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Citystep Teaches Cambridge's Kids to Dance

By P.M. NATASHA CHANG

It could be a scene out of "Fame": a box in the corner cranks out the music, a slight figure in black yells out the beat, and 23 bodies jump, spin, and twist across the room.

"Now remember, we're professionals here—we have to concentrate," yells the figure in black. But she's not eyeing a *plie* or criticizing an arabesque—she's trying to stop one of the dancers from worrying about the big rip in the crotch of his pants.

These are not performing arts students; they are fifth and sixth graders, for whom dance class isn't just the last hour of their schoolday. As participants in Citystep, a program that brings undergraduate dancers into four Cambridge public schools to teach children to dance, these children are learning not just teamwork but also a new mode of communication—movement.

"In the beginning, we just played games, like snake, cool cat and fox," said 10-year-old Jessica from the Agassiz School. "We learned to wriggle like a snake, stretch like a cool cat, and jump like a fox. In the show, me and my friends do ballet barrels. We pretend we're barrels and puff up our cheeks and stuff like that."

According to Sabrina T. Peck '84, who created Citystep and also directs it, she and the 20 other undergraduates who work with about 100 fifth and sixth graders attempt weekly to portray the vitality of urban life, as seen through the eyes of a child. She says, "We don't just dance with the kids, we provide role models, we work on creating a curriculum that helps them explore events and themes in their lives."

The dance program will culminate with performances at Sanders Theatre this Sunday and Monday and at the American Repertory Theatre on March 11.

Peck describes the program as a collaborative effort that requires careful cooperation for success. "We pull together some of the finest undergraduate dancers, musicians, technicians, and producers with some wonderful kids to do something both artistically and socially rewarding," she says.

"My interest is literally split between kids and dance, which is what makes it so exciting," Peck adds. "Among the dances to be featured in the performances are an impish boy playing with his shadow and three girls sharing friendship during recess."

Last spring, Citystep's first production at Sanders Theatre played to the largest single Harvard audience ever, followed by a sell-out command performance at the ART. The company's expansion from a dance company giving demonstration sessions at area schools to a full-time teaching program was encouraged in particular by its reception from several hundred Cambridge schoolchildren who were invited to the performances. "There was such positive reinforcement from the teachers and administration that I thought I'd stay on and choreograph on a serious level with undergraduates," says Peck.

Stanford T. Makishi '87, who has been with the company since its inception last year, welcomed Citystep's entrance into the classroom. "I wanted to do some kind of social service last year, but I couldn't fit it in with the dancing," he says. "This is a great way to mix both. It's incredibly rewarding."

Like all the dancers in the company, Makishi teaches two one-hour sessions per week at an elementary school and several hours each Saturday at an all-day session for more interested students. Peck teaches at each and all of the classes in addition to choreographing the dances, and rehearsing the week's curriculum with the undergraduates.

"I only thought the program would work in the beginning because of Sabrina," said company member Rachel H. Inker '86. "She's a wonderful teacher with such unusual energy."

"Sabrina's amazing," agreed Andrea Fastenberg '86. "A friend of mine spent the day with her, and all Sabrina did was play the dance music again and again and again. She's always thinking the music, living it, trying to imitate it so the choreography is perfect, natural."

"Hey," says Peck to the class. "When I get here, which foot is first?"

"The right!"

"What about here, how many of these do I do?"

"Six."

"No, it's seven," prompts Peck. She prances around the room to the music. The children watch her, some doing the steps with her, others listening intently.

"I thought it was kind of weird for a guy to dance at first," said a tough sixth-grader from Longfellow School. "But our teacher showed us some dancing from West Side Story. And I do break-dance. This is really like street-dancing."

"Alexis had a dentist appointment today, but he came in after lunch especially for this class," said Longfellow teacher Paula A. Falloni. "He wouldn't do that for anything else."

Alexis is participating in a dance about three boys who get into a fight on the way to school.

"Now, let's work on this. It's step, hop, step, hop, step behind, bum, bum," says Peck in measured time, hopping around Alexis with her hands clasped behind her back. The rest of the class watches, singing along with the music and dancing Alexis' part themselves to the side of the room.

"The greatest thing about the program is that the kids are working together," said one mother who is working on costumes for the show. "Even kids who normally wouldn't participate in a group activity—excluded for one reason or another—are interacting."

Backed this year by close to \$3000 in loans and grants from various University offices, the Undergraduate Council, and a grant from Stride-Rite, Citystep hopes at least to recover the approximate \$6000 cost of the performance itself. "The future of the program will depend on the shows," said Executive Producer Catherine T. Davidson '85. "If we get a good response, hopefully it will go on. Sabrina's proven that absolutely anyone can dance. She took these fifth and sixth graders who had no experience and taught them how."

"If we get some money, I would love to do this for a salary," said Peck. "You don't know how many kids there are, what kind of impact we can make."



ALBERT SILVA (front) and NATASHA KENTISH of Cambridge's Longfellow School are two of about 100 local schoolkids who are learning dance from Harvard undergraduates through the "Citystep" program.

Credit: Joe Wron