

Causing A Commotion

By Tara McCarthy

One hundred and thirty aliens landing in Cambridge? Most would think the event unfeasible. Well, not if you're involved in CityStep. This arts outreach program, which involves Harvard students and Cambridge public school children, has combined many hours of work and a lot of imagination to put together a multi-media, multi-faceted production—virtually *A Cosmic Commotion*.

A Cosmic Commotion opens on April 14, which the Mayor of Cambridge has declared "CityStep Day" in honor of the group's work. CityStep auditions Harvard students each year and organizes them into teaching teams before sending them out to Cambridge public schools to teach dance to fifth, sixth, and seventh graders. According to director Ellen Bledsoe '90, CityStep teaches its students "the basic elements of dance and theater—expressing themselves through music." The upcoming performance involves over 100 grade school students and over 150 Harvard undergraduates.

A Cosmic Commotion differs from other campus dramatic productions because of CityStep's unusual mission. "We are dance theater," says Maggie Apollon '90, one of the four directors of the production, "and we focus more on children's issues." Back in October, she says, CityStep directors decided that this year's production would focus on the role that imagination plays in children's lives: "how fantasy relates to reality."

The upcoming production is distinct from its CityStep predecessors in several ways. While all of their past shows have been set in urban environments, *A Cosmic Commotion* is set specifically in Cambridge and includes scenes set in the T station. It also features segments of a recorded interview with the Mayor.

During the course of the show, our city is invaded by aliens who "zap" energy from Cambridge residents so that they can get

their spaceship home. Bledsoe says that the choice of locale was very important. "It's a place that is very familiar for the kids—very close to home. We've also added an interesting twist to the plot by using a comic book theme. It's fun for them to see Cambridge through a comic book."

Like all CityStep productions, *A Cosmic Commotion* was completely created by Harvard students. Each year, after the directors decide on the central theme, they must turn these ideas into a piece of theater, weaving in dance and music, and, this year, slides and recordings as well. The music is also composed and performed by Harvard undergraduates.

Each of the nine composers who contributed to the thirteen pieces in *A Cosmic Commotion* were chosen by Ben Hammond '89, this year's Music Director. Composers were filled in on content of the scene they were assigned to compose music for, and worked closely with the choreographer of the scene, always one of the four directors.

Composers returned from Christmas break with their ideas, which they then discussed with the choreographers and revised until the beginning of recording two months ago. Hammond, who has worked on several CityStep pieces before, says, "Last year we hit a good technique for writing for CityStep. We had effective music so we used a lot of the same stylistic components this year."

He does, however, note some improvements over the music of past shows. "We had more time to concentrate on recording so the technical aspects of the music are much better this year. The music is also incredibly varied—just about every kind of musical style you can imagine. Each piece is interesting on its own. It's not just background for dance." An added aspect of difficulty for this year's show was synchronizing the music to the fourteen slide projectors used during the production.

The focus of the CityStep program is fifth graders, but the program has expanded to



PHOTO BY STEPHEN E. FINLEY

High steppin': Cambridge and Harvard students rehearse for *A Cosmic Connection*.

allow for enthusiastic students to continue their dance theater education. These sixth and seventh graders learn more advanced steps and incorporate more drama into their dancing. Advanced students are also given the opportunity to become SuperSteppers and attend an after school program at Harvard once a week. *A Cosmic Commotion* features eight such students, and they carry the plot through most of the production.

This year a new workshop for teachers was introduced to the CityStep program. Apollon said that the workshop is "basically designed to help the teachers develop their skills." As a result, one piece in the upcoming production is completely choreographed by the undergraduate teachers.

When CityStep began in 1983 under the direction of Sabrina Peck '84, it was much smaller. The entire program consisted of a handful of Harvard and Radcliffe students who visited one public school. Though CityStep now works in three different Cambridge schools, the fundamental goals of the program have not changed.

According to Stephanie Altman '90, the

Executive Producer of *A Cosmic Commotion*, the basic goal of CityStep is to "provide a new means of expressions for these kids—to build their self-confidence through achievement."

Though the CityStep program does not focus on the show for the first half of the school year, instead concentrating more on improvisational games, *A Cosmic Commotion* is definitely the culmination of CityStep's goals and long hours of work.

Bledsoe feels that "It has been very exciting to see the kids really express themselves and work together in a group in the fantasy world we created." The growth of the City Step program is certainly a testament to its achievement.

It has succeeded, at the very least, in developing teaching skills in Harvard undergraduates and involving grade school students in theater. At the same time, according to Bledsoe, "*A Cosmic Commotion* has been fun—the kids really get into it." Next weekend, the audience will have a chance to do the same.

A Cosmic Commotion takes over Cambridge Rindge and Latin School April 14 and 15 at 7:30 pm, and April 16 at 2:30 pm.