

Dance

Raising the barre

Two kids' companies learn from the best in the biz BY URSULA EAGLY

No one has more energy than a kid. And few dances require more energy than Doug Varone's *Democracy*, an apparition of organized chaos that sends bodies hurtling through hard-edged, quasi-robotic movements. On March 4 and 5, *Democracy* will be performed at the Kids Cafe Festival by Dancewave's Kids Company—a group of two dozen 12- to 18-year-olds who make up New York's only young people's troupe performing the work of contemporary adult-world choreographers. (Along with work by Varone, the company has contended with a Mark Morris piece intricately connected to music and a Trisha Brown dance set to no music whatsoever, as well as works by Twyla Tharp and Bill T. Jones.) While choreographers make special appearances to work with the kids, dancers from their companies are mostly responsible for teaching the dances to the students.

Another up-and-coming group to check out this spring is the Celebration Team, which consists of 80 of the most committed nine- to 15-year-olds from the National Dance Institute, a New York-

based dance-education organization. Like Kids Company, the NDI stars work with professionals from the dance world. And, although in this case the pieces the children perform have been created especially for young bodies (the Team's work is created by teaching artists with professional performance careers, as well as by the occasional famous choreographer), these youngsters, like their Dancewave counterparts, are learning something your average dance class just doesn't teach: the thrill, as well as the demands, of artistic excellence and sophisticated approaches to dancemaking.

For the Dancewave kids, the rehearsals often have less to do with how to move than with how artists make broader aesthetic choices. When Varone came to coach *Democracy*, he brought with him a book of Jean-Michel Basquiat drawings that had been his inspiration for the piece. "I thought it was really important for the cast to understand certain aspects of the movement vocabulary that had nothing to do with dance steps," Varone says. "I'm talking about color and

design, and how that can be translated to bodies in space." Explains eighth-grader Nola Smith, "It was like seeing the dance in drawings. He showed us the depth of the piece."

The Celebration Team works with written language as well as a choreographic one: Its upcoming performance, *A Celebration of Literature*, at Symphony Space on April 1, showcases a collection of dances based on stories and poems by prominent writers like E.L. Doctorow and Gwendolyn Brooks. Master composers such as David Arnam have created the music, and world-famous visual artists, among them Red Grooms, are responsible for the sets.

Enhancing children's performances with work by acclaimed artists is the brainchild of NDI founder, former New York City Ballet dancer Jacques d'Amboise. While the NDI choreography itself isn't as technically demanding as Kids Company's, the productions inspire the dancers to excel. D'Amboise, who grew up in Washington Heights, credits his early exposure to the arts with keeping him off the streets. He says he learned through personal experience to "never, never do anything but first-class everything. If you can get the finest music, the best lighting—children are going to flourish. Why would we give children less than our best?" ● Kids Company performs in March. The Celebration Team performs in April. For information, see Listings.

Time Out New York Kids

MARCH-APRIL 2006

Listings

For weekly listings go to www.tonykids.com

April

Ages 3-6

A Celebration of Literature
Sat 1 at 11am, Symphony Space, Peter J. Sharp Theatre. \$20, children \$12. The National Dance Institute's premier group of kid dancers—the Celebration Team—performs a collection of literary-inspired pieces from NDI's repertoire. See "Raising the barre," page 88. Ages 3 and up.

Ages 7-10

A Celebration of Literature
Sat 1 at 11am, Symphony Space, Peter J. Sharp Theatre. \$20, children \$12. See Ages 3-6.

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