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Ballet Program Gets Kids Moving

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When Diablo Ballet visits area schools, it leaves the tutus and toe shoes behind. Instead, the company's Adopt-a-Class program imparts the basics of music composition and choreography.



"We start with a choreographic project, which is purely using their imagination through the music and finding their own movements," dancer Corinne Jonas said. "So right away, we come in demanding a lot of them . . . right away they're given that freedom to really explore to the depths of their creativity."

Founded by Jonas' sister, Diablo Ballet's artistic director Lauren Jonas, the outreach program introduces the performing arts to students in lower-income elementary schools in Contra Costa. October through May, students at Las Juntas Elementary in Martinez, Shore Acres Elementary in Bay Point and Valle Verde Elementary in Walnut Creek are treated to monthly activities, art projects, guest speakers and an opportunity to present their own recital at the end of the year.

"A lot of our kids aren't exposed to this," said Teresa Cheung, whose second- and third-graders at Shore Acres surprised her by embracing the program so quickly. "They've never been to the theater or a production." One thing the students notice right away is how down-to-earth the dancers seem: no elaborate costumes or ballet slippers. In addition, Jonas usually brings modern, hip music such as "E Medley," a Latin jazz composition by Pete Escovedo. "We don't want to see them up on their toes," Corinne said. "That's why we bring in music that's not classical ballet music." But before students pick up an instrument or begin creating dance steps, Jonas asks them to close their eyes.

When Berkeley composer and flutist Michael Bemesderfer and professional drummer Darren Driver performed an exotic, Middle Eastern-sounding song for students at Shore Acres, Jonas watched the children's faces. Afterward, she asked, "Did you have a picture in your head when you just heard this music?" "African people dancing," replied one child. "I pictured something growing from the ground like a beanstalk. When they got a little crazy with the drum, it was like the wind blowing through the stalk," said Jonas, whose own physical reaction to the music resembled the motions of an uninhibited flower child, not a classically trained ballerina. "I think what we're doing is sparking something that's inside of them that they don't even really know is

there -- it's just tapping into that part of them that is maybe a little nervous or shy to share," Jonas said. Joan Feury, a second-grade teacher at Las Juntas Elementary, said that many of her students -- girls and boys-- are aspiring choreographers. "Their creativity is what it's all about. I think they like school a whole lot better because they have these opportunities," Feury said.

MULTIFACETED PROGRAM

The Adopt-a-Class program, which is funded by the California Arts Council and the Concord Pavilion Associates, covers many facets of the performing arts -- from a history of "The Nutcracker," and discussions on stage fright to a field trip to watch Diablo Ballet rehearse at its studio in Walnut Creek. During a recent one-hour visit to Shore Acres, the Jonases introduced the children to innovative musicians Bemederfer and Driver, who explained the process of creating music and defined terms such as "tempo" and "rhythm" simply.

Bemederfer, a Chicago native, said the Adopt-a-Class program reminds him that his own desire to become a musician was sparked in the second grade, when the Chicago Symphony visited his school. At the same age, Jonas and her sister, Lauren, were already training to be dancers -- a privilege Corinne says she appreciates.

"So many kids don't have that opportunity," she said. "I feel if we can package up this passion for creativity, movement and dance and bring it to them, present it to them in a way that they can embrace it and understand it -- we can be producing dancers or actors or musicians." Jonas said she shows the children the diversity in the company's dancers. When she introduces Kendall Sparks, a Walnut Creek native, many of the children's preconceived ideas about ballet dancers change. "He tells them that he was a swimmer and that he played football and that right now, he is a surfer . . . A lot of the students, especially the male students, can look at him and look at what we do in a different way."

Diablo Ballet's dancers from Korea, Singapore and Russia also intrigue the students. "When we're going into some of these underprivileged schools, and any public school, there are a lot of bilingual students. When they see that we have dancers from all over the world that are working but still trying to perfect the language, that we can all learn from each other -- that gives them a really good connection," Jonas said. Corinne, 31, said she hopes to retire from performing in the next two or three years to devote all of her time to Adopt-a-Class, expanding the program to include theater activities. "Working with the kids became something for me that's as exciting as actually being on stage," Jonas said.