

The Arts Paper

www.palmbeachartspaper.com

Dance

Breaking barriers

Teen ballerina from Wellington, dance veteran at FAU hope their success will help other Black artists

By Tara Mitton Catao
ArtsPaper Dance Writer

Clarence Brooks still remembers the day in the 1980s that he first saw the posters that had a photo of him dancing.

"Someone (or several people) ... had plastered the N-word all over the posters," he said.

Brooks, who was only in his second year of studying dance, had felt so honored to have been selected to perform a solo at an important fundraiser to be held at the Civic Center in Oklahoma City, but he was unaware that the poster advertising the event, which had been circulated all over the city, prominently featured a photo of him in the solo.

"My recollection is that the chair [of the dance department] and the choreographer witnessed me holding a poster and my tear-stained face and pulled me into the office to console me. The surprise and honor [I felt] was stifled by the shock of seeing that vitriolic word hurriedly scrawled across my face. ... It hurt to know that someone I studied with and knew would do this.

"But the all-white faculty held me up ... they had my back. The gist of their pep talk was 'cry in private, but smile in public.' They wanted me to be strong and above it all," he said.

Staying motivated through tough times

Now take a moment and imagine you have been training as a dancer for the last 13 years, and now it is your chance to perform at Lincoln Center in New York but, because of COVID-19, it doesn't happen. All of New York City is shut down.

Madison Brown, 16, said it was more than disappointing, it was "heartbreaking. ... I was just so shocked and disappointed. It was all I could think about ... and then it was gone," she said, speaking from her home in Wellington.

Maddie, as she is known, is a talented young dancer who was a strong contender for winning her division at the coveted New York City Finals of the most prestigious international competition for young dancers, Youth America Grand Prix, which is held each year in April at the David H. Koch Theater in Lincoln Center. Just before the pandemic hit, Maddie had won first place in both the classical ballet and contemporary dance divisions at Youth America Grand Prix's regional competition in Tampa.

Her dream is to dance with American Ballet Theatre, following in the steps of Misty Copeland, who has become the groundbreaking role model for many aspiring ballet dancers, particularly for those who are Black.

Copeland broke an important racial barrier in classical ballet by becoming the first Black ballerina at ABT to perform the lead roles in *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Now Madison, too, aspires to perform these iconic roles.

"She opened the doors. ... [Now] there's no reason to hesitate if this is what you want," Madison said. "You can go get it. You can strive

See **DANCERS** on page AT11



TOP: Madison Brown dances the "Queen of the Dryads Variation" from the ballet *Don Quixote* at the Youth America Grand Prix. **Photo by Visual Arts Masters.** **ABOVE:** Clarence Brooks performing *Mourner's Bench* by Talley Beatty at The Tank in New York City. **Photo by Melissa Sobel/Meems Images**

Theater

New Kravis CEO 'planting seeds' for reopening

By Hap Erstein
ArtsPaper Theater Writer

A viral pandemic and an economic downturn have made for a tight job market, yet Terrence W. Dwyer, former chief executive officer of southern California's Segerstrom Center for the Arts, has landed a plum position during these challenging times.

Last month he was named the new CEO of West Palm Beach's Kravis Center, taking over for the retiring Judy Mitchell, who has held the post since the center opened almost 30 years ago.

"As you can imagine, it's a difficult time to be looking for work," Dwyer said recently by telephone. "People were staying in jobs and organizations were hesitant to fill empty jobs. So when the Kravis opening came up, and it's pretty much a dream job for me, I was thrilled that the board had the confidence to bring me on board as the next CEO. Particularly following such an exceptional tenure as Judy Mitchell's."

Dwyer was at the helm of the Segerstrom Center from 2006 to 2019, a time of significant growth for the Costa Mesa organization's programs and budget, including the raising of \$140 million for that center's capital campaign during his tenure. Following his departure from the center, he briefly headed the McCallum Theatre in Palm Desert, California.

Asked about his achievements at the Segerstrom, Dwyer is quick to say, "The Segerstrom Center was very accomplished when I arrived." He adds, "We continued to enhance the artistic programs and we created and built a very strong community engagement department that really helped to transform the center's relationship with its community. We were very proud of that."

