

## Dance



*Photo by Jennie Miller*

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## Young dance makers break new ground

By Judith Stiles

With election politics heating up the airwaves, it is not surprising that hot topics such as the war in Iraq, race relations and gay rights are among the themes addressed by the recent works of young choreographers at Columbia University's Miller Theater. Telling stories of immigration, slavery and the ramifications of war, the politically savvy Greenwich Village youth of the Loco-Motion Dance and Theater Company dance up a storm.

In a stunning ensemble piece called "Dear Mr. President," a mysterious dancer in a comical, albeit creepy, George Bush mask, prances over the limp body of a U.S. soldier (Zeke St. John). This is followed by dancers in red-white-and-blue leotards streaking across the stage to lunge at the President, pleading with him.

"Bush should go to every family of every soldier that died in this war and apologize," said 12-year-old Gabriel Bosco when asked what the work attempts to inspire in Bush. "He should listen."

In preparation for "Dance