

Tifini Austin finds strength in African Dance

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Life seems to have come full circle for Tifini Austin. She is celebrating 10 years as a dancer with the African Caribbean Dance Theater and will give her 10th performance at this year's Florida African Dance Festival. However, Austin says this year will be special for a different reason altogether. Her daughter, age 6, will take the stage at the festival for the first time.

"My daughter started [at dance theater] in the womb," says Austin. "As soon as she could walk, she started walking down the line."

Austin refers to the lines in an African dance class where students travel in rows across the floor and learn new steps.

"A lot of people think African dance is just a lot of jumping and making weird noises but there is a lot of structure and discipline in our classes," says Austin. "It's more character-building, very gently molding you as a dancer and as an individual."

Austin can't imagine her life without dance. A Tallahassee native, she recognizes ACDT as her anchor and home — a community who shares in the special language of the drum.

Always a mover, Austin dabbled in ballet from a young age, but discovered her niche at Rickards High School where she was captain of the flag core in marching band. After graduation, she joined FAMU's Marching 100 for the 2001-2002 seasons. She didn't find African dance until after the birth of her son. Eager to get back on her feet, a friend invited her to dance class.

Austin admits the class intimidated her, and she didn't return to ACDT for almost a year. She reflects back on this encounter a decade later, believing it was the music, atmosphere and discipline reminiscent of



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her band days that brought her back.

While ACDT features live drums for every class, the studio has no mirrors. Though atypical of a dance space, Austin enjoys this detail as it forces participants to focus.

"It helps with the stage presence and just being confident," says Austin. "It really is a feeling that you're looking for inside the music."

In addition to performing for the company, Austin is a teacher



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for the weekly classes. She describes the class structure, which starts with stretching then coming down the line. Arranged by skill level, these lines encompass a wide range of

students from three to 50 years old. The instructor gives a movement and students travel across the floor with it until the "break."

Austin explains how

IF YOU GO

What: Florida African Dance Festival

When: June 11-13, 2015

Where: Performances in Lee Hall Auditorium (and classes in various locations)

Details: For more information, please visit: www.fad-f.org

this non-verbal cue comes as a change in the music, telling dancers when to start a different choreographic section. Learning the break is a milestone to be celebrated by beginners, and still poses a challenge for advanced students.

"Even now if we're in a dance we haven't learned before, the experienced ones are like, 'Was that the break?'" Austin laughs. "It's definitely a learning experience."

Austin describes her teaching style as fun, but firm. She loves getting a withdrawn group excited, and is respected by beginners for her ability to parse movement into accessible pieces.

Each class ends with a huddle for announcements, birthday jingles, and shared news. This speaks to ACDT's philosophy of promoting strong, healthy communities and tailoring classes to participant's needs.

Mindful living is a large part of Austin's own philosophies. At the Florida Department of Health, she works as a Sexual Violence Prevention Program Director and teaches in elementary school classes. Austin integrates African dance into her programs as a way to address self-esteem. Additionally, she is on track to receive a doula certification for midwifery and hopes to work in clinics abroad.

"I really try to educate women on their bodies and advocating for themselves," says Austin.

Her passion for women and children intersect as she names her favorite African dances. At the top of

the list is Guinea's Sorsornet, which provides a platform for women's issues through movement. Other favorites include the arm and neck heavy Lamban, performed for the ancient wisdom keepers of West Africa, as well as Congo's grounded and earthy Zebola that utilizes the hips and waist.

ACDT's repertoire comes from many countries. In Austin's time with the company, they have performed dances from the Ivory Coast, Guinea, West Africa, Senegal, Congo, Central Africa, and Mali. While the company benefits from visiting artists, they often travel outside Tallahassee. Austin notes that Facebook has played a key role in ACDT staying connected with the African dance community.

"We've met a lot of international artists and even if they can't stick around for a while they always give us something really good we can hold on to," says Austin. "Our artistic director always tells us to 'take it home and put it on your pillow.'"

Austin appreciates ACDT's Artistic Director, Marcus Robinson who has been rehearsing the group's skills for the festival, and preparing them for anything to happen onstage — from a renege drumstick to a skirt falling off.

"He does everything out of love," admires Austin.

Aside from Robinson, she names Mouminatou Camara and Yousouf Koumbassa among her dance mentors; both are on the bill for the upcoming festival. After 10 years, Austin serves as a figure of inspiration herself. She remains humble and open, encouraging young people to go after what drives them forward. For her, it's dance, making her a strong mover, mother, and individual.

"It's built some tough skin for me. Some tough feet too."