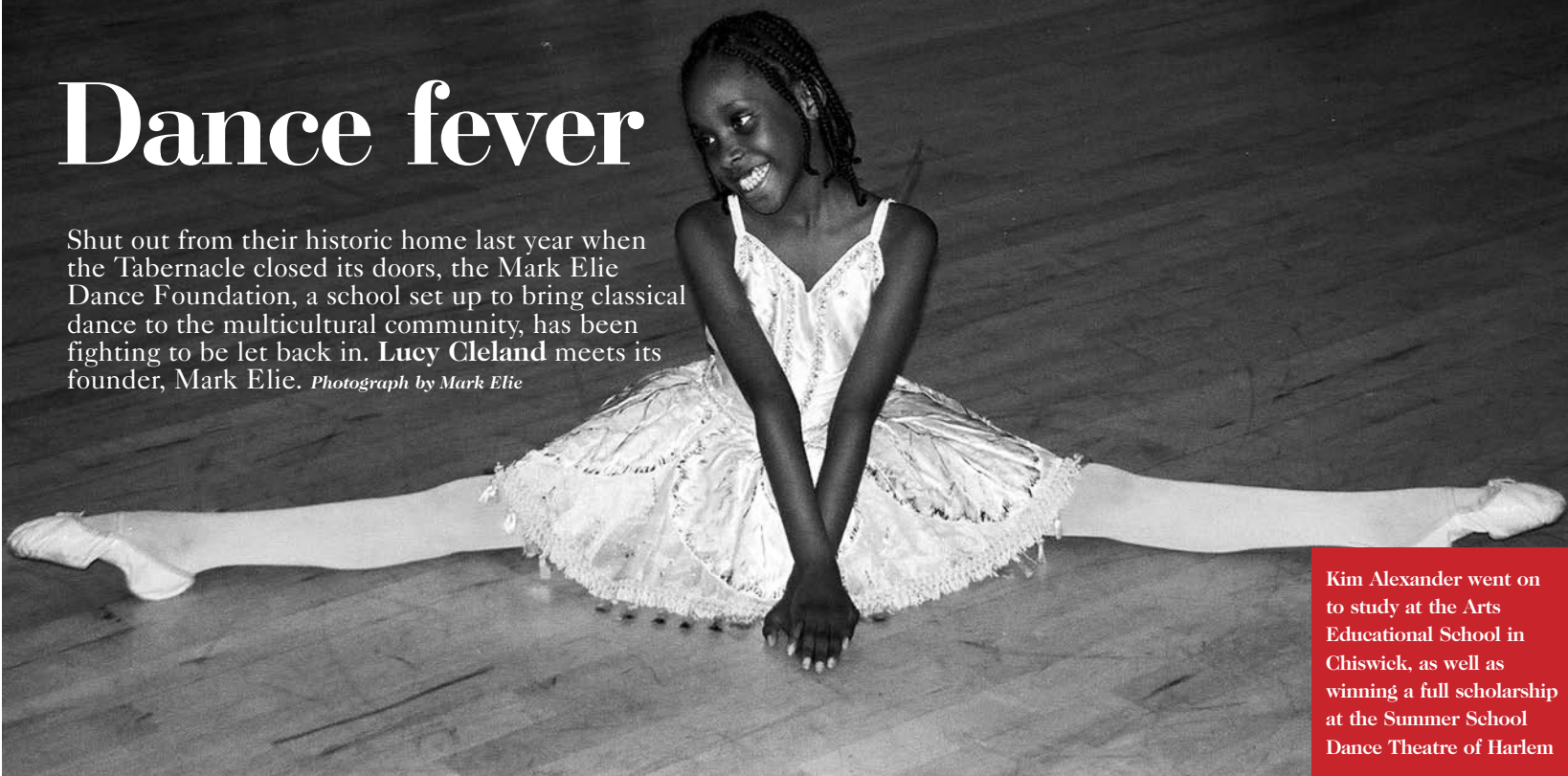


Dance fever

Shut out from their historic home last year when the Tabernacle closed its doors, the Mark Elie Dance Foundation, a school set up to bring classical dance to the multicultural community, has been fighting to be let back in. **Lucy Cleland** meets its founder, Mark Elie. *Photograph by Mark Elie*



Kim Alexander went on to study at the Arts Educational School in Chiswick, as well as winning a full scholarship at the Summer School Dance Theatre of Harlem

WHEN THE TABERNACLE, THE HISTORICAL CULTURAL CENTRE FOR WEST LONDON'S MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY, closed its doors in April last year amidst a shroud of rumours that funds had been inappropriately mismanaged, it left some of Notting Hill's much-loved arts groups without a home. One such group was the Mark Elie Dance Foundation, a school and events organisation which had been teaching dance to local children for 12 years at the Tabernacle.

When founder, Mark Elie, heard about the closure, he was devastated. Ever since, he has continued running classes in the area, mostly at Portobello Green and St Peter's Hall, but, to him and the children and parents involved, it is far from satisfactory, and they are desperate to return to their cultural and spiritual home.

Mark grew up in a Westminster children's home and it was there that he was encouraged to pursue his talent for dance. As a child, he was accepted to study at the Ballet Rambert at the Mercury Theatre, Notting Hill, finally

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joining (with a scholarship) New York's prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem. It was here that he met its founder, Arthur Mitchell, who was to prove a lasting influence on Mark's subsequent work. It was Mitchell who revolutionised black ballet in the US and blasted the myth that black dancers could only really excel at jazz and commercial dance.

With many lessons learnt from his US experience, Mark returned home full of determination to make his achievements in dance accessible to the wider multicultural community in which he grew up, and so the foundation was born, specialising in classical ballet, tap, contemporary and street styles.

Up to 150 children attend the classes every week in an environment where creed, colour and class mix through their shared affinity for the physical regime of dance. It is no surprise then that some of the students go on to study, at places such as the Urdang Academy, the Arts Educational School in Chiswick and even further afield, to the Dance Theatre of Harlem, to which Mark owes his

encouragement. One such student is Kim Alexander, who won a full scholarship to the Summer School Dance Theatre of Harlem

'I wanted the foundation to be an outlet for the arts, and a hope for young children from ethnic backgrounds to pursue the language of classical ballet with role models they can identify with,' says Mark, as young a looking 40-year-old as you are likely to meet. His real enthusiasm and passion for the school is

etched in his face and the concern over its future and return to its rightful home weighs heavy. 'We are still doing classes, but some of the venues are far from ideal.'

Each year culminates in a dance showcase by students, where they get a chance to perform in front of an audience. This year, the school's performance group showcased their work at the London Youth Games, Europe's largest youth sports event at Crystal Palace, as well as the Big Dance event held at the Tate Modern in July.

As of yet, there is little word about the future plans for the Tabernacle, and Mark is desperately waiting for news from the Arts Council, who will decide its fate. Along with Kensington & Chelsea Council, it is committed to restoring the centre as a place for community arts and has implemented a consultation. However, the Tabernacle's current acting manager, Angela Law, says, 'We won't know the future direction of the building until the consultation exercise is completed.'

Without people like Mark and centres to promote the arts in our vibrant community, Notting Hill will lose so much of its cultural heritage. Let's hope that the Arts Council reaches the decision to reinvigorate the Tabernacle so that Mark and the children can finally go home.

If you want to find out more about the Mark Elie Dance foundation, please visit www.markelie-dancefoundation.co.uk