Even from thousands of miles away, Dwyer was well aware of the Kravis Center. "The Kravis Center is one of a small number of very large and prominent performing arts centers in the country. So anyone who has worked at one tends to know a fair amount about the other ones. You share reports and you share information," he says. "And so the Kravis Center is really one of the exceptional performing arts centers in the country and I couldn't believe how lucky I was that there was an opening that I could throw my hat in the ring and see what happens."

Despite his knowledge of the Kravis and an acquaintance with Mitchell from various industry conferences, Dwyer still did additional research on the center. "You talk to friends that know the organization well, you talk to colleagues in the funding community. You get as much information as you can, but



Terrence Dwyer takes the helm of the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts at a most challenging time. **Photo provided**

See **DWYER** on page AT10

DANCERS

Continued from page 9

for it because she has changed the way people look at ballet ... the skin color doesn't matter ... it's all about what comes from within and how you portray yourself on that stage. ... [She] has inspired me and reassured me that there is no reason for me to be scared that they may not want me for what I look like. All that matters is the person I am and the way that I dance."

Keeping at it

Brooks, 60, now an associate professor and director of the dance program at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, has come to the same conclusion. His professional life has spanned four decades.

Beginning his training in the 1980s at the Oklahoma Ballet and Oklahoma City University at an age that is considered to be very late for a dancer, Brooks refused to let this be a limitation. Instead, he used his late start to drive him as he pursued every opportunity he could uncover that would expand his knowledge in dance, cramming in as many classes and summer courses as he could into those early years of training.

Summers have always been a highlight in a dancer's training because of the plethora of intensive programs where young dancers have the opportunity to work with master teachers from all over. Brooks, who tried to fit in as many as two or three each summer, knew that dancers needed to audition in order to get financial assistance. Brooks remembers showing up one year to audition for the famous Jacob's Pillow summer program.

"I walked up to the desk and said, 'I'm here to sign up for the audition,' and the snarky young girl there — with the New York attitude — said, 'Well, which one?' I said, 'What do you mean?' She said, 'Well, there's the ballet, the modern and the jazz [auditions].' And I thought, 'Well, I have the capability to do all [of them] so I'll hedge my bets,' and I said, 'I'll do all three.'"

To his complete surprise, Brooks was accepted into all three programs on scholarships.

Jacob's Pillow, which brought in two dance companies a week during its 14-week session, was a mecca for dancers, allowing Brooks to meet numerous artistic directors, company members and other fellow dance students. In fact, it was the Ohio Ballet that came to perform at the end of the season and offered Brooks his first professional contract. Consequently, he once again found himself as poster boy but this time, Jacob's Pillow used his photo to illustrate his success story — scholarship to contract — in its advertising for the program.

Dealing with racism

Brooks, who was lithe, limber and had good legs and feet necessary for the classical lines of ballet, was cast in many roles,



Madison Brown competes at the Youth America Grand Prix to choreography by Duncan Cooper. Photo by Visual Arts Masters



ABOVE LEFT: Clarence Brooks instructs students in the studio at FAU. Photo by Mark Santillano

ABOVE RIGHT: Madison Brown in the studio with coach and ballet teacher Magaly Suarez at The Art of Classical Ballet in Pompano Beach. Photo by Belinda Carhartt

but there were times during his career that he encountered clear racism. While under contract with the now-defunct Charleston Ballet Theatre, he showed up for the casting call for the Cavalier in *The Nutcracker*.

And even though he was the highest-paid dancer in the company, he was asked to leave because it would never cast a black man as the Cavalier knowing that the audience would never accept it. Brooks suggested that he perform the role at the matinee school performances where more than 80 percent of the audience was African-American children, but the directors still wouldn't budge, so he quit.

Brooks did return to Charleston, a year later, to perform the contemporary ballet *L'Histoire du Soldat*, a sensual biracial *pas de deux*. "So here it was. I am in the same city that racially discriminated against me because they did not want to put a Black man in a lead role and here I am — in the same Black body ... and in a lead role and dancing with a white female," Brooks said. "There was no public outcry. There wasn't a hint of backlash. In fact, it was just the opposite. It was very well-received."

