

An American in Paris, Making Classical Dance Training (Gasp!) Fun

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

PARIS — Brooke Desnoës was 10 or 11 when her parents sought to enroll her in the Alabama Ballet School. “Can you frog?” asked Sonia Arova, the star ballerina turned teacher. What Ms. Arova meant, in ballet parlance, was could she lie on her tummy and splay her legs like a frog, a test to see if she had the flexibility to dance. Puzzled, young Brooke crouched down like a frog and began hopping around the room. “She died laughing,” Ms. Desnoës said.

It was one of the few missteps Ms. Desnoës (pronounced day-no-AY) has made as a dancer and a teacher. Since founding the American Academy of Dance in Paris in 1997, she has emerged as a proponent of a fresh approach in France that seeks to include not only students with perfect bodies but also anyone who takes pleasure in dance. Her school, where students range in age from 3 to 19 and are admitted without auditions, represents the latest step in bringing to France an American approach to classical training.

Tall, with a burst of blond curls, Ms. Desnoës, 39, an Alabama native who danced with Ballet South and Alexander Bennett’s Scottish American Ballet in Chattanooga, Tenn., arrived at a time when French ballet schools were just beginning to change their approach to dance.

Her decision to have her own school, the only one in France started by an American since Rosella Hightower founded a ballet academy in Cannes in 1962, was also a rejection of a job offer from the selective and prestigious Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris. “I couldn’t do it,” she said. “It was frigid; it’s not how I was taught ballet.”

“The kids are superquiet, there’s no real dialogue between the kids and the teachers, and it’s more about copying, while I was taught, ‘Why doesn’t it work?’ and ‘How can we make it work?’”

Daniel Agésilas, who was appointed director of choreography at the conservatory four years ago, said, “The world of dance has changed,” adding, “You cannot train a dancer today the way you did 30 years ago.” Choreographers like William Forsythe and Merce Cunningham, who have both taught and presented their work in Paris, have forced changes in the way dance is



Brooke Desnoës, who founded the American Academy of Dance in Paris in 1997, at the school’s new 10,440-square-foot quarters.

taught, said Mr. Agésilas, who vowed to bring fresh air into the conservatory.

After starting the American Academy with eight students in temporary quarters near the Invalides, Ms. Desnoës saw it grow year by year. By 2003 there were 450 students, about half of them American. Buoyed by a \$1 million grant that year from the Annenberg Foundation, she began looking around for larger permanent quarters.

Asked what the foundation liked about the school, Gregory Weingarten, an Annenberg board member, replied in an e-mail message, “The combination of discipline and effort required by dance, all this is taught, but with a smile on the students’ faces.” The school, he wrote, offered “an alternative to the state-run École de l’Opéra, where you either fit the mold, or are ejected.” At least one student who has flourished at the school was rejected by the École, the principal state school for ballet.

“I was also impressed by the

way Brooke taught these young kids about public service, helping others less fortunate,” Mr. Weingarten continued. “She has them perform before children often with serious illnesses in hospitals.”

Last season the school moved into new premises in the same neighborhood, with a total area of 10,440 square feet, including five air-conditioned studios (a rarity for private ballet schools in France) to accommodate 540 students, about 40 percent of them American; there are 13 teachers, including 5 Americans. The school has begun to place its pre-professionals with prestigious schools elsewhere, including those of the Chicago Ballet, the American Repertory Ballet in New Jersey and the English National Ballet. But Ms. Desnoës says its size is about at its limit.

“I still know every child,” she said. “I can still flag every child who has potential.”

Many parents say they like the school’s bilingual approach (classes are given in French and



Anyone who enjoys dance is admitted, no auditions required.

English) and its American spirit. “My kids understand English, and it’s a means to access the language,” said Pascale Serck, a Frenchwoman who has three daughters at the school, ages 4, 8 and 10. Her two older daughters study jazz dance with Charles

Malik Lewis, a former dancer

with the Fred Benjamin Dance Company who taught at the Alvin Ailey school in New York.

The school “has a very American side” that contrasts with rigid French methods, Ms. Serck said.

In one recent class, Alexandre de la Caffinière was running 11

students through their steps to music from the third act of Tchaikovsky’s “Sleeping Beauty.” He snapped his fingers and barked orders alternately in English and French.

“The Americans taught us Balanchine’s steps,” said Mr. de la Caffinière, a product of the Paris Opera Ballet and a former soloist with the ballet of the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. “He taught us long arms, like this,” he said, snapping his arms out to their full length. “Not sloping arms.”

Ms. Desnoës, Mr. de la Caffinière said, sought to fill a gap in Paris. “All the big schools have disappeared, and today only two remain,” he said, referring to the conservatory and the Opéra National de Paris. “In my time, 25 years ago, you could be trained professionally outside this circuit. Today it’s impossible. Brooke is aiming at that gap.”

“The American mentality is radically different,” he added. “Here the ballet tradition is a museum. But our ministry of culture is reacting, by being more open to influences from abroad.”

In France, said Alexandra Bansch, a German who danced with Béjart Ballet Lausanne, “What’s incredibly important is the perfection of the body.” Having danced in Hamburg for choreographers including John Neumeier and Kevin Hagen, she said, she observed that “many Americans did not exactly have perfect bodies,” but American choreographers might hire them anyway because “they had incredible energy, charisma, strong motivation.”

Ms. Desnoës continues to bubble over with projects. Finding good teachers is a continuous challenge, she said, and she harbors plans for a junior-year-abroad program, so dance students from American colleges can come to her school and earn college credit.

Her big rock candy mountain, though, is the school’s own ballet troupe. “That’s one of the things I’m scared to verbalize, but it will happen,” she said. “It’s the next step.”

Noting that it would be the only ballet company in Paris aside from the Opéra de Paris, she added, “First you crawl, then you walk, then you run.”

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