



ANGEL GARDNER

Children from the National Dance Institute rehearse "Volando a México" ("Flying to Mexico"), an hour-long dance program on this year's topic, our neighbors south of the border. "We all need an education in being better neighbors," says director Jenny Seham.

A fun way to learn . . . and so much more

DANCE

National Dance Institute: The Event of the Year

Where: Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School auditorium, 65th St. between Amsterdam and West End Ave., New York

When: 6 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, 6:30 p.m. Monday

How much: \$12 in advance; \$15 at the door. Call (866) 811-4111 or visit nationaldance.org

BY ROBERT JOHNSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK — Kids get excited about learning when dance is part of the curriculum in school. Grown-ups get excited watching the kids thrive physically and mentally. Soon everyone is having fun, and no one could be happier about it than Ellen Weinstein, artistic director of the National Dance Institute.

Each year, the institute founded by former New York City Ballet star Jacques d'Amboise selects a topic for study, which public school students turn into a theatrical event. This performance is called "The Event of the Year." While giving these elementary and junior high students a goal to work toward, the show also publicizes NDI's activities.

Over the years, NDI participants have

studied "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Albert Einstein and an African village. This year, the topic was Mexico. Two hundred local students, plus 11 children visiting from south of the border, will perform in "Volando a México" ("Flying to Mexico") this weekend at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School auditorium.

"I don't think they would know as much about Mexico if they read it in a book," says Weinstein, a former dancer with Garden State Ballet who has been involved with NDI for 21 years. "But I can tell you all of the 3,500 children that we worked with this year know so much about Mexico. They do their own research, and they come in with information, facts and ideas. There are art projects, writing projects and each teaching artist creates his or her own event in the school."

Eight choreographers, including d'Amboise, have pooled their resources to create "Volando a México," an hourlong presentation directed by Jenny Seham.

Seham, a former dancer and a clinical psychologist who is originally from Tenafly, recalls that she was dancing the tango in Argentina when the telephone rang. It was Weinstein, inviting her to take charge of a teacher-training program in Mexico City. A nonprofit foundation called ConArte wanted to adapt NDI's program for Mexico's public schools.

Her experience in Mexico City in 2006 then

became the seed for a yearlong study program in New York and for "Volando a México." "The country is so rich in culture," Seham says, "and we all need an education in being better neighbors."

In the show, a Mexican-American brother and sister named Megan and Xavier go on a journey of discovery. They pass through scenes recounting the Mayan creation myth and portraying an Aztec sun-worshipping ritual, they take part in the Día de los Muertos celebrations in which Mexicans pay tribute to their deceased relatives, and they re-enact the Mexican Revolution.

Contemporary Mexico is definitely on the agenda, with episodes set to music by Nortek Colectivo, a techno band from Tijuana, and the rock group Maldita Vecindad (Cursed Neighborhood).

When the children's plane lands in Mexico City, it is magically transformed into a flock of monarch butterflies. The butterfly, Seham explains, "becomes the mystical guide that takes them from one adventure to the next." Underpinning "Volando a México" are recurrent themes of migration, creation and the way learning can transform people.

"Hopefully all of us are transformed a little bit by watching," Seham says.

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