Focusing on the future

This past summer, Madison was scheduled to return for her

fourth summer as a National Training Scholar at the famous 890 Broadway studios at ABT. She knew she wanted to devote her life to dance during her second ABT summer when, during lunch break, she happened to see two company members rehearsing in a studio.

"I stood there, just watching them through the little window in the door, and I thought, 'This is what I need to do for the rest of my life. ... I can't do anything else. This is what I need and it's what I want.'"

Madison has won a bevy of top awards at a wide range of competitions as well as appearing on TV as the youngest finalist on NBC's series *World of Dance*. Articulate, thoughtful and aware, Maddie is likely to follow Copeland as a role model for dancers of color. She is cognizant of the pitfalls of social media, and together with her parents' guidance and support, she is able to stay focused and dedicated to achieving her dream even during this difficult stay-at-home period.

Her whole family is helping. The living room furniture has been pushed back, carpets removed, and a Marley dance floor rolled out. Her father got the hammer and saw out and made a ballet barre so Maddie could continue her twice-a-day daily ballet classes on Zoom, which she intersperses with even

more online classes in other dance forms.

She has been doing virtual schooling for a few years now, so the transition to online dance classes by herself at home was easier in one way, but on a day-to-day basis, Maddie said, "It's definitely been harder for me — not to be motivated, but to have as much joyful emotion for it [dancing] ... so, it's just that it has been a little more sad, but I know that eventually, I will be able to get back out there, and that's what is keeping me motivated and striving for it [my goal]."

Choosing career moves

For his part, Brooks has learned to navigate his career opportunities. He made calculated decisions about what places he could not just survive but thrive in as a Black dancer.

He looked for directors who were willing to see him for who he was and cast him for his talent and not the color of his skin. Some years later, Brooks had the opportunity to dance the Cavalier in Loyce Houlton's *Nutcracker Fantasy* for the Minnesota Dance Theatre in Minneapolis, the same town that sparked a movement for racial justice for George Floyd.

Brooks has danced for 65 companies performing works by 135 choreographers in an extensive range of dance styles. He has toured throughout the

USA, Europe, and Asia with Nikolais & Murray Louis, Bill Evans, Marcus Schulkind, Loyce Houlton, Laura Dean, Robin Becker, Deborah Carr and Anna Sokolow, among others.

He returned to school, earning a master's in fine arts from the University of Washington in Seattle and in 1998, he came to Palm Beach County to teach at the Bak Middle School for the Arts. Six years later and after choreographing musicals and plays for FAU, he was hired as a visiting artist to develop the dance department at the university.

"I realized that I had started dancing at a university as an adult and I know what that is like ... so I thought, 'Let's try it and see.'"

Brooks's passion for dance and learning is evident. In his current role as educator, he takes the role of mentoring students seriously. Drawing from his experiences, he works with them to help define "safe spaces," knowing that this kind of environment is where dancers can grow, expand and believe in their futures. He also imparts to his dance students that it is their responsibility to be more aware of social injustices.

"This is definitely a topic that is on the radar right now because of what has just happened here because of the two pandemics — the racist pandemic and the COVID. People are really starting to look at what is going on around them." Later he added, "The changing of cultural images needs to be redone. It can be done, it is being done, and we just need to get the word out."

Staying true to self

Madison's advice for other aspiring young dancers?

"Even though you do perform for other people, you do it for yourself; otherwise there is no reason to do it. Stay in tune with yourself. Focus on who you are and stay true to yourself and that's not always easy on social media. ... You may think you need to change who you are to get the hype and love from people ... but if that doesn't make you happy, it's going to make something you love, something you *used* to love."

Madison has sage advice, as well, on the present state of society.

"Looking into the future... with everything that has happened in this matter of months with racial inequality and all this illness ... it's been a lot and I think it was America's wakeup call. We really need to do something here. We can't just hear about it. ... You actually need to make a move in order to see a change."

To that end, Madison's eyes remain fixed on the future.

"I really hope that in the next few years we can see a difference," she says. "I'd love to see a greener earth. ... [I hope] this world can really see what we could miss out on if we continue to live the way we do. I think we could make the changes and really make a brighter place."