



Gracey Tune

Arts Fifth Avenue

Keeping in tune

By Ken Parish Perkins

*This is what I am
supposed to be doing. I'm
not about to give
up and run away.*

— Gracey Tune

The story of the opening of Arts Fifth Avenue on Sept. 11, 2001, has been told and re-told by co-founder Gracey Tune — though not necessarily for the sake of repetition. That any such enterprise was trying to find its footing at the same moment the country came to a screeching halt is dramatic enough, without having to result to theatrics.

One quality always stands out when Tune tells of the day this south side gathering-place came into being, on a day remembered for its concentration of terrorist attacks. That is the more modest recollection of how people showed up there, anyhow, not looking for the arts per se, but just looking.

Why they'd find themselves there, of all places, was intriguing then for Tune and partner Eddie Dunlap, who had brought over his famed Mondo Drummers educational program from the Eastside Neighborhood Arts Center.

But with the passage of time, it all makes perfect sense. Arts Fifth Avenue has been around only seven years but has already earned a reputation as a focus of Fort Worth's grass-roots consciousness of cultural diversity and an artistic world-view. Call it the little train that could, can — and often does, to borrow a classic cliché from children's literature.

"I had a few students come in that day, and it was almost like we huddled

here and said we must protect our children and our families," Tune says. "And in that, there was this strength within us that carried over that first year. Even though we thought it was a horrible situation, we felt that this was going to be a place where we'll be safe. That in this midst of a tragedy and horror, there was some little seed that was planted for growth."

The seed that Tune and Dunlap planted at Arts Fifth Avenue has certainly grown, putting the enterprise in the category of arts institution survivorship – an impressive accomplishment in a shaky economy. AFA's \$145,000 budget is higher than the \$90,000 it took to run things last year, and at times Tune wonders if she has overreached.

The optimism comes from success: 7,000 classes conducted by local and nationally recognized artists in the visual and performing arts. More than 500 performances by such diversified artists as tap dancer Sarah Petronio and jazz legend Marchel Ivery. Dozens of art exhibits.

With classes in – take a deep breath, here – salsa, zumba, acting, ballet, guitar, hip-hop, chorus, drums, a home-school curriculum, sculpture workshops, public school art teachers' forums and an annual celebration of El Día de los Muertos, AFA offers a heavenly haven for both the cultural connoisseurs and the curious souls.

"I really admire her dedication, her passion and the amount of sacrifice to keep that place alive and make it so all-encompassing and inviting," says musician Sevan Melikyan, who approached Tune about bringing in the Jamaican reggae drummer Dyrrol Randall and bass player Robert Higgins. Her answer: We can make that happen. She even suggested the idea of workshops in the Jamaican reggae style. The process took a few weeks to prepare and was staged early this year.

Tune has been many things: choreographer, artistic director, lecturer, director, producer and tap dancer from a performing family – her brother is the terrific Tommy Tune, who scarcely requires

an introduction – and recipient in 2005 of the North Texas Dance Council's Texas Tap Legends Award. But providing arts opportunities to a vast audience will be Tune's legacy.

Still, while AFA has managed to get local funding – the Arts Council of Fort Worth & Tarrant County has provided a grant that allows access to a public relations company to handle marketing – the big-money donors haven't come around. AFA relies heavily on volunteers to handle tasks from running the box office to mopping floors. That the lights are still on doesn't mean that keeping them on hasn't been a struggle.

"You don't want to say that things are tough or hard because it doesn't paint the picture that you are going forward," Tune says. "But to be honest and true, it's been very difficult."

That's why Tune has tried to get out of the building more to drum up support, talking with groups and foundations. The outreach shows signs of success. Fairmont-district neighbors raised \$600 by throwing a Christmas party.

"The times get really tough," Tune says, "and you start to say, 'Gee, are we going to make it?'"

There are no guarantees in the world of non-profit arts, Tune and Dunlap say – only guarantees that Arts Fifth Avenue will continue to provide as long as the building is standing and they are in it. The plan is to move forward by changing nothing: There are Shakespeare in the Parking Lot and a Hispanic Playwrights Festival in need of producing, not to mention belly dancing and jazz.

"A man once said, 'This is your curse,' because I was put here to do this," Tune says. (Dunlap's mother calls AFA his "affliction.")

Tune doesn't see it as a curse at all.

"It's a gift," she says. "This is what I am supposed to be doing. I'm not about to give up and run away." **RWC**

Contact Perkins at hizpress@hizpress.net

