When our Knowledge Issue team read about the work at East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, we knew we wanted more. We asked the center’s artistic director Jordan Simmons to expand on a piece that ran on the e-zine Music Trust. Simmons’ unifying question was: What does it take to nurture youth in the art forms of their ancestors and prepare for a diverse, demanding and complex world? In this story, he explains and explores the growth of a center and the answer to that — and other questions — as a model for a performing arts center that takes its community and a global vision to heart.

— Alicia Anstead

BY JORDAN SIMMONS

Long past its heyday as a World War II shipyard and immigrant gateway, infamously mired in poverty, violence, race and class divisions, Richmond, California — located just across the bay from San Francisco — is step-by-step rising. And in what’s known as the Iron Triangle neighborhood of Richmond stands East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, a 49-year-old state-of-the-art cultural center engaging 5,000 youth and young adults whose lives are being transformed through music, dance and theater.

Like many urban California centers, Richmond’s neighborhoods are complex, diverse and comprised of communities that strive to address both the historic disenfranchisement of “minority” cultures and the artistic masterworks of those cultures, even as they seek to support equitable access to artistic training for their youth and the telling of their own stories.

It is from these circumstances that the questions guiding East Bay Center’s evolution have emerged: What does it take to nurture youth in the art forms of their ancestors and prepare for a diverse, demanding and complex world? Whose art forms and skills are taught to whom and why? How can a community-based cultural arts institution provide a shared and equitable home to its beautifully diverse youth? How do
under-resourced public schools find a place for world art forms, contemporary technologies and new media?

Gradually, a vision emerged that became the anchor for our work, a vision centered on how artists train around the world, on the nature of foundational skills and the opportunities that existed for youth to connect to their immediate communities. This vision is perhaps best captured in our flagship Young Artist Diploma Program and its Deep Roots, Wide World curriculum.

Reflecting the heritages of our community and a careful selection of world art forms, Deep Roots, Wide World provides 140 middle and high school students with a combination of depth and breadth: focused technical instruction (depth) and comparative artistic/civic experience (breadth) fostering readiness for higher education, lifelong artistic practice and critical agency. Practically speaking the training is anchored in a modest number of root forms. Not surprisingly, they include jazz, western chamber music, world repertoire theater, and contemporary urban dance, yet equally classical ballet, classical Anlo Ewe (West African) music and dance, regional Mexican Son (Jarocho/Huastecan), African American vocal traditions, Mien/Laotian, Japanese music and filmmaking.

The genesis of the breadth aspect of the curriculum at the center can be found in 1995 when, just as new programs of cognitive science were being started in colleges and universities, we launched our own five-week summer intensive course that ran parallel with emerging work in neuroscience, cognition and perception and our desire to broaden our understanding of how the brain identifies and implements complex artistic tasks.

In specific cases, we were also drawing from and inspired directly by the work of exceptional faculty artists’ international perspectives and research. For instance, the educator, master performer and composer C. K. Ladzekpo translated the foundations of West African polyrhythm for his students at our center and UC Berkeley. This framework introduces the philosophical and contextual meanings of the Anlo Ewe approach to making music and living a fulfilled life. In another generative series, Japanese Shakuhachi virtuoso Masayuki Koga shared decades of research in the areas of breath and kinesthetic awareness.

From those earliest explorations, we gradually established a framework to guide faculty members in the way they designed and organized our five-week full-time summer cross training — the Comparative Study Institute — as well as the year-round curriculum. This framework introduces sequential study of kinesthetic fundamentals (weight, breath, spatiolization), visual and aural skill bases, single dual and multiple sensory patterns in performing arts as well as more common areas: language, composition, improvisation, symbols and technologies, masterworks and risk/play.

Generally, we have found that it is not always useful for students to initially confront the theories of perception behind the framework; rather, it is more important that the material be clear and interesting in itself. As the students say, we “break it down” for them in as many ways as possible until their own self-analytic powers are strengthened. On the other hand, accessible concepts such as muscle memory or physical phenomena such as persistence of vision are introduced in special workshops as well as in field trips to Exploratorium: The Museum of Science, Art and Human Perception in San Francisco.

In the past eight years, 128 teens have completed the full four-year Young Artist Diploma courses of nearly 2,000 hours, and many have become the first in their families to attend college — often on scholarship — at a range of institutions that includes the University of California system, conservatories and Ivy Leagues universities. This spring, we have committed to fostering 20 diploma graduates headed to college annually.

While the majority of our students will not pursue performing arts as a profession, all the students, their families and evaluations cite the training, discipline, ability to concentrate, attention to detail and lifelong work habits resulting from their participation as critical to their individual advancement, higher educational achievements and anchoring of personal agency.

Our story is not meant to suggest that young students need necessarily jump unprepared into a whirlwind of simultaneous arts training experiences. The whole point of “comparative” or “interconnected” study at East Bay Center is that it is not exclusive; rather, it suggests that any individual will have a range of perceptual capacities — strengths and challenges — and that through extended and repeated periods of focused and excellent cross-training, they will come to better understand their true gifts and be inspired to follow them wherever they may lead.