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Lucy Hamilton creates change in CNY dance industry, one step at a time

Updated: Sep. 10, 2024, 4:53 p.m. | Published: Sep. 10, 2024, 4:34 p.m.

Lucy Hamilton demonstrates a move to Central New York ballet dancers at Dance Centre North. (Ryann Phillips) This is CNY

By Ryann Phillips

Mattydale, N.Y. — At Dance Centre North on a Wednesday evening, sunlight beamed into the studio, reflecting off the gray marble floor and framing eight students in the mirrors.

In a blue Lululemon top and black shorts, Lucy Hamilton walked around the class teaching battements, grande pliés, and proper alignment.

“Don’t get sad, just be productive about it,” she said after giving a young dancer a correction in advanced ballet class.

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Between each exercise, she paused for two to three minutes to make sure the dancers understood how to work their muscles

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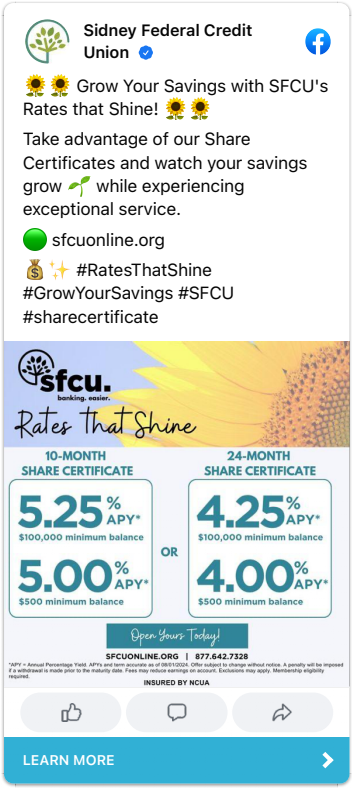

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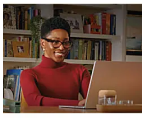
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and bodies.

Before class, Hamilton, 27, met with an assemblyman to secure funding for her new company, Central New York Ballet. She helped create this company after Syracuse City Ballet fired her and five other dancers for striking against unsafe working conditions and inappropriate artistic direction.

While on strike in November 2023, Hamilton spent hours on FaceTime drafting multiple emails and at least four plans for how to put on the annual show, "The Nutcracker." Sometimes she had to cancel class with her students so she could answer calls and meet her former ballet's deadlines to reach an agreement.

"It's so important to show the people coming next, I don't think I should be here telling you what to do if I can't even show up for myself," Hamilton said. "Is it really good to go teach and be half in tears, and no sleep, and not sure what's going to happen?"

Lucy Hamilton helps a ballet dancer stabilize her posture at Dance Centre North. (Ryann Phillips) This is CNY

The Saturday after the professional dancers went on strike, they were supposed to have a rehearsal with the students. After the cancellation, students turned to Hamilton to find out how they should respond to the strike.

"Kids aren't stupid. They just haven't been in the world as long," Hamilton said. "It was interesting. They saw everything that we saw for the past few years and didn't feel good about all of the same things we didn't."

She educated the young dancers about the business side of professional dance. In striking, Hamilton wanted to challenge the idea that ballerinas couldn't speak up for themselves.

Syracuse City Ballet did not respond to an interview request about Hamilton's involvement in the strike.

"It was almost like you couldn't think, it was just the right thing to do and you had to do it," Hamilton said. "That little voice that's always been piping up and blasting at people, I feel was used well in that moment."

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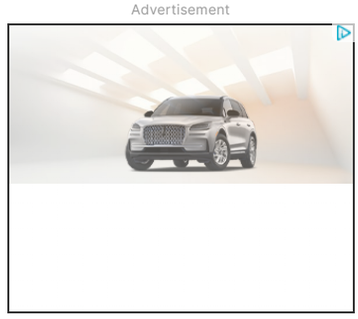

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Lucy Hamilton danced the leading role as Odette in Central New York Ballet's April production of "Swan Lake." Marc Safran

The six dancers reached a $6,991 settlement with Syracuse City Ballet in July after The National Labor Relations Board decided that Syracuse City Ballet had wrongfully fired them.

Standing up to authority wasn't new for Hamilton. She moved away from home at 16 to dance at the Sarasota Cuban Ballet School. For three years, she trained to get hired at a professional ballet until she received her first contract at Ballet San Antonio in 2018.

"She's an advocate for things she believes in and for people she believes in," said her mom, Regina Murphy.

Hamilton stood at the barre in CNYB's company class at Syracuse Stage on Tuesday. "Stretch legs, Lucy," Aldo Kattón, the artistic director said.

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She pulled through her legs and straightened them even more in relevé, standing on her toes even after the music ended. When they moved to the center for grand allegro, a series of jumps across the floor, Kattón checked to make sure Hamilton understood the exercise.

"Yes, mi bailencita?" Kattón said.

"Sí," Hamilton said with a smile.

She performed the combination of jumps, leaps, and turns across the floor with Felipe Panamá, the vice president of CNYB. Hamilton moved to Syracuse after the pandemic because of her friendship with Panamá, whom she met at Ballet San Antonio. Years later, Syracuse City Ballet needed another dancer, so she filled that role.

"As dancers, we are very good at following orders. It's sometimes to a detriment," Panamá said. "Of course I knew Lucy could withstand anything, because she's a very resilient person. But it's also even more important that she decided not to."

Hamilton's willingness to speak up for herself and other dancers reflects a growing shift in dance culture. Dancers at Dallas Black Dance Theatre in Texas recently formed a union to negotiate with leadership for more artists' rights.

More than 200 dancers threatened to pull out of this year's Olympic Games' opening ceremony to protest pay inequality before reaching an agreement with the organizing committee.

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"Forever the people in charge have dictated the art that we create and the artist that you are," Hamilton said. "I think it is so transformative to turn the whole thing on its head and say no. Because we want people in charge of us, but it can't be that you single handedly determine my entire life and mood and ability to dance and connect."

Central New York Ballet's next performance is "The Nutcracker," set for Dec. 21 and 22 at Baker High School's theater in Baldwinsville, N.Y. Tickets are $42 for adults and $32 for children 12 and younger.

Ryann Phillips *is a graduate student at Syracuse University's Newhouse School and a contributing writer for syracuse.com and The Post-Standard. Contact Ryann at rphill08@syr.edu.*

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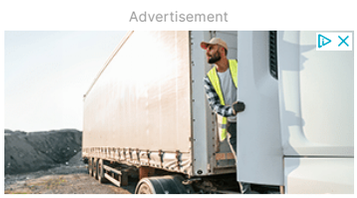

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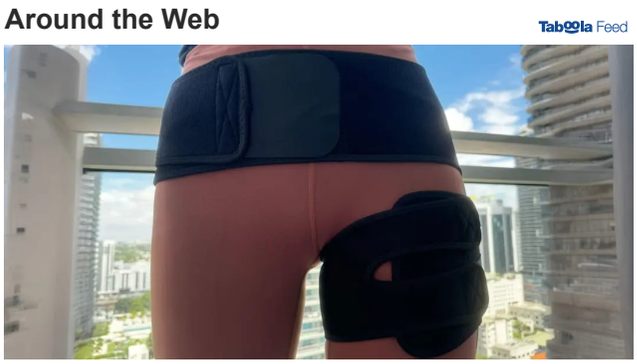

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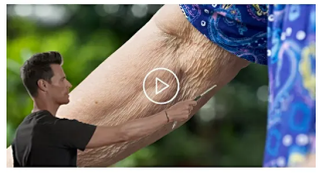

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