

Philadanco's Joan Myers Brown celebrates 4th Founder's Day Concert



Joan Myers Brown is the founding director of Philadanco. The dance company will host its fourth Founder's Day Concert on July 17. — file photo

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Four years ago, the dancers of Philadanco hosted a fundraising event, while also honoring their company's founding director, Joan Myers Brown.

During her lifetime, Myers Brown, 82, has been a dancer, entrepreneur and community leader. She first founded a dance school for African-American children in 1960 and a decade later formed Philadanco. Today, the company is heralded as one of America's most important companies, and one of Philadelphia's most renowned touring exports.

For Myers Brown, this is really her centennial.

"This year I am telling everybody that I am celebrating 100 years," explained Brown. "My dance company is 45 years old, and my dance school is 55 years old, so together that's 100 years that I have been doing dance in

Philly — not counting the years that I was studying dance and all that other stuff. I am celebrating 100 years right now.”

The ever elegant dance legend’s day starts at 8 a.m. with Philadanco until 4 p.m., followed by the dancing school until 8 in the evening, along with the dance company that come in at 7 p.m.

“So, I’m here from 8:30 in the morning until 11, 11:30 at night,” she said. “I am putting in my time, and I want to claim it.”

The event proved so successful it’s now time for the 4th Annual Founder’s Day Concert, set for Friday, July 17, at The Dell Music Center.

Currently, Myers Brown is preparing for the upcoming yearly event that not only recognizes her contributions, but also showcases performances of the professional Philadanco corps, the D/2 the apprentice company, plus D/3 Youth Ensemble, which features budding movement artists age nine through 16. The slate of acts helps introduce youngsters to the art of dance.

According to the founder, 4,000 have been in the dance company and countless more have been in the dance school. “Almost everybody I met in Philly say I taught their child,” said Myers Brown with a laugh. “You know, the mayor’s wife [Lisa Nutter] was one of my students and company members. [Councilwoman] Blondelle Reynolds Brown and so many kids that have done other things and have become doctors and lawyers. The focus of dance has played an important part in their lives.”

When asked if she ever leisurely dances, the candid artist said: “People don’t know how to bop no more. Everybody is dancing ugly. I like to dance pretty, you know, swing around and twirl and dip. Nobody does that stuff anymore. And, I’m not going to get into line dancing and do that same thing over and over again, but the rest of it I love. I love to dance.”

In recent weeks, news of Misty Copeland’s appointment as lead ballerina of the American Ballet Theatre dominated with headlines cheering the first appointment of an African American in that company. However, Myers Brown was quick to point out several often unheralded dancers that preceded Copeland. “Lauren Anderson was a Black ballerina in the Houston Ballet, recalled Myers Brown. “She did ‘Swan Lake’ long before Misty, but Misty is a product of social media, marketing and hype. But unless we tell our own stories they’re not going to get out there. Some things change, but they don’t.”

Despite the ups and downs, the ever fabulous leader said she’s continually inspired. “I would say, for some little four-year-old girl to walk up to me and hug me and say, ‘Miss Joan, I just can’t wait to be in Philadanco.’ And, I’m like, ‘okay’.”

Philadanco’s 4th Annual Founder’s Day Concert is on Friday, July 17 at 7 p.m. at the Dell Music Center, 2400 Strawberry Mansion Drive. For ticket information, visit mydelleast.com.