

Crash Course in Jazz Dance

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New Bedford pupils soak in lessons from Ailey Troupe by Christina Hickman

“You are now part of the Ailey Dance Company, and you are practicing a jazz routine,” Solomon Dumas informs his students. For the next 30 minutes, the group sashays and grapevines across the room, until they have the whole routine down pat.

But there is something different about this practice. It does not take place on a stage, but in the gym of a school. The students are not students of dance, but students of two New Bedford schools: Global Learning Charter Public School and Our Sister’s School.

And although they are not really part of the Ailey Dance Company, the children really did just perform a jazz routine conducted by three members of Ailey II.

After going to a performance at the Zeiterion Theatre on Feb. 9 featuring Ailey II, an extension of the internationally known Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, sixth, seventh and eighth grade students of the two New Bedford Schools had the opportunity to interact one-on-one with the dancers.

Dumas, Fana Tesfagiorgis, and Slim Mello, the Ailey II dancers, started the kids off with enthusiastic warm-ups, followed by practicing dance steps, and culmination in groups of students performing a routine across the room.

The students were as synchronized as members of a parade marching band and as full of energy as the actual performers. They cheered for each other, shouts of encouragement echoing across the gym. They erupted into applause on various occasions, even if it was just to congratulate a classmate for memorizing a move. There was no negativity present, no criticism, only positive encouragement. The teachers and staff cheered from the sidelines.

“It’s a wonderful experience, whether you’ve danced before or if you’re a new dancer,” said Stephanie Wick, Director of Institutional Advancement at GLCPS.

The dancers agreed. Mello from Salvador-Bahia, Brazil, said, “The kids’ energy is amazing. They make me feel stronger about my art and my dance.”

The children all found something different to enjoy.

For Alyia Dillard, 13, and Jaienne Castillo, 14, of Our Sister’s School, it was learning a new dance.

“I loved watching them perform because of the emotion,” said Sam Shuman, 11, of GLCPS.

The dancers encouraged the students to use this emotion, especially in facial expressions, while they practiced their routines.

Mariah Cote-Perry, 12, of CLCPS, thought the dancers were especially kind. "They came here and wanted to teach us dance," she said. "They give other people, like us, their time."

When the dancers finally had to leave, there was time for a quick question and answer session. The very first question was simply, "Can you stay longer?" followed by nods and yelps of agreement. After group photos and autographs, the students reluctantly parted ways with the dancers.

"There's someone who is going to re-examine their life because of this today," said Rosemary Gill, Assistant Director of the Zeiterion.

This is the second year Ailey II has visited the Zeiterion and GLCPS.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre was founded by Alvin Ailey in 1958. Since then, the Theatre has performed in 48 states and 71 countries, renowned for its promotion of African-American culture and preserving modern American dance. Ailey II is comprised of 12 hand-picked members of the Ailey School in Manhattan.

For Chicago-native Dumas, working for Ailey II is personal experience. "Ten years ago, I was one of these children. I am now a product of what I am doing now."

"You can see the difference you make in their lives. But they change our lives too," said Tesfagiorgis, of Madison, Wisconsin.

For more information about the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, visit www.alvinailey.org.