

# reigniting a passion

LISA MARA GIVES NONPROFESSIONAL ADULT DANCERS A PLACE TO PERFORM.

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—GISELLE ASUNCION,  
ATTORNEY AND DANCEWORKS MEMBER



Lisa Mara (left) has founded DanceWorks adult performance and choreography groups in Boston and New York City.

BY KAREN CAMPBELL

**Just four days before opening night,** upwards of 150 dancers of all shapes and sizes spill into the aisles of The Boston Conservatory Theater, generating an animated buzz of excitement as they catch up after the holiday break. Onstage, dancers pop and lock with sharp-edged precision and attitude, or sail through jetés and whip out impressive chaîné turns in final preparation for their upcoming show.

But these dancers aren’t 17- to 21-year-old conservatory students in training for professional careers in the arts. These

performers are lawyers, investors, nurse practitioners, graphic designers, teachers, even a few mothers, and they range in age from 20 to 35. They’re all part of DanceWorks, an innovative company designed by Lisa Mara specifically to give serious dancers who are pursuing nondance careers a fun and flexible yet high-level postgraduate performance and choreographic outlet.

For Mara, who began her career in public relations before founding DanceWorks, the company is also dedicated to fostering social connections.

“Dance has always been part of my life,” she says. “That and sports taught me the rules of life and how to be part of a team and work together. That’s what I try to bring to DanceWorks. It’s not just a dance program, it’s a community. The friendships that are formed here carry the program into the next season.”

Like Mara, the majority of company members danced from childhood through college, many on their schools’ dance teams, others in programs ranging from recreational to pre-professional. Most are reconnecting with an artistic

passion they thought they would have to relinquish after graduation. While open classes at area studios offer opportunities to practice dance, DanceWorks provides a venue to perform.

“I never thought I’d be able to perform onstage again,” says 29-year-old attorney Giselle Asuncion. “It’s not always easy to go to rehearsal after a long day at work, but we do it because we love it. And I don’t take that for granted. It’s just so much fun.”

Mara, also 29, agrees. DanceWorks is not just her full-time job, but a creative

and social outlet. In addition to directing every show, she choreographs and dances in several pieces. She took dance classes as a child, but it wasn’t until college at Syracuse University that she prioritized dance, focusing on hip hop and co-directing the student-run dance club. “I found the marriage of my natural talent and leadership skills,” she says.

After college, she worked for a high-end entertainment public relations agency in New York City, but says, “I was miserable. I didn’t want to work 16-hour days and red-carpet events.”

So she moved back to Boston and auditioned in 2009 to be a Boston Celtics dancer, becoming one of 38 finalists.

It was a three-day-long process and such a fun experience, she recalls. “I got to know all these dancers. Only 16 made the team, but any one of us could have, so I said, ‘Where are these people going to go dance?’” She answered the question by creating DanceWorks the following year, with an initial troupe of 15. “It started mostly through word of mouth, with dancers who had some connection to me or one of the other

Photos: Matthew Ziegler Photo, courtesy of DanceWorks



Left: performers of DanceWorks Boston; below: Mara leading rehearsal.

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dancers,” Mara says. They spread the word via social media and put out a call through area colleges.

The business model for DanceWorks focuses on performances rather than classes, and Mara set the bar high from the very beginning. “I took that leap of faith to say we only wanted advanced and technically trained dancers to audition for the program,” she says. Far from being a deterrent, that model made the program distinctive, attracting talented movers from all over the Greater Boston area. The last round of DanceWorks Boston auditions drew 178 dancers, with 158 accepted into the company.

The tremendous growth of the Boston program inspired Mara to develop a DanceWorks in New York City as well, drawing on her large network of Syracuse University alums in the city to help get the word out. While interest was keen, the largest drawback was rehearsal space. During each



four-month season, the group holds as many as 24 to 27 rehearsals a week. Ultimately Mara found a home for the troupe at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Queens. DanceWorks New York City launched in June 2011 and currently has 100 dancers.

Mara now splits her time between the two cities, though she is training a new hire, Jackie Arcy, to direct the NYC branch. Mara says a typical day can involve nearly every facet of the business: scheduling, website maintenance, apparel branding, photography scouting, coordinating with choreographers on all program/print materials and lighting, video editing, dancer reminders, accounting/budgeting for the season. “I try to work about a month to two months ahead of schedule so everyone

knows what’s coming down the pipeline,” she says.

Both companies present two performance seasons a year, in spring and fall, with auditions during the winter and summer. DanceWorks doesn’t offer classes. Instead, it hosts a series of \$1 workshops before auditions to give dancers a sense of the skill level required and stylistic range. Tuition is \$275 per season, plus a \$50 registration fee for dancers (\$25 for those who contribute choreography).

Dancers who want to choreograph audition first. They have 10 minutes to put forth their vision for a group piece to a panel of judges (comprised of Mara and choreographers from previous seasons). For these unpaid young dance-makers, choreography is not a career



Dancers have to be technically advanced to perform with DanceWorks, but most have day jobs outside the dance world.

choice, but an opportunity to stretch. “We attract a handful who work at the mom and pop studios who want to choreograph for their peers instead of 5-year-olds,” Mara says. “But mostly our choreographers are average Joes who go to work every day.”

Each dancer may audition for up to four pieces. Mara’s goal is to find a good stylistic fit for everyone. The commitment can be as little as one rehearsal per week for one piece for the four months of show preparation, though many dancers opt to be in multiple pieces.

One of the biggest challenges is to

make the show both entertaining and manageable, given the huge number of participants. Mara’s rule is that choreographers include 14 to 25 dancers in each work and wrap it up in three minutes or less. “I don’t want to turn people away, but I don’t want to have a show longer than two hours.”

Dancers sign an injury waiver, and Mara has company liability insurance, but she says, “It’s really no different than going out to play a pick-up basketball game.” Attrition is due less to injuries than moves, marriages and babies. “It’s that next phase,” she says. “In the past

six months, we’ve had eight dancers get engaged.” Even so, Mara says more than 30 dancers have stayed with the company since its second season.

Marie Torto is one of them. She commutes nearly an hour each way from New Hampshire. “The night I get to dance for four hours is the best night of the week,” she says. “And I get to see friends I’ve been growing with for the past four years.” **DT**

*Karen Campbell is a cultural correspondent and dance critic for The Boston Globe.*