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Rosalie O'Connor

Getting artistic juices flowing at the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn

BY NANCY ALFARO

Tlc A volcano of voices erupts in the stairwell as backpack-laden children, their moms, siblings, and babysitters head to the dressing room. The young dancers shed their jackets and shoes, and bang their way into the studio. A boisterous game of tag begins, and unbeknownst to these barefoot, breathless students, their choreography class has started.

While directing childhood energy can be challenging, expert teachers have developed techniques that put this natural force to work. Choreography classes are a perfect outlet for it, and they are on the rise both in private studios and public schools, according to Jane Bonbright, the National Dance Education Organization's executive director. *Dance Magazine* talked to four dedicated professionals who teach choreography to students of a range of ages. As they've discovered, such classes allow young dancers to explore creative, skill-oriented, physical self-expression.

"Being a choreographer is tough," says Dance Theater

Workshop's veteran teacher **Ellen Robbins**, "so it's great that kids get to experience what it's like to make and present a piece of choreography." Robbins starts off her class with a game of tag, devised to help blow off after-school energy and create an unconscious group bonding experience. She restores focus by calling, "All feet in the middle," and as students rush to take part in that game, too, the warm-up begins.

Improvisation is a necessary tool of Robbins' trade, because she feels kids should experience the freedom they have "while dancing in their living rooms." For her, watching students who memorize steps is entirely different from looking at those who make their own movement. "Kids who've created their steps are comfortable performers because they own it," she says. "They've honed their improv skills enough that when they perform set choreography, they can go on should they 'drop a stitch.' They're freed up to 'Dance with a capital D!'"

Students also perform solos in class and then discuss what reads best and why. Sometimes, classmates learn each other's

movements in order to demonstrate how suggestions (made by Robbins or themselves) would look. Robbins finds that children enjoy giving and getting constructive feedback, and lets them know they can hold onto their ideas if they feel strongly about them. “Most kids are pretty open to suggestions, though,” she says.

Aiming to get dancers choreographing early, **Paula Hunter** founded Jump!, a children’s dance company in Providence, Rhode Island. She believes most young dancers aren’t encouraged to see choreography as a viable future option. When you’re a dancer in a company, “People just arrive and start choreographing on you. The whole idea of Jump! is to break that pattern,” she says. “Choreography is just like composing or making a drawing. There are techniques to do it, and we need people who know what they’re doing.”

One of Hunter’s methods is to let the dancers listen to music, turn it off, and have them make movement based on their musical impression. Or she’ll leave the music on and let them see what it “makes” them do. “Sometimes I’ll use the weather to create movement,” she says, “or science or historical situations like the New England mill girls who were child laborers.”

Hunter includes dance history to give her fledgling choreographers a chance to reference or reject existing concepts. “I’m constantly showing them how Merce would have everyone moving in this dance, while Martha may have used a central character,” she says.

Jump! is more than a creative outlet for her teenage students, as Hunter often tells them to leave their problems for the dance studio. “I ask them to remain neutral in the world, and come here and put all their feelings into a dance,” she says. “The kids love hearing me talk like that.”

As a teacher in a public school, BodyVox outreach director **Anne Egan** uses stories, pictures, or themes to get things cooking. “We have the kids talk about what’s current for them and develop dances out of those concerns,” she says. She finds that middle-schoolers are very connected to hip hop and what’s considered popular and cool.

“Older kids don’t want to look silly dancing,” she says, “so sometimes we do a ‘silly’ exercise on purpose to loosen them up.”

Egan believes that giving kids ideas and examples is a good way to free them up creatively. She’ll have everyone in class present a thematically-based movement, which creates a natural flow of participation and increases creative input. “It’s good to hit people with as many ways of learning as you can,” she says, “showing, telling, or giving them a basic rhythm to start with.”

To get artistic juices flowing, **Misty Owens** of the Mark Morris Dance School in Brooklyn uses creative movement concepts such as space. “We discuss what space is, what level, and is it the space around you or what’s out in the cosmos?”

As the composition course progresses, students become more comfortable with exploring. Once they are moving freely, she’ll have them make up a choreographic “sentence” with a beginning, middle, and end. “This links to what they’re learning in school about writing,” Owens says. She asks them to show these sentences, and has them improvise changes to their movements over and over again, eventually making them travel. “Changing their expression is empowering to them. I’ll have the accompanist add qualitative differences—slow, fast, sharp, percussive—and we weave those elements into their stories.”

The dancers’ final assignment is to choreograph a solo. They draw floor plans of their dances, and for the first time they perform a set movement sequence. Owens says, “They develop a natural sense of pride and grow confident from creating a dance that they’ve memorized and interpreted.”

Learning to create steps and form a choreographic sentence is a great way for children to experience dance. As Robbins says, “It’s helpful that a kid knows what they’re doing before signing up for a lifetime in dance.”

Nancy Alfaro taught creative movement at The Spellman Center in New York City.