unsettling realization that she had become too comfortable. “There was a moment when I was performing and thought, ‘You know what? You’ve figured this out for yourself. You’ve figured out how to go to class every day, how much time you need to spend resting, how to honor Bill’s work. You figured out how to perform and do your best there,’” she says. “It was all becoming a little familiar—and a little selfish.” That was the moment she realized she wanted to teach.

Soon after her epiphany, Bard College approached Jones about forming a partnership with the Bill T. Jones company, which would be in residence at the school. Jones put Cox in charge of the program, which offered Bard dancers regular technique, repertory and composition classes with company members. Cox quickly grew to love her new role (despite the two-hour commute between her New York City apartment and the campus).

“She has a very good eye,” says Janet Wong, associate artistic director of Jones’ company. “She can see ahead toward a goal: What does this person need to develop into that? She can take her own goals as a teacher and translate that into a curriculum.” That part of teaching was particularly appealing to Cox: “It was really fun to figure out, ‘What should we teach of Bill’s works? How do we get it across? Who’s a really great teacher?’” she says. When the partnership ended in 2015, Cox stayed on as associate professor at Bard, teaching technique and composition—a position she continues to hold.

Like Coming Home

In 2013, ADF director Jodee Nimerichter invited Cox to apply for the job of associate dean, to work under Gerri Houlihan, who would be leaving in 2014. It was a dream come true for Cox, who was in residence at the festival to restage a Bill T. Jones work for the students. “I immediately kept thinking, ‘This is the job for me. I have to have this job,’” she says.

She’d participated in the Durham, North Carolina–based festival—one of the country’s oldest summer dance schools, known for its Six Week School, a technique and repertory program that enrolls about 300 students each summer—in practically every role possible. First, as a college student in the summer of 1996; then, as a performer with Jones’ company; later, as a teacher and répétiteur of Jones’ work; and, finally, as an MFA candidate at Hollins University. “Every time I went to ADF as a teacher or a performer, it was: ‘I love this place. It just makes me so happy,’” she says. “I hadn’t felt that kind of drive or light like I did for this job since I first auditioned for Bill.”
Nimerichter immediately thought of Cox for the position of dean. “What I love is how well-versed she is in the field today—what techniques and classes could be the most advantageous to propel our students forward,” she says. “Her curiosity is amazing. She wants to share information not just in the classroom but to have open dialogues about all kinds of things.” Cox spent a year learning the ropes and officially became dean of ADF in August 2015.

**With an Eye Toward the Future**

“So much of what I do at ADF is facilitating experiences for other people, where I can see them getting really excited,” says Cox. “How do we get this amazing group of people together, and how do they share what they want to share? What do they want to teach? OK, so queer theory is important right now? How do we give the students and teachers moments to exchange about that? And who’s the best person to lead it?” During her first summer as dean, Cox will teach, too—a selective composition class called Choreolab. “It’s important that I stay connected to the students,” she says, “and that they know who the dean is—not just as the person walking around programming, but as someone who teaches.”

As dean, one of her biggest concerns, ever mindful of the tradition of ADF, is to push the festival forward. “I want to keep making sure that we’re offering students what the range is in the field, in terms of training, and a sense of the past. But also really preparing them for what contemporary dance practice is now,” she says. She’s converting to an audition-based enrollment for the three-week program for high schoolers. Too many students arrived unprepared for the rigor of the program, having taken dance only a couple times a week during the school year. “I would say maybe 25 percent of the dancers we were getting were meeting the minimum standards for technique—now we’re making sure they’re fulfilling them,” says Cox.

She is also committed to keeping ADF competitive in an oversaturated summer festival market. In addition to intensive training and performing, part of her plan is to give students more opportunities to produce work. She noted that a growing number of dancers were eager to create and show their own choreography during festival downtime. “We added four student concerts last year, because otherwise students would self-produce their work—like, ‘Show up at 11 pm,’” she says. “And we filled up those four concerts with no problem. That’s almost 40 students wanting to make their own work!”

Cox seems to get the most joy out of something surprisingly simple: seeing students eager to learn and share their enthusiasm. As her class at the winter intensive nears its end, the 27 students are no longer timid or hesitant—they’re offering feedback, sharing thoughtful observations, cheering each other on. “To see people come out of class—they’re so excited!” she says. “That’s the thing I wanted. You never see it as a performer—you go out the stage door, and people look at you like you’re the odd thing that was onstage and they’re kind of afraid to talk to you. But this—oh my god, I love this!”

Rachel Rizzuto is an assistant editor for Dance Teacher and a modern dancer and choreographer in NYC.