



Loco-Motion, Where Kids Learn More than Dance

by **Bonnie Rosenstock** May 15, 2016

When I opened the door to the Parish Hall at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, I entered into a world of exuberant creativity. The students from Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children were huddled together into their three distinct groups (other groups rehearse at other times or days) busily focused on working out the choreographic kinks for their upcoming annual spring performance on Friday, May 21, at Columbia University's Miller Theatre. The program consists of 12 pieces on such topics as global warming, how women are portrayed in the media, a dance letter to a playground bully, the lessons teens want to learn but are not taught, three works utilizing poetry, spoken word and voiceover, plus an improvised duet and their first-ever parent-child dance.

Each group, in turn, performed for Lisa Pilato, Loco-Motion's artistic director. She offered comments, suggestions, asked for clarification and posed questions to think about. The concepts and choreography are a result of the kids' collaborative efforts, utilizing a creative process conceived by Pilato, who founded Loco-Motion in 1994. "We provide a forum for young voices to be heard," said Pilato. "We encourage students to create material that reflects their responsibility as members of a global community, to search for fresh answers to old questions while exploring the idea that art can effect positive change. We encourage them to take risks, and we support them in their creative vision."

I asked Pilato about the absence of mirrors in the space. "We don't mind because they have amazing concentration and memory and don't need to look in the mirror to see where they're at," she responded. "At their age, becoming young women [the majority are female], they really have strong self-esteem. I think sometimes mirrors change that. They do really well without them."

I was impressed with the ease of interaction among the students, who range in age from 4 to 18 and represent the city's ethnic, racial and socio-economic diversity. Most of the students were drawn from P.S. 3 on Hudson Street in the West Village, near where the dance school used to be headquartered. Even though the older students wound up in different high schools, they all trek over to St. Mark's in the East Village, where the dance school has been housed for over three years ago.

"They have been together a long time—on average from 8 to 10 years—so they know Lisa's style and have developed their own shorthand language," explained Susie Page, the managing director. In addition to Pilato's modern dance classes, they are also exposed to other techniques like Limón, Dunham, Ailey, even Pilobolus, to name a few, via guest instructors. Students from seven different dance classes spent the last nine months in comprehensive choreography workshops. The overall program consists of seven classes per week and includes Modern Dance and Composition and Dance Lab, plus workshops in acting, playwriting, poetry, mime, directing, ballet for modern dancers, physical comedy and audition techniques. Classes and workshops are a mix of technical and creative exercises that are designed to expand imagination and instill confidence, so that students can develop as artists and individuals. Children as young as five or six are introduced to classes in choreography, directing, improvisation and playwriting. "Of course, the 5-year-olds do creative dance," offered Page. "The mixed ages in the classes are great, as the younger ones get to see older kids."

In addition, more than one-third of the current 100 students attend for free, drawn from New York City public schools through auditions. “Our scholarships are awarded to some children based on talent and others go to those who have experienced personal, economic, or environmental situations that have placed them at risk of not developing their full potential,” said Pilato.

One group of eight girls, 11 to 18, plus a boy, Andrew Korn, 7, is working on the theme of Control in everyday life. “This is crunch time when we’re usually stressed and bickering about getting it done, but we haven’t experienced it as a group yet probably because we’ve grown up together,” stated Ajali Harrison, 18. “We’ve created a bond with each other, so we’re able to communicate well and listen to each other’s ideas.” Harrison and Calley Craig, 16, have known each other for about 10 years and texted often during semester break about ideas for the upcoming project. Harrison’s cousin, Zoë Dalzell-Sexton, 11, who started at age 7, is also in this group, as is Calley’s younger sister, Cecily, 14. “We’ve always been a community with older kids and younger kids,” said Harrison. “When I was a younger kid, I felt my voice wasn’t being heard, so with the younger kids in the group now, we tried really hard to hear everyone’s voice in the choreography. It’s important to keep our community and get a well-rounded dance.” Veronica Habacker, 13, agreed. “I think that’s why this dance became so great.” “The dance focuses on how we all have an individual struggle that is in common,” explained Calley. “Sometimes you can’t hold onto anything, and you have to come to terms with there’s nothing you can do about it.” Harrison added, “There are moments in our dance where we’re all unified, but there will be one or two individuals who won’t be able to keep up or won’t be able to control that aspect, so they lose control of themselves.” Cecily explained how the dance evolved. “We got into a circle and did spontaneous movement, strung it together into a combination which turned out really well. It is one of the main parts of our dance. It adds to the losing control.”

Harrison created most of the music. She experimented with different sounds, and they decided on static. “I immediately thought of ‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,’ where there was a sequence of chaos on the stage which was loud static,” said Edie Fine, 13. Aneka Delilkan-Russell, 13, added, “I think a really big part of Loco-Motion is the music. A lot of other dance schools are more about the moves. We have a really big connection with the music, and we spend a lot of time listening to it.”

The opening sequence for the next group, 12 girls, ages 7 to 17, depicts them walking in high heels, which they cannot quite control; some fall down. “Every woman is supposed to know how to walk in heels immediately,” said Lindsay Alexander, 16. Their theme is How Women are Portrayed in the Media, “expectations and standards,” said Emma Grover, 15. Catrina McGrath, 11, asked, “Why are you not skinny enough? Why are you wearing that? Generally speaking, we have to have a perfect body, clothes, everything has to be perfect, like a Barbie Doll.” “We brainstormed ideas and different ways we wanted to portray how women are influenced by the media,” said Alexander. “We wrote out a timeline where we wanted every part to go. Usually when we’re making up things, it just comes,” she added.

They used voiceovers from real newscasts, like Fox News, YouTube videos and things they hear all the time. “We also wanted to incorporate women’s response to these outbursts that are said to them, how they should act,” said Alexander. “We end on a note that these things are going to be said about us, but we’re not going to let them influence the way we act, the way we want to dress, the way we want to live our lives as women. It is empowering.”

The last group I talked to chose the theme of Hope, danced to “Shake It Out” by Florence + The Machine. “Bad things weigh you down, but you can’t have your past determine your future,” said Kaylah Tucker, 18. Because their group of nine girls ranges in age from 7 to 18, they decided to approach the dance in a way that would give voice to everyone. “At any age, you still have trouble you have to go through and overcome,” said Ting Bertner, 18. “You grow up together and experience the different dances and the feelings about the dances,” said Jane Beck-Policoff, 15. “My first dance, Monster Dance, we were in onesies.”



A scene from Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Measurements," a dance about the pressures of standardized testing and the labeling that happens in the public school system.

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A scene from Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Don't Shoot," which was based on racial profiling and police brutality.

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A scene from Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Painting Skye."

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A scene from Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Colors," a satirical piece that was a type of social commentary on race, color, class and status.

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One of Loco-Motion's youngest dancers explores the acrobatic nature of cats in "Caper."

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