

teach-learn connection



NDI dancers rehearse at LaGuardia High School. Below: Jacques d'Amboise offers a little guidance.

CENTERWORK

# Movin' In

*The National Dance Institute lands a permanent home in Harlem.*

BY ELAINE STUART

On a snowy Saturday morning last January, 190 elementary and middle school students filed into Manhattan's LaGuardia High School of Performing Arts. They had been hand-selected by the National Dance Institute, a nonprofit arts education organization, to receive regular weekend dance training for free as members of its performing groups.

In one studio, legendary New York City Ballet star and NDI founder Jacques d'Amboise rehearsed his work for the program's year-end performance. It was a reimagining of Balanchine's *Apollo*, the iconic ballet for which d'Amboise is perhaps best known. The significance of this was not lost on the students. "It's amazing that normal kids get to work with a famous ballet dancer," said Noa Bornstein, 11.

That's just one of many amazing aspects of NDI. Over the past 35 years, the educational initiative has impacted the lives of more than 2 million children through its partnerships with New York City schools and residencies nationwide and abroad. But considering the staggering success of NDI, what's most striking is the fact that the organization has never had a home base.

"We've been gypsies," says artistic director Ellen Weinstein. "We're lucky to have extraordinary friends and relationships. But there is nothing on paper; there's no contract. We're always worrying and wondering."

In a few months, that will all change. This summer NDI is moving into an 18,000-square-foot facility in Harlem. The property, part of an abandoned school that's been converted into a residential development and community space, marks the culmination of NDI's 10-year search for a home of its own.

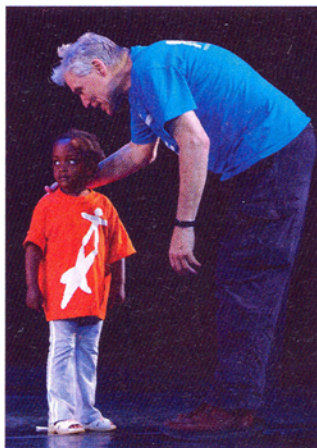
The new Center for Learning and the Arts will house four studios—the largest of which doubles as a 175-seat performance venue—plus administrative offices and a lobby art gallery. "I want it to be a haven for our artists, and not just them but artists in the community," Weinstein says. "I want it to be a bubbling, living center for dance and the performing arts for children."

Despite the new digs, NDI's core mission of helping students in the classroom won't change. The institute conducts programs in 30 New York City public schools, working year-round with 4,000 children—mostly from low-income communities with no other access to the arts. Once a week, an entire grade gathers in the auditorium or gym with a lead teaching artist, a teaching assistant, and a live accompanist (NDI stresses the connection between music and dance). Academic teachers sit in on the sessions to see their students in a new light, and shared curricular themes help them bridge lesson plans.

This year's theme is "A Sense of Wonder: Science and the Arts Play Together." The idea is to "take a scientific principle and—using music, dance, poetry—playfully celebrate that principle," as d'Amboise explained to the dancers in his rehearsal. The previous Tuesday, fifth-graders at P.S. 20 captured that spirit. They memorized movement patterns based on alphabetical science terms ("A" is for atom, "B" is for biosphere"), and teaching artist Mary Kennedy incorporated a fluid "Matrix" step, inspired by the

movie, into a dance routine.

"Although we're demanding excellence, we're doing it in a way that feels joyful," says Tracy Straus, associate artistic director and a veteran teaching artist. D'Amboise agrees. "The teachers are models for the passion and love of an art form, and the morality that is involved in it," he says. He adds that he is eager to expand NDI's teacher training program. The organization has developed a rigorous methodology for its





educators, but has had to borrow or rent space for the two-week training workshops. With the new building, Straus says, "We'll be able to pilot different structures of the teacher training because we're not beholden to anybody else."

Similarly, the Center for Learning and the Arts will enable NDI to increase its after-school and Saturday offerings. Each year, around 200 children receive additional instruction on weekends. Around 100 are invited from NDI's partner schools to join the SWAT (Scholarships for the Willing, Achieving and Talented) Team. "They may not be technically perfect," program director Aileen Barry says of SWAT participants. "But they're the kids who love it, who are dancing while they wait for the bus." After SWAT, some children join the NDI Celebration Team, a group of about 80 junior-high students who show exceptional promise. Weinstein hopes to grow these programs as much as fourfold.

NDI also plans to broaden its international presence from this New York base. It has organized cultural exchanges with Russia, Australia, Bali, and China, but d'Amboise looks forward to seeding ongoing NDI-affiliate programs around the world. They are already experimenting with new technology to reach children in other countries. Last summer, using Cisco's TelePresence video equipment, NDI hosted the first real-time virtual rehearsal with young dancers in Shanghai. "This building is meant to be a communications center for the arts and children globally," says d'Amboise. (Anyone who reads his new autobiography, *I Was a Dancer*, will learn of d'Amboise's extensive global experience as both a dancer and mastermind of NDI.)

The new facility also means something psychologically to an organization that's been around since 1976 but never felt a sense of permanence. As 13-year-old Celebration Team student Ben Korman put it, "Everyplace needs a home, and NDI finally found its." NDI has always run on the passion of its people, but on top of that energy, there is suddenly a palpable excitement for the future. "We will be in control of our destiny," Weinstein says. "So I feel like the sky's the limit now."

*Elaine Stuart has written about dance for The Wall Street Journal and Time Out New York Kids.*