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The hottest ticket in town

City students take part in National Dance Institute's 'Postcards,' founded by ballet star d'Amboise

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Neither love nor money could get you a seat at the best show in town earlier this week.

It was the National Dance Institute's "An African Village: Postcards from Potou," a giant multicolored pageant danced by 200 city school kids at LaGuardia High School. Naturally, parents and friends of the participants had first dibs on tickets. Lucky them.

The 30-year-old Institute's "Event of the Year" always goes pretty well, but it's hard to recall one with the joy quotient of "Postcards." NDI, a dance-driven educational enrichment engine founded by ex-city Ballet star Jacques d'Amboise, traveled to Africa 18 months ago to forge a mutually beneficial alliance with the rural town of Potou, Senegal.

The trip was sponsored by Millennium Promise (MP), a not-for-profit organization that fosters self-sufficiency in needy places.

In Potou, where malaria is a deadly fact of daily life, MP distributed bed nets to every inhabitant, 35,000 in all. Thousands will benefit. (After NDI kids had raised \$25,000 to benefit Potou earlier this year, a benefactor matched the total dollar for dollar.)

The bed-net program bracketed "An African Village: Postcards from Potou." The hour-long piece was a series of exuberant snapshots of Senegalese life, a kaleidoscope of folklore, stories, celebrations, even food.

A contiguously appealing number called Theboudenne Stew was great to see and taught a subtle lesson. It is about the differences be-

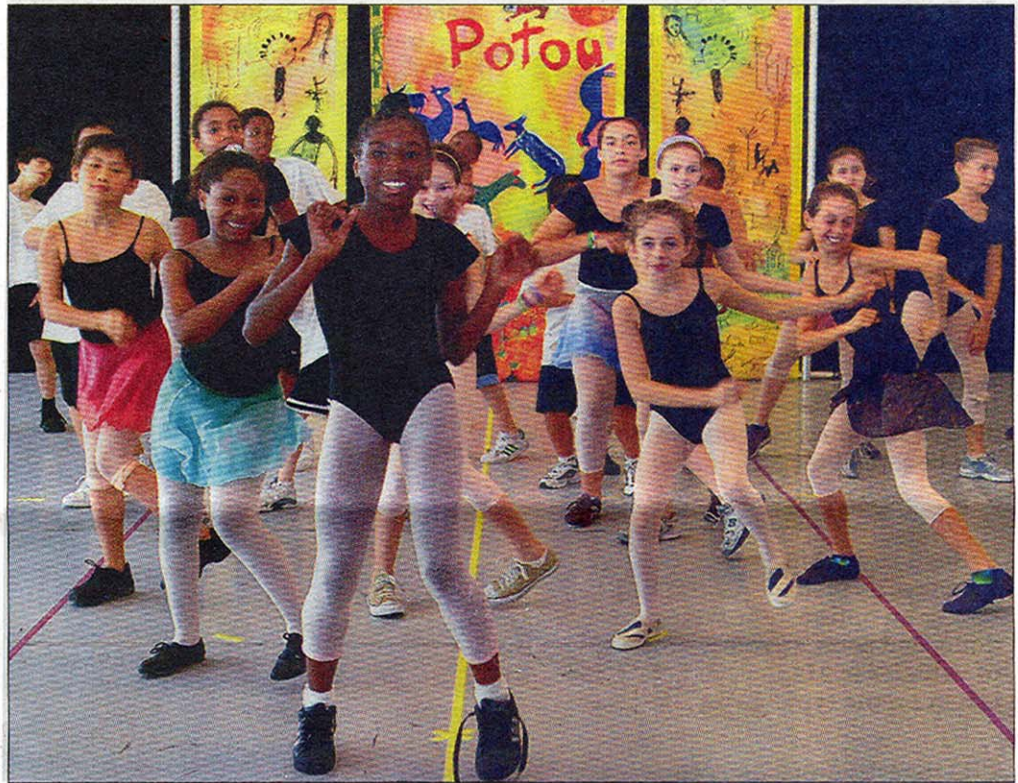


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The National Dance Institute's "An African Village: Postcards from Potou" was a series of exuberant snapshots of Senegalese life, a kaleidoscope of folklore, stories, celebrations, even food.

tween us, person to person, that add character to the mixture. Scene-stealing dancer Brandon Wu was the terrific fish in this jambalaya.

While some programs for children cut corners — after all, it's only a kids show — NDI seems to take pains to make sure that its charges get the best that's available.

The music — bass, keyboard, trumpet, guitar, vocals, percussion, woodwinds — was performed live. There was a live singer, a fluid and charming vocalist named Kaissa and an on-stage percussionist, the meticulous Roderick Jackson.

Lighting, projections and sound were top quality. Karen Hart's African costumes — every imaginable variation from animal ensembles and masks to swirling, colorful tribal garments —

were splendid.

With Jackson, Kaissa and the other musicians establishing the foundation of each number, teams of NDI kids performed works developed from the Senegal connection. A piece called "Water" had undulating movements by performers in light-blue costumes. "Harvest" was a colorful pageant. "Animals" borrowed an element or two from "The Lion King" but was funnier and fresher.

Traditional Senegalese dance is a fast, whirling, joyous aerobic workout. You haven't seen such happy kids as the 5- to 13-year-olds in this show.

Director Ellen Weinstein casts against type. A chunky, fast-moving little white kid led a detachment of warriors. Kids who wear glasses had

starring roles sometimes, as did very big and very little kids.

The hissing, tip-toeing winged children (in black and white) who played mosquitoes were big crowd pleasers. And the 5- and 6-year-olds from PS 1 and 2 in Chinatown stole the show every time they stepped on stage. Very small fry but very big hams.

Questions: Did a great big lump get stuck in the throats of otherwise hard-boiled adults at this beautifully orchestrated assault of exuberance, joy and skill? Yes.

Should the program be funded throughout the city (not just in Manhattan schools)? Yes.

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