

A dancer's destiny

World renowned Dayton troupe directed by its founder's daughter

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With all due respect to Dayton, the city of 165,000 is not the sort of place you expect to find a world-renowned dance company. A description, by the way, that isn't hype.

Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, known more familiarly as DCDC, has performed in all of America's major dance centers. It has toured Asia and Europe and been featured at top-flight dance festivals, from Jacob's Pillow to the American Dance Festival. And it was major player in PBS' "Black Dance in America" documentary.

This weekend, the company, beginning its 40th year, performs at the Aronoff's Jarson-Kaplan Theatre to open Contemporary Dance Theater's subscription season. (The Cincinnati-based CDT is celebrating its 35th year.)

DCDC's founding and growth is one of those inspirational tales that someone should have turned into a movie or book long ago.

In 1968, Jeraldyn Blunden, a twentysomething dancer who had performed with everybody there was to perform with in Dayton, decided she had something of her own to add to the dance world. She had no aspirations to become a great choreographer. She really didn't know much at all about how to run a dance company. But she launched DCDC anyway.

By the time she died of cancer at the age of 58, her company had amassed a repertory filled with works by a who's who of American modern dance. Most, like Blunden herself, were African-American. But Blunden didn't want a company that was about race. She wanted one that was about dance.

Now, nearly eight years after

47, became the company's artistic director. (Former company member Kevin Ward had served in the position since Blunden's death.)

Blunden-Diggs began performing with the company when she was 12. And in many people's eyes, this position was her destiny from the time she took to the stage.

Like her mother, she is devoted to a democratic vision of dance.

"I believe that dance is for all people," says Blunden-Diggs, "and I believe DCDC is a company that can create repertory for all people."

It's an ambitious goal. But her mother, who was awarded one of the so-called "genius awards" from the MacArthur Foundation, managed to accomplish it. And while success of this sort isn't a genetic certainty, you have to think that Blunden-Diggs knows what she is talking about.

Her first step is to tweak the repertory a little. Her mother assembled a collection of dances that were readily accessible to audiences. Some were dealt with hard-edged social issues. Some were downright celebratory. Audiences knew what they were about.

Ward, on the other hand, is a very cerebral man. Under his leadership, the repertory grew more abstract. More "modern." But audiences found his choreographic additions to be too challenging.

"My vision is to merge those two mind-sets," says Blunden-Diggs, to make it accessible for those who understand contemporary dance and those who might be intimidated by it.

"I want to find a way that both of those groups can feel comfortable when they watch DCDC. That's my challenge."