

Students dance alongside stars: Actor Taye Diggs in residence at WSU studio

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Taye Diggs is a celebrity for his roles on TV, in movies and on Broadway. You'd never know it watching him put students through their paces Monday morning in the Heskett Center Dance Studio at Wichita State University.

Diggs and his collaborator, Andrew Palermo -- with sterling Broadway credentials himself -- were at WSU over the Labor Day weekend to create a new dance, 'Beyond Words,' with students there. Though two days of hard work had brushed some of the glamour off their famous guest, students couldn't quite escape the handsome actor's undeniable presence in the studio.

'Everybody got starry-eyed when he walked in,' said Courtney Mertes, 20. 'All of us were stunned.' 'I was like, wow, he's actually here,' said Breianne Dillon, 17. 'But we all pretty much got over it as quickly as it happened,' Mertes said. 'By the time he sat and watched us a little bit, we were all like, okay, this is the piece, there's Taye, there's Andrew. We were good.'

The new dance -- created by Diggs and Palermo -- is full of quirky, propulsive movement that quickly made the students sweat. Diggs was instructive and funny as he walked groups through their moves -- and worked up a sweat of his own. Palermo initially set the pace of the practice -- calling out cadences and cues in rhythmic bursts of syllables and words.

Diggs was scheduled to fly back to Los Angeles on Monday after rehearsal. He'll return Saturday and Sunday to polish the piece, which will be presented in a free public performance at 1 p.m. Sept. 15 in Wilner Auditorium at WSU.

Palermo will remain on campus through September to help produce WSU's fall musical, 'The Wild Party.' 'This is a more than a typical residency because of the celebrity of the artists involved,' said Nicholas Johnson, director of dance at WSU. 'And in the end, that has had no impact on the students. They were totally ready to learn the choreography and do the best job that they can.'

Diggs and Palermo grew up together in Rochester, N.Y. They formed a contemporary dance company three years ago. Diggs has starred in musicals ('Chicago,' 'Wicked,' and as the landlord in 'Rent') and in movies, most famously as the handsome love interest in 'How Stella Got Her Groove Back.'

He's even better known for many television roles -- on 'Ally McBeal,' 'Will & Grace,' 'Day Break' and 'Grey's Anatomy.' This fall he'll star in the new show 'Private Practice.'

Palermo has had a successful theater career, too -- notably on Broadway in 'Annie Get Your Gun' and in 'Wicked' with Diggs. He is also a dance teacher and choreographer -- he crafted the dances in Music Theatre of Wichita's production of 'Aida' in 2005.

The duo's dance company -- and the residency at WSU -- give Diggs a chance to choreograph, too. 'Dance I have been the most passionate about since I started (in show business),' Diggs said.

Working closely with such big stars is an experience the students at WSU won't likely forget. 'They are both amazing,' said Jordan Ryan, 21. So does she have a memento from Diggs to prove she danced with a star -- a cell phone photo, maybe? 'No. Not yet,' Ryan said. 'But I still have next week.'