"THE THINGS YOU LEARN IN BALLET ARE INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT – THAT'S THE CONFIDENCE, THE DISCIPLINE, LEARNING TO EXERCISE YOUR WILLPOWER..."

THE CULTIVATION OF CONFIDENCE AND ENJOYMENT

Former Royal Ballet soloist Eric Underwood believes the arts offer children a space to exercise boundless creativity. Irena Barker spoke to him at London Fields Primary School.

When Eric Underwood was a child, he literally "stumbled" into ballet. He had just fluffed an acting audition at the local performing arts school in Washington, DC, and noticed some girls doing ballet through a doorway. Underwood walked in and asked the teacher to let him have a go. "I felt like I could be great at this, and that I could change my family's destiny if I got it right," he told *The Guardian* in 2016.

And he *was* great at it. His life path was changed forever, and, after years of work, he went on to become a soloist with the Royal Ballet in London, which he left in 2017. It is an incredible trajectory for a Black boy from a poor neighbourhood in DC, and one he would like to see within reach of many more children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This is why Underwood – now a model and actor living in London – devotes much of his time to promoting ballet to young people, giving up his spare time to show them its potential both as a career and for boosting well-being and confidence. He is currently a model on the books of the famous Storm model agency and is preparing for the roles of Kevin and Albert in the play *Clybourne Park* at the Park Theatre in North London next year.

An inspired young audience

When we meet, Underwood is on one of his frequent visits to London Fields Primary School, a diverse school in Hackney, East London. He has had a relationship with the school for the past five years, after teachers told him they were naming a class after him and he offered to come in.

On the day we meet, Eric first visits Year 3 pupils in "Underwood" class and admires the incredible full-scale collage they have created of him leaping across a wall as a part of their project looking at his life and work.

Next, comes the tricky Q&A session, where Underwood seems unfazed by questions such as "Do you have a six pack?" ("I work really hard at staying fit and healthy") and "How strong do you have to be?" ("Super strong to lift the girls"). The hardest parts, he tells the enthralled class, are "Parts that other people have already danced". It's clear that Underwood – whose favourite role was as The Caterpillar in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – likes to go his own way. But he is not getting out of the question-and-answer session that easily. Perhaps inevitably, a child asks him to perform the painful-sounding "air splits". He leaps boldly into the air, very narrowly missing the chairs and desks.

Next comes a proper dance workshop led by Underwood in the school's Victorian PE hall, and he encourages the children – still dressed in their yellow-and-grey uniforms – to leap the length of the room admiring their sauté ballet moves. Every child is engaged as he explains the French terminology and the skill of "spotting" that stops dancers getting dizzy as they turn. The Year 3s jump happily around learning the jeté and other moves, and he even attempts some audience-pleasing non-ballet stunts upon request.

London Fields Primary School

"The things you learn in ballet are incredibly important – that's the confidence, the discipline, learning to exercise your willpower," Underwood tells me afterwards.

These primary school children, he says, could also actually become great ballet dancers if they have the opportunity to actually know about it. "It's just off-radar for lots of people," he observes, making it clear he thinks ballet is still much too "elitist" and lessons too expensive. "I stumbled across ballet, so if someone didn't introduce me to it I wouldn't have had the career I had, so I feel obligated to repay that," he says.

He would like to see a TV programme do for ballet what *Strictly Come Dancing* has done for ballroom. "Why not *Strictly Come Ballet*? Ballroom was taboo prior to that," he says.

As a child with a "scattered" brain at school who disliked maths but loved creative subjects, he sees them as vital to the curriculum in schools. He comments: "The arts give children a space to exercise boundless creativity and I think this school being able to promote children going towards careers that aren't necessarily traditional, as an accountant or a doctor, they've done really, really well because often people don't tap into the arts.

"Ballet and anything artistic was an outlet for me and I remember I would draw in school, I would love that. I would get my friends' jeans and I would draw Mickey Mouse on them. All of those classes, I worked hard at them because I enjoyed it.

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Arts and creative curriculum

From the teachers' point of view, Underwood's visits are a priceless opportunity to make something potentially distant and highbrow totally relatable to children.

"It's really important for us that we give every class a name which allows children to see people that they can identify with in roles and jobs that they can really aspire to," says assistant head Rebecca Austin. Other classes have been named after the poet Lemn Sissay, the singer Michael Kiwanuka and the Hackney-based artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, among others.

The Underwood link is also part of a highly developed arts and creative curriculum that is integrated throughout the school. "Ultimately, we want the children to think like artists, we want them to think like musicians, we want them to experience what it is to be an artist or a musician and that's then factored into our curriculum in the classroom," says Austin.

"We've really established our vision for our curriculum and that it cascades out to everyone in the school, it's really important that we all share the same vision.

"It's not just having one person who is brilliant at art and nobody else knows what they are doing – it's about making sure that's rolled out throughout the whole school."

The emphasis on the arts is evident in the school's art weeks, whole-school art projects, gallery exhibitions and shows where children from nursery to Year 6 showcase their work. And the connection with Underwood is pride of place in the school's work, with hundreds of children being inspired by his visits over the years.

"Children who were in Underwood class four or five years ago are still talking about him and excited about the fact that he's back in our school," she says; "it is truly remarkable." ■