

Harvard, Cambridge students find CityStep a common bond

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CAMBRIDGE - Mayor Alfred Vellucci announces that the aliens have chosen his city as their first stop on planet Earth because "it's the heartbeat of America."

Harvard dean Archie Epps refuses to close down the university just because of the invasion. Harvard, he says, has closed down exactly once - for the American Revolution.

The town and gown comments are from a production called "A Cosmic Commotion" that is itself part of a town and gown collaboration called CityStep. This year, the program involves 200 Harvard undergraduates and 100 Cambridge public school students, grades 5-7, all currently working hard on "A Cosmic Commotion." The musical about a spaceship crashing in Cambridge and letting loose 130 little green guys who zap the residents senseless will be performed by some of the Harvard students and all of the Cambridge kids - with Vellucci and Epps weighing in with taped interviews designed to add verisimilitude - at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School this Friday through Sunday. (Tickets are available at the Holyoke Center Ticket Office, 1350 Mass. Ave., Cambridge. Telephone 495-2663.)

CityStep was founded in 1983 by then-undergraduate Sabrina Peck, who wanted to put on a musical extravaganza with the story told through dance. Peck's efforts evolved into a public-service program that runs through most of the school year, bringing Harvard and Cambridge together through dance and theater. The CityStep staff - all volunteers - sends out invita-

tions to join the program to all fifth-grade classroom teachers in the city. Any teacher who wants to can have a CityStep team offer a dance/theater class a couple of times a week, during school hours. After the fifth-grade, participation is up to the individual child, and classes are held on Saturdays. A few of the Saturday dancers are culled for SuperSteppers, the *creme de la creme* kids who learn harder steps and have bigger parts in the annual production that is the culmination of the CityStep year.

The Harvard undergraduates who act as CityStep teachers do not necessarily have dance backgrounds. Other Harvard students with dance and theater training teach their fellow undergraduates how to teach movement to the school children. There is no emphasis on technical niceties - no pointed feet or stretched knees - but a lot of work on self-expression and conveying ideas.

CityStep's budget has grown to \$35,000 a year, some of it raised in a big benefit ball each fall, some of it donated by corporations and foundations. The time commitment for the key staff is enormous. During spring break, when some of their peers were basking on Caribbean beaches, CityStep's four directors - Maggi Apollon, El-

len Bledaoc, Annie Reinhardt and Stefanie Roth - were rehearsing with the SuperSteppers in a Harvard gym every day. Roth reckons that she works 20 hours a week on CityStep, a major chunk of time for a full-time Harvard student. Not all the Harvard students work on the artistic end of CityStep. Some write grants or do publicity, photography or costume design.

Roth, Bledaoc, Reinhardt and executive producer Stephanie Altman were in the gym for rehearsal the other day, along with four SuperSteppers: Gordon Levin Beeferman and Anna MacEwan, both seventh graders at the Graham and Parke School; and Majeed Ahmad and Lamar Taylor, sixth graders from the Tobin School. In addition to dancing, Beeferman is a budding composer whose work will be featured in "A Cosmic Commotion," along with music by seven Harvard students, all working under musical director Ben Hammond.

The SuperSteppers were learning their parts as friends of Tanya, the Cambridge kid captured by the aliens. Their efforts to save Tanya bring them to City Hall, where they attempt to grab the attention of bureaucrats who veer between robotic indifference and caffeine-induced frenzy. When

asked for directions, the bureaucrats - who aren't present at this rehearsal but are imagined by the SuperSteppers - point their fingers in opposite directions, a gesture that clearly spells red tape. As the final insult, the bureaucrats form a giant machine that tosses the SuperSteppers back onto the street.

Lamar Taylor spent most of the two-hour rehearsal lying on his stomach, playing with a battery-operated game. "This is my day off," he explained. At another rehearsal earlier in the week, he'd already leaped the part the other SuperSteppers were tackling. But he came anyway, just to hang out with people he likes. "I just didn't want to go home," he said. He's proud that the CityStep directors picked him as a SuperStepper: "It's fun," he said, "and I have more responsibility" than last year. "We have to be onstage most of the time. So we're stars."

The rehearsal over, the directors sat on the gym floor and talked about what children get out of CityStep. It's a chance to excel for kids who aren't tops at academics; it's a chance for self-expression; it's a chance for a whole fifth-grade class to work together as a team; it is, in one of Roth's classes this year, a chance for a student, who has just moved to

Cambridge from Italy, to loosen up, forget the language barrier and have fun with his classmates.

The directors said they get as much out of CityStep as the children do. They've learned how to teach, how to set small goals and be proud when children reach them. They've enjoyed making contact with non-Harvard people in Cambridge. They've learned to accept that they can't reach every student and that some of their Harvard peers will occasionally let them down - just because they have exams.

"It's a gratifying experience to see kids gaining confidence," said Roth. "It's more gratifying than getting an A on a paper." It's so gratifying, in fact, that Roth, a senior, is now looking for a public-service job for next year, because, she said, "I've been translating my CityStep experience into job interviews."



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