TROUPE STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

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Crain's New York Business
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Last month, Dance Theatre of Harlem's ensemble performed to strong reviews at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts, the troupe's first full season at the prestigious annual festival in more than 20 years.
Dance Theatre has reduced its debt by more than 50%, rebuilt its school, grown enrollment to 500 kids a year, and added 12 new board members. It is developing creative performances to bring in new audiences around the country. It had a $4 million operating budget last year and a $29,000 surplus.

The coveted chance to perform at the festival is just the latest good news for the dance institution—founded 41 years ago to train dancers of color in classical ballet. After shutting down more than five years ago following years of mismanagement that resulted in a $2.3 million deficit, a shrinking of its board to three people, and declining enrollment at its school, the storied institution is staging an encore.

"We are very different now than we were before," says Laveen Naidu, the former head of Dance Theatre's school who became executive director of the entire organization when it began to rebuild itself in 2005. "We are completely committed to the same mission as 41 years ago, but we are an institution that is much more responsive to the marketplace and very willing to rethink everything."

Turning around the nonprofit has been a slow process, especially for Mr. Naidu, a dancer with little knowledge of business or arts management. He was put in the top job by Arthur Mitchell—who made history more than 50 years ago as the first African-American dancer in the New York City Ballet. Mr. Mitchell founded Dance Theatre in a church basement in Harlem in 1969 to help the community and give dancers of color a place to perform classical dance.

It seems that he chose his successor well. Mr. Naidu has made rebuilding Dance Theatre his life's mission, relying on the guidance of arts management guru Michael Kaiser, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; and taking an executive leadership course at Harvard Business School. Last year, Mr. Mitchell named longtime dancer Virginia Johnson artistic director of the group.
More to be done

Still, Dance Theatre's turnaround has a way to go. The organization's professional company has yet to be revived—something Mr. Naidu hopes to achieve in two years.

In the meantime, Mr. Naidu and his new board chairman, Kendrick Ashton of Perella Weinberg Partners, are looking to hire a major gifts officer and a full-time marketing associate to join the 15-person staff, and are planning to double the size of the board over the next two years.

"[Our top priority] is recruiting new board members who are passionate about the vision and who can add value in moving toward a strong financial base so DTH can continue to inspire new generations," says Mr. Ashton, who remembers seeing the troupe perform when he was a young boy.
Ensemble cast

For now though, in place of a professional dance company, the top students at the school are part of an ensemble, a kind of second-tier group that performs around the country. Two years ago, Dance Theatre developed a special show for the ensemble that combines a full-scale performance with a look behind the scenes at how dancers train and how works are created. The aim was to attract new, younger audiences in smaller markets to dance. Since the program started, Dance Theatre has put on these performances in 16 states for 50,000 people, increasing the group's earned revenue to 26% of its budget from 19%.

Even more importantly, the new program has caught the eye of major donors. This past year, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation all became donors, ponying up gifts totaling about $350,000. Rockefeller also hosted a breakfast for Dance Theatre to pitch its story to 20 other foundations.

"The Rockefeller Foundation sees the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a cultural treasure for New York City, long serving both the Harlem community and the arts community as a pipeline for the next generation of ballet dancers," says Edwin Torres, associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation.