

A WINNING LEGACY



*As Bobbie's School of Performing Arts enters its 30th year, studio owner **Bobbie Tauber** reflects on the secrets of its success.*

BY JEN JONES

Located a half-hour outside Los Angeles in Newbury Park, California, Bobbie's School of Performing Arts has become one of Hollywood's bright lights—as both a perennial competition power and prep school for working dancers. Alumni have gone on to become members of River North Chicago Dance Company, Odyssey Dance Theatre and Bad Boys of Dance, and they've graced major stage and screen productions. Yet perhaps most notable is the studio's formidable presence in the competition world. From New York City Dance Alliance to NUVO, the studio and its Expression Dance Company enter at least five events yearly and have received accolades at regional and national levels. At the center of it all is owner Bobbie Tauber, who brings almost 50 years of teaching experience to the table—along with a strong belief that competitions are an essential component.

“By competing, dancers can grow, be inspired,” says Tauber. She believes that when students see more advanced dancers, it helps them to understand what it takes to get to the next level.

“Dancers are never going to push themselves as hard if they just stay in their own studio.”

Of course, when in the confines of *her* own studio, Tauber demands nothing less than full dedication from her competition company—which is divided into four sub-groups: Bobbie's Bees (ages 4–8), Experience (advanced dancers ages 7–19), Expression Hip-Hop and Expression TapWorks. Along with signing a contract and maintaining a C average in school, all company members are required to take weekly technique classes in ballet, jazz, stretch and strength, tap and contemporary—and attend company rehearsals each Wednesday. Dancers also participate in a yearly all-company intensive, for which Tauber enlists prominent master teachers like Denise Wall, Jeff Amsden and Mandy Moore. “It's killer,” says Tauber.

But Tauber is quick to emphasize that preparing for competition is not the sole focus. “I'm a firm believer in mixing,” she says. “We do community events and an all-company show at the end of the year alongside our normal recital. Competition can't be the be-all and end-all; yet as teachers, we do need to remember that





Tauber now focuses her teaching on pre-schoolers and delegates training of advanced students to younger faculty members.

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Her directive is no doubt a nod to teachers who are against the idea of competing. As an active member of Dance Educators of America and a born networker, Tauber is well-aware of the distinct divide on whether competition should be an integral part of any curriculum. While she understands the opposing perspective, she urges those teachers to reconsider their position in light of recent changes she’s seen in the industry. “For a long time, competitions were giving away awards to everyone; it took away the incentive to really be your best,” says Tauber. “Conventions are now starting to give out fewer top awards. It means more when you win.”

“More importantly, the most positive change we’ve seen is that the level of dance in this country is going through the roof,” she adds. “There is no comparing the current level of dance to that of even 10 years ago. That is where teachers who don’t go to competition are losing out: They’re not being exposed to the best.”

TAUBER IN TRAINING

Many dance instructors start out as professional dancers and transition into

the teaching field—but not Tauber, who says she decided on a teaching career at the age of 7. “Growing up as an Air Force brat, I changed studios every three years and had lots of really good *and* really bad experiences—all of which made me a better teacher in the end,” she says.

While all her experiences were formative—from early training in Texas and California to rigorous study under a Russian ballet master in Hawaii—her most influential was with New York City Ballet alum Eleanor Irving, who taught dance at the New York Air Force base where Tauber’s father was stationed. At 15, Tauber took over the classes when Irving became ill with cancer. “Eleanor was the teacher who really taught me everything I know,” she says.

“Competition can’t be the be-all and end-all; yet as teachers, we do need to remember that it is an important training tool.”

—Bobbie Tauber

After graduating from high school, Tauber returned to her home state of California and eventually opened dance studios in Santa Paula and Fillmore. When a job change for her husband and a baby on the way necessitated a move from Ventura to L.A. County, she was forced to leave her studios behind. “I gave up teaching for a year. That was the only year since I was 15 that I didn’t teach,” she says. “When we moved back to Thousand Oaks, I started teaching the neighbors in my garage. Within a few years, I had 200 kids coming to my garage for lessons.” Buoyed by that interest level, she opened Bobbie’s School of Performing Arts in 1979.

But as proud as she was of her business achievement, her early experiences on the competition circuit were humbling. “Studios were just starting to go to competitions, and we were among the worst dancers,” she says. “I had no idea what I was doing in that world. I remember driving home from one competition saying, ‘I either need to give up or figure out a way to train my dancers better.’ That was a turning point for me.”

She started making the hefty commute from Thousand Oaks to West Hollywood several times a week to study with teachers like Rhonda Miller, Keith Clifton and Carol Connor. “I didn’t quit—I just kept training and bringing what I was learning back to my students,” Tauber says.

That commitment to learning is what longtime friend, choreographer and master teacher Jeff Amsden admires most

Performance opportunities are ample at Bobbie's: community events, annual all-company show and competition events.

about Tauber. "What makes Bobbie a great teacher is that she's a great learner who is always trying to improve," says Amsden, who has known her for nearly 20 years and who recently joined her faculty full-time. "She is always going to conferences and trying to find out what's new. She doesn't let her ego get in the way and that's why her kids are so incredible."

While immersing herself in the Los Angeles dance scene, Tauber befriended many of her mentors and was able to tap into their network to find fresh teaching talent. "I had the opportunity to hire some very young teachers that had just moved to Los Angeles," she says. Among those fresh faces? Tap impresario Gregg Russell and contemporary choreographer Mandy Moore (best known today from "So You Think You Can Dance"), who became director of the Experience group. Tauber adds: "I had experience and maturity, but they brought the other side of it. They had young, exciting choreography and movement ideas and were also versed in the competition world."

Amsden also remembers those days. "When her studio first started competing and they weren't winning, she would get so frustrated," he says. "Bobbie really



wanted to figure out what the missing link was, so she invested her time in bringing in quality ballet, jazz and contemporary instructors. She truly became a curator of some of the best dance teachers in Los Angeles."

Today Bobbie's School of Performing Arts has a solid reputation among conventions and competitions alike, and Expression Dance Company has amassed an impressive number of titles under the guidance of Moore and Sari Anna Thomas, who in 2008 took over for Moore.

FAMILY MATTERS

In such an intense environment, it's easy to imagine a cutthroat atmosphere, but Tauber's objective is to create a sense of family. Having cultivated relationships with top-notch talent, she is also known for retaining it. Many of Tauber's teachers have remained on staff for 10 years or more.

"Bobbie's success relies on a simple formula: Get the best teachers you possibly can and let them do what they do best," says Rod Howell, tap instructor and director of Expression TapWorks. "She lets her teachers have creative freedom with choreography, and there is no pressure that the number has to win. It's all about doing what you love, and that approach fosters an environ-

ment where people are true to what inspires them—which ultimately plays well to an audience."

"One of the things I appreciate and love about working for Bobbie is that there are no limits," says Thomas. "We can come to her with the craziest prop or idea and make it happen. That freedom has everything to do with what we produce in the end."

Even with all she's done to create a successful and supportive atmosphere, Tauber says the true measure of her success is simply in the rewards of teaching. "Most of our students *don't* go on to be professional dancers," she says. "They become adults who know that hard work pays off. They are able to go out into the world with a lot of confidence. I feel so honored to see all these students growing into wonderful people."

And in 30 years Tauber has literally seen hundreds of dancers grow and blossom. She's now teaching the children of her former students. "Preschool is my favorite—if you teach them to love dance, it lasts forever," she says. "When you teach 2- and 3-year-olds, you can't help but be happy. They have no worries, and it is the best medicine in the world." **DT**

Jen Jones is a certified BalleCore instructor in Los Angeles.



Photos by Monica Saulmon, courtesy Bobbie's School of Performing Arts