*-Interview*

FLAVORWIRE

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This week, we caught up with choreographer and Juilliard faculty member Stephen Pier, who’s leading the training, and ABT corps member Elizabeth Mertz, one of the five ballerinas taking part in it.

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**Flavorwire: How did the Women’s Choreography Project come about?**

**Stephen Pier**: We were trying to figure out why men show more initiative. There’s something about the culture of ballet that encourages people to follow directions very well, but not to take initiative. And since women tend to start very young, they seem to get a little bit more steeped in that culture. I think Kevin [McKenzie, artistic director] and Rachel [Moore, executive director] are trying to change that. The dancer of today has to be able to take initiative, because choreographers are asking for that.

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**FW: What drew you to the program?**

**Elizabeth Mertz:**I’ve imagined choreographing for years, but I’ve never tried it. I’ve been dancing professionally for 15 years now, and you get used to being told what to do all the time. This was a great opportunity to see if I could take what was in my head and create something. On the first day, Stephen told us to create a phrase, and we all created such extremely different things. I actually kind of liked what I came up with and I was inspired by my co-workers. So from day one, I realized that I can create something. I just have to get up and try.

**FW: Is the workshop meeting your expectations so far?**

**SP:** I went in not knowing what to expect. It’s been extraordinary — there are already several who have shown potential. What’s really interesting is that there are five distinct voices. Some are staying very much in the classical idiom, some are developing their own idiom, and there’s every shade of gray in between. I have no restrictions on what kind of vocabulary or material they use as long as it’s authentic to their intentions.

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**FW: What have you discovered about your own choreographic style?**

**EM:**I discovered that my style is definitely not classical. I don’t immediately do glissades or arabesques or tendus. I think I naturally want to move kind of slowly and turn in and turn out a lot and be very grounded. I basically like trying anything—I don’t know how I would classify myself yet. I love taking something that I’m thinking of and creating something from it. I would love to keep exploring and definitely keep doing the workshop and be brave enough to choreograph more than just a two-minute piece.

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**FW: Beyond becoming a choreographer, what are the benefits of learning how to choreograph?**

**SP:**Dancers are playing a completely different role in the 21st century than they did in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. They are being called upon to contribute not only to the performance but to the creation of these pieces. So it helps them immensely if they have some idea what the choreographic process is about. We’re moving away from that hierarchical form that ballet has existed in, where there’s a leader all the way down to the corps de ballet. It’s becoming more and more collaborative. They’ve got to be on that or they’re going to be left way behind.