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Celebs connect low-income children with dance

Bernadette Peters, Jacques d'Amboise tout youth involvement with arts



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By Giacinta Pace

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*Cause Celeb highlights a celebrity's work on behalf of a specific cause. This week, we speak with actress and singer **Bernadette Peters** and dancer and choreographer **Jacques d'Amboise** about their involvement with youth participation in the arts.*

*D'Amboise, formerly a principle dancer for the New York City Ballet, founded the **National Dance Institute** in an effort to connect public school children, especially those from low-income families, with dance. Since its founding, NDI has touched the lives of more than 2 million children. D'Amboise recently attended NDI's Annual Gala held at the NOKIA Theatre Times Square, where Peters was the artistic honoree.*

Peters, a two-time Tony Award-winning actress, has performed on stage and television, in concert, and on recordings. She recently wrote a best-selling children's book, "Broadway Barks."

National Dance Institute holds its 2009 "Event of the Year," a celebration of John Lennon's life and legacy, on June 20-22 at LaGuardia High School Concert Hall in New York.

Bernadette Peters

Question: Why do you feel it's important to come out and support this cause?

Peters: These kids that are dancing from public schools, they get a chance to perform and express themselves and have a chance at the arts. I just think it's very, very important.

Q: What's your favorite part about dance?

Peters: It's really a feeling that expresses itself through the body, and it's a great feeling when it can come out like that. I think kids have so many feelings and emotions and that's why it's so wonderful to be able to express them.

Q: In a time when the economy is so bad and so many different charities are vying for support, why is it important to support an arts cause?

Peters: I always say, "Food feeds the body and the arts feed the soul." So it's always important. Can't live without it.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Peters: I think all of this is very important. I know that the economy has been tight, but if you still can give a little bit, don't forget the things that are close to your heart and support the things are close to your heart. Even if it's a little less money than you usually can give.

Jacques d'Amboise

Q: Can you tell me about this organization, what you do for it, and why you feel it is important?

D'Amboise: I was a dancer, and it transformed my life. Being involved in the arts, using dance as a window to all the arts, and I just wanted to have a chance to express myself in a transformative way. So I thought, "Well, look how you were transformed by the arts. How would you get young people to be engaged with the arts on a really high level and use dance as that window or catalyst?" And so about 33 years ago I started this program, and now it's National Dance Institute, but it has affiliates, which have different names, and well over 2 million children have been through the program.

Q: Are there affiliates all over the country?

D'Amboise: Yeah, and some in Europe and Asia. The ones that I've heard about are Netherlands, Madras, India, and I heard there's one in Sweden, and of course we've done programs in Bali and Russia and Siberia. I mean pretty much everywhere. So it's global even though it's called National Dance Institute. It's global in its outlook.

Q: Do you still dance?

D'Amboise: No, I've got a pair of artificial knees and, at 75, it's a little too old. Although there's Freddy [Frederic] Franklin, who I love and I always take to dinner, who's like 94 is still performing. As long as you can move anything, you can dance somehow.

Q: Of all of your performances, which is your favorite?

D'Amboise: You know Melissa Hayden, who was one of the greatest ballerinas we ever had in this country, used to answer that — “Dance. What’s your favorite ballet? Dance is my favorite ballet, and what I’m doing tonight is the most important dance I am doing.” So, whatever ballet she was in that night became the most important, and I feel the same.

Right now, you and I are the most important, too. We’re part of our life. We don’t know five minutes from now, and the same with the artist. Every first performance, every closing night is that one performance. You don’t know if you’ll be there at tomorrow’s matinee, but you are on that stage at that moment. So, I would say every time I’m on the stage to dance, I would make that the single most important.

The whole world is that. Now, other ballets would challenge me. They’re always better than I could ever be, no matter how I kept trying to get better, and Apollo by Balanchine is probably that, and I did a lot of full-length ballet, not enough of them. I wish I could have explored it more. But, the real answer to that, right now, right now on the stage that I’m on at that second, on this stage at the moment.

Q: What has been your most memorable moment working with the children?

D'Amboise: There’s so many! We’ve performed at the White House so many times. We’ve performed ... again, I would say NOW, tonight ... tonight as these children are dancing, right at this moment ... it’s like waves, a wave comes in, that’s the wave you’re in. The wave goes out, there’s another wave, that’s the wave you’re in. And, that’s the way our school is. A whole wave of children right now.

Q: With the economy in shambles at the moment, and because this is an arts organization, why would you say it’s important for people to continue supporting the arts even though there’s a large variety of charities out there?

D'Amboise: That question is asked all the time. An organism, whether it’s bacteria or an elephant, you need food, shelter and water. Protein needs food, shelter and water. But we’re more than elephants, or proteins, or bacteria. We’re human beings. And human beings have something extraordinary — a sense of wonder.

Wonder. Isn’t it wonderful? Look at the pyramids! Isn’t it wonderful? Look at that dance! Isn’t it wonderful? Look at that sportsman! God, he’s wonderful! And, also, I wonder what makes the stars burn. Isn’t it wonderful! So we have to support science, our arts and our sports. Those are the three things, human beings that play, human beings expressing emotion through the arts, human beings expressing wonder by curiosity on how does it work, can I re-create it, what is it? Science, play, and the arts. That defines us as humans. That’s why you’ll have people in concentration camps dying playing orchestra music. They’re saying, “We’re not just animals, we’re human, and this is what we do.”

Interviewed by Giacinta Pace, NBC News