

Studio for tiny dancers creates huge following



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Downtown Dance Factory

From left to right: Beckett and Melanie Zrihen with Banjo Dobbie and Hanne Larsen at the Downtown Dance Factory in Tribeca


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BY Joseph Rearick

Melanie Zrihen and Hanne Larsen, expected to see a lot of empty seats at their company's first recital last year. Owners of the Downtown Dance Factory, a comprehensive dance center in Tribeca, they booked the main theater at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center to give their students, raging from two to 12 years old, the thrill of performing in a professional venue.

On the day of the performance, however, they were more than surprised as they peered from behind the curtains.

"People really spread the word and came out in droves," Zrihen

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said recently. “Almost every single seat was full. Family, friends, neighbors—they all showed up.”

The recital represented the culmination of an exciting inaugural year for the company, which Zrihen and Larsen have been dreaming up since they met as parents at the Park Preschool. Zrihen, who danced for 13 years while growing up in Canada, retired her dancing shoes long ago to work in consulting and marketing. Larsen helped run a successful dance studio in Australia, her native country, for 15 years, learning the art of teaching dance to students of all ages. Both were seeking a place for their own children to take dance classes downtown, somewhere their children could learn the basics of dance within a fun and nurturing environment. Their collaboration seemed natural.

“We had a conversation two years ago where we said, ‘I’ll do it if you want,’” recalled Zrihen, who manages the business side of D.D.F. “Six months later, we said, ‘lets just do it.’”

The two found a single-studio space in Tribeca and began designing classes to suit the neighborhood’s kids because, Larsen said, “As a Tribeca mother, I get the mindset.” The result is what the pair has termed a “comprehensive dance center,” a place where children can delve into any number of dance techniques and styles, from street hip-hop to ballet.

“Now not every kid can relate to classical music,” said Larsen.

D.D.F. classes feature contemporary hits that get young kids jumping—girls and boys alike.

“Parents ask for our music list all the time,” said Zrihen.

“We have a special program for boys,” said Larsen, one that teaches hip-hop dance and features an instructor with martial arts experience. “Very masculine.”

Indeed, Zrihen said that at the recital, the boys “stole the show.”

“It was really cool for them to see that it’s cool to be up there and be the man on stage,” she said.

Even parents are getting ready to groove, with a new adult dance class set for the studio’s coming season, which starts this September. “Moms would come in and say, ‘I want to do that,’” said Zrihen. “So now, they can.”

Downtown Dance Factory has grown so rapidly - enrollment for next year is already up 50 percent - that they recently began construction on a new space at Broadway and Reade. The new locale will feature professional studios, huge windows, locker rooms for both genders and a reception area.

For Zrihen and Larsen, their goal is to provide as many artistic avenues for their tiny dancers as possible. Children can break it down however they please, learning everything from pirouettes to the moves featured on MTV—with some necessary changes.

"It's an age-appropriate version of what would be in those film clips," said Larsen. "Everybody has enough clothes on."

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