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Dancing for the stars

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Tonight, at Disney Hall in downtown Los Angeles, Katherine Avila will stand all alone on a stage and begin to dance.

It's a special role. "Los Angelitos," which opens Jan. 15, was made several years ago especially for Avila's dance company, The Wooden Floor, one of Orange County's most celebrated cultural institutions for underprivileged kids.

Avila is only 17, but when she performed her part during a recent rehearsal of "Los Angelitos," the Santa Ana native showed the confident bearing of a seasoned professional. That's no surprise –

Avila has been studying dance at The Wooden Floor for more than half of her young life, since 2001.

Looks can be deceiving, of course. Avila admits to some butterflies about being the sole focus at the beginning of a serious 20-minute work by Mark Haim, a nationally respected choreographer.

"It's hard for me," she said. "It's my first solo ever. It has to set the bar for how the piece is going to be."

Interpreting a serious role isn't the only challenge that Avila and The Wooden Floor's 388 other young dancers face. Many of them come from homes where dance, even as a hobby, doesn't seem like a worthwhile pursuit.

"There's a lot of pressure on these kids to work or get involved in a trade," said Wooden Floor executive and artistic director Melanie Ríos Glaser.

"When it comes to youth dance it's very hard for people to take it seriously. There are so many stereotypes that (center) around this kind of thing – that it will be sloppy, that it's just something to keep them busy. That's why we work so hard to make these (dances) look good."

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Juilliard-trained Ríos Glaser, 39, has been running The Wooden Floor since June, 2005. She succeeded the 26-year-old group's founder, Beth Burns, and presided over a major change of image and name. Last year the group shed its original title, Saint Joseph Ballet, as part of a larger effort to raise its profile.

The Wooden Floor offers more than dance instruction. Students are given counseling, tutoring, college prep and other scholastic assistance; an academic counselor is among its 15 full-time employees.

The Wooden Floor's many services are housed in an attractive, state-of-the-art building just south of the Bowers Museum, completed a decade ago with assistance from some of Orange County's best known philanthropists, including the Segerstroms. "You'd recognize a lot of the names on our board," Ríos Glaser

aid.

Ríos Glaser has taken her young dancers to Disney Hall's REDCAT performance space once before, in 2005. But this time her aims are different.

"Part of our long-range strategy to raise the visibility of The Wooden Floor is performing outside the boundaries of Orange County. It was the goal of Beth Burns to grow our impact and be a national model for other organizations. REDCAT is a steppingstone, and what I like about it is that it's unusual for a youth group to perform there. It's a theater dedicated to experimental and adventuresome art-making, and so by presenting our work there it's also an affirmation that ... we do real art, not just dance to keep kids occupied."

FRIENDS FOR LIFE

Besides imprinting the message on its kids that art is important, The Wooden Floor teaches life skills.

"I've learned a lot about time management," Avila said. Rehearsals demand full and focused commitment. During the run-up to a performance they occupy every weekday from 4 to 8 p.m. and some weekends from 10 in the morning until 5 p.m.

"I've learned how to be more confident; also more responsible," said Santa Ana High School senior Yesenia Sanchez, 17, another "Los Angelitos" dancer and Avila's longtime friend.

The Wooden Floor also introduces earnest teens to like-minded kids, Sanchez said. "Everybody here is serious about this. The friends you make are true friends. They stick with you and help you."

During rehearsal, Haim, the choreographer, sits and watches his work intently. Occasionally he shouts out encouragement or instructions to his dancers. The score, a spare, melancholy work by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, gives the choreography drama and urgency.

"When I first worked here (on the premiere of "Los Angelitos" in 2002), I didn't know what to expect or what exactly was expected of me," said Haim, who has choreographed more than 90 works for such renowned groups at the Nederlands Dans Theater, Ballett Frankfurt and the Limón Dance Company. "I wasn't sure how I would approach a work for young, non-professional dancers."

The number of dancers required also concerned Haim.

"I'm used to companies with fairly small ensembles. Here, they choreograph for 50, 60, 75 or more." "Los Angelitos" has 22 dancers.

ARTISTIC SIMILARITIES

Over the years, Seattle-based Haim has gotten used to the unique characteristics that a Wooden Floor dance requires. Since "Los Angelitos," his first commission from the company, he has choreographed two others, "The Presence" (2004) and "What is Too Strong for Breaking" (2008).

"Los Angelitos" is an intriguing combination of pedestrian and dancelike movement. Dancers wriggle their fingers, slap themselves, nod their heads, somersault, bound on and off stage in big, high-energy groups. Sometimes their movement is robotic; sometimes it's expressive and highly emotional. Three female dancers freeze in a pose reminiscent of "see/hear/speak no evil."

Asked about the meaning of the work, Haim is elusive.

"It's abstract movement. I didn't want to give it an overt story."

Avila said the choreographer revealed a little more about his thoughts to the dancers.

"He told us the story about how he devised the piece. How he went through some hard times, and that some people in his life were angels. I play a kind of crazy girl, but the angels come to her and touch her, calming her down, helping her find herself."

Avila smiles. "I like that image a lot."

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