



FRANCESCA HARPER Leap of faith

AFTER EIGHT REWARDING AND FULFILLING YEARS UNDER THE DIRECTION OF WILLIAM FORSYTHE, AS A PRINCIPAL DANCER WITH THE FRANKFURT BALLET, FRANCESCA HARPER DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO MOVE FORWARD AND PURSUE HER OWN PROJECTS IN WHICH SHE COULD SHARE HER "IDEAS OF TRUTH WITH THE WORLD." WITH SEVERAL BROADWAY PRODUCTIONS UNDER HER BELT, CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED CHOREOGRAPHIC WORKS TO HER CREDIT, A STUNNING ALBUM OF ORIGINAL SONGS, AND HER OWN DANCE COMPANY, THIS EXUBERANT, INTELLIGENT ARTIST HAS NO REGRETS AND LOOKS FORWARD TO THE FUTURE WITH EXCITEMENT.

“I knew from a very early age what I wanted to do,” says Harper. As a child, she would accompany her mother, Denise Jefferson, to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, where she was a dance educator and director of the Ailey School. Harper loved the expression that dance offered. “You could feel the power of people convening together and dancing and sharing in this moment,” she exclaimed. “That’s what continues to be thrilling for me about it.”

Harper began taking classes at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center and studied at both the Joffrey Ballet School and the School of American Ballet. In the late 1980s, she

joined Dance Theatre of Harlem, where she performed in both ensemble and solo roles. After three years, Harper was forced to explore other options when, in 1990, DTH announced a half-year layoff. She decided to go to Europe, where she planned to visit several cities to look for work. Her first stop, Frankfurt, proved to be her last; she saw a performance of William Forsythe’s *Limb’s Theorem* and that was it. “I knew in that moment that this was where I wanted to be,” she recalls. “I just knew it. I felt it.” She auditioned and was asked to join the company. She moved to Frankfurt eight months later.

“Bill Forsythe spoiled me in the best sense of the word,” says

Harper. “I have such respect for him. I had never seen a company where the members were so diverse—different nationalities, different body types, different races. Just amazing performers.” This diversity was very important for this statuesque African-American woman. “He really wanted people that were open creatively and very smart. I felt like one of the prerequisites of joining the company was being an intelligent, aware, committed, open artist.”

Forsythe populates his company with artists who specialize in all different areas—from modern dancers and rigorously trained ballet dancers to actors. “You were able to

"I think we all dream of a time when we can start over in life, find some sense of completion, and begin to understand our personal histories more completely."

work with these really hyper-stimulated people that were just phenomenal at what they did," says Harper. "He would utilize all of our talents. It made us feel so safe and so respected. To this day I consider him my mentor."

Harper continues: "What he did was highlight what made us special. For me, my height and my muscularity was something that would work against me [in the ballet world], but Bill would highlight that. There were some men that were more effeminate in their dancing and he would highlight that. So we'd have all these artists that were breaking stereotypes of what you thought dancers 'should' be and they were even more committed to doing it because an artistic director...told us we were beautiful the way we were and had

more respect for the spiritual rigor that we had as people. It made it just an incredibly fulfilling spiritual experience."

The work with Forsythe became even more collaborative. "He really didn't want to be a dictator. I think he just has more of a democratic mind, a socialist mind, even. We eventually started choreographing with him and he would use some of our work in pieces. It was limitless what you could actually bring to a piece with him. It really made you trust yourself."

This newfound confidence enabled Harper to leave the Frankfurt Ballet in 1999 and venture out on her own. She presented an evening of her work at the Holland Dance Festival and began choreographing pieces for Alvin Ailey

Repertory Ensemble and for The Ailey School Spring Concerts in 2001 and 2002. Her choreographic work over the next several years propelled her to start her own company, The Francesca Harper Project, a not-for-profit group dedicated to creating groundbreaking dance, music, and theater works, which premiered its first evening length work, *Modo Fusion*, in March 2006. *Modo Fusion* is also the name of Harper's first album of original material, which she released independently in May 2006. It is an eclectic blend of musical styles that showcases her versatility as both a singer and a songwriter.

Since returning to the US in 2000, Harper has also experienced a great deal of success in the world of musical theater. She appeared on Broadway as

"To Europe and Back,
A Dancer's Odyssey
Of Self-Discovery"
Francesca Harper,
The New York Times,
July 2000



a featured performer in *Fosse* from 2000 to 2002, completed a tour of *The Producers* (and also appears in the latest film version of the musical), and performed in Susan Stroman's *The Frogs* at the 2004 Lincoln Center Summer Festival. She has also understudied the roles of Squeak and Sug Avery in Broadway's *The Color Purple*.

In January 2007, Harper took on her first principal musical theater role as Helene in the tour of *Sweet Charity* starring Molly Ringwald. Although performing eight shows a week in a role that is so vocally demanding, she's thrilled of the challenge and is excited to take on a part that also stretches her acting abilities. Harper acknowledges that her improvisation work with Forsythe and the deep exploration of her artistic talents while at the Frankfurt Ballet has helped her immensely. "I'm able to feel free and make choices in the moment," she says. "I realize there's something in terms of discipline with dancing that we have—if it's not perfect, we have a tendency to be hard on ourselves. The wonderful thing about acting is that you really can't be. You have to

be really free and playful.

"There's such a power that dancers have

from their physical presence," she says. "The same with singers in terms of what they can master physically. But with acting you have to be very vulnerable. You have to be so present to combine the work you've done on the character as well as just being yourself in the moment. It's this wonderful combination that is so interesting. As Martha Graham said, it's our duty to be open and bring people inspiration. That's what people come to see. They come to see the vulnerability."

Harper notes that there's no room for voices of doubt in her head. She says that she has had to become her own best friend and support herself com-



pletely. She knows that her responsibility is to give a good per-

for-

mance. "Because this gift is here now," she says, "I feel it would be a disservice for me not to really love myself and enjoy this gift."

She also realizes that her growth as an artist is a process. "You have to step back and say, I cannot expect everything to be here right away, but if I am diligent about my work and committed every day, I know there's going to be a gradual succession of improvement. It's almost the philosophy I remember my mom told me once – that it's not going to be easy. It's kind of [like] Buddhist philosophy: accept things are not going to be perfect. Take the moment and clear the voices. Be hap-

py with the little progress you make every day. When I let go of my frustration, of where I wasn't, and made that personal commitment to myself, when I really let go and didn't expect anything—that's when *Sweet Charity* happened. The more you can really surrender into that positivity, you make space."

Harper returns to New York on June 24th to perform in Times Square with her company in *Solstice: Dancing at the Crossroads*, an AIDS fundraising event organized by Dancers Responding to AIDS. *Sweet Charity* ends its tour on August 12, after which Francesca will join American Idol's Fantasia Barrino in *The Color Purple*, on Broadway.

"Finally, I said enough to all the wavering and jumped into the abyss," wrote Harper in *The New York Times*. That leap of faith proved to be what it took for this accomplished artist to spread her wings and soar to even greater heights. [m](#)

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