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DANCE

Glorya Kaufman School of Dance Adds a New Dimension to Arts in Los Angeles

By BRIAN SEIBERT AUG. 26, 2015

Jodie Gates, left, the director of the new Glorya Kaufman School of Dance, with Ms. Kaufman at the Los Angeles construction site. Jake Michaels for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — "Ah, I recommend it," Jodie Gates sighed, adopting the tone of someone advocating an exotic spa treatment or sky diving. The satisfactions she meant are much harder to come by. How many people get a state-of-the-art building of nearly 55,000 square feet designed to their specifications? Ms. Gates was standing near the construction site of such an edifice: the Glorya Kaufman International Dance Center, the future home of the University of Southern California's new Glorya Kaufman School of Dance.

As that dance school's director and vice dean, Ms. Gates could speak with proprietary delight about the center, scheduled to open by next September. But joining her on a tour of the partly finished structure a few weeks ago was a visitor with an even greater sense of ownership: the philanthropist Glorya Kaufman.

It was Ms. Kaufman's 2012 donation of an unspecified multimillion-dollar sum that made possible the founding of the Kaufman school, the first new school in nearly 40 years established through an endowment at the university, which barely had a dance program before. The Kaufman school, which started classes this week, is unusual in embedding a conservatory-style bachelor of fine arts program within a private research university of some academic rigor. It's also distinctive in curricular focus; its motto — "the New Movement" — connotes revolution, and Ms. Gates speaks of "reimagining dance education for the 21st century." But aside from the part-time involvement of the world-renowned choreographer William Forsythe, its main attention-getter is its nascent building. It's a major structure devoted to dance in a city better known for other arts, and a highly visible sign of how that situation is changing.

On the tour, Ms. Gates emphasized the made-to-order flexibility of the design — Collegiate Gothic on the outside, modern within — and how room-within-room construction and basket-weave sprung floors will insulate each of the six studios (one a convertible performance space) from the noise and vibration of the others. At this stage, though, the strongest impression was of scale: the 30-foot ceilings, the yawning arched holes where tall windows will let in the famed Los Angeles light. "Dance requires space," Ms. Gates said, spreading her arms wide.

Ms. Kaufman, wearing slacks of sparkling silver not usually paired with a hard hat, seemed entirely comfortable among the tattooed workers and tickled by the project's progress. She is no stranger to scaffolding; her fortune derives from her late husband, Donald Kaufman, and the home-building company (now known as KB Home) that he founded with Eli Broad. The new center won't be the first dance structure with her name on it. Dance is her passion — she says she believes in it as a force for joy in the world — and she's donated millions to dance and dance education.

Despite her sunny exterior, Ms. Kaufman can be steely about how her money is spent. In past interviews, she has expressed dissatisfaction with how the University of California, Los Angeles — whose dance department is housed in a women's gym renovated in 2005 into Glorya Kaufman Hall — was too bureaucratically hamstrung to fulfill her grand vision. But so far, she said, she "couldn't be happier" about the scale and design of the new school and building at U.S.C.

A rendering of the new Glorya Kaufman School of Dance. Pfeiffer Partners

The ambition is as large as she wants it to be. She also expressed confidence in Ms. Gates, a prolific choreographer who spent most of her career as a ballerina with the Joffrey Ballet and Frankfurt Ballet (under Mr. Forsythe's direction). "I made sure she's in my contract," Ms. Kaufman said. Ms. Gates explained that the curriculum she designed would take advantage of the opportunity to build a "progressive program from square one." Talking to dance professionals around the country, she looked into what was needed and what was lacking. Her goal, she said, is "to breed the next generation of hybrid artists — creators, innovators, entrepreneurs." B.F.A. candidates must study ballet and modern dance but also hip-hop, dance management, dance for camera and digital media. They will learn and perform dance masterworks but also participate in colloquiums on topics like "What Is the Medium of Dance Today?" Senior projects must involve at least two disciplines apart from dance.

Ms. Gates has already learned how to speak the language of the university's brochures. "Hybrid," "interdisciplinary" and "entrepreneurial" are buzzwords across the campus. Partnerships between the Kaufman school and U.S.C.'s Thornton School of Music and School of Cinematic Arts will encourage collaborations between dancers, composers and filmmakers.

The Kaufman school emphasizes composition, both within the curriculum and in conjunction with a new U.S.C. Choreographic Institute, a still vague research platform advised by Mr. Forsythe, who plans to be on campus about six weeks a year (and who declined to be interviewed for this article). Connections and partnerships keep mounting, including one with Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.

Students will interact with the world-class performers who tour to the Music Center, Los Angeles's largest performing arts presenter. The funding for its dance series is evident in its name, Glorya Kaufman Presents Dance.

Ms. Gates also views her program as fitting in with a renaissance in the Los Angeles dance scene. She fell in love with the area in the 1980s and '90s, when the Joffrey Ballet was bicoastal, and after retiring from Frankfurt Ballet in 2004, she moved to Laguna Beach, where she founded the Laguna Dance Festival. Since then, she has witnessed a tidal shift. "It's covered wagon time again," she said. "There's opportunity in the West. Dancers are moving here to dance, and choreographers are coming here to form companies," she added, mentioning Benjamin Millepied's L.A. Dance Project and up-and-coming troupes like BodyTraffic. "If we can train our students well, can you imagine what they will contribute in five years?"

"So many things have happened with so little resistance," she explained, citing high interest in the Kaufman school from potential students, faculty and institutional partners. "I feel like the universe is helping, like we must have the right plan."

For now, the first class of students — larger than expected, 33 young dancers who gave impressive answers to the question "What does the New Movement mean to you?" — will have to make do with a slightly renovated studio in the old physical education building. Ms. Gates joked about the shabbiness of her current office, as only someone about to move into much better accommodations would.

They all have the Kaufman center to look forward to. They can follow its progress by webcam or walk over to the site, adjacent to the even larger construction project of U.S.C. Village, a mix of student housing, restaurants and shops. What "the New Movement" means — just how new and how valuable — will depend on what they do with all that space.

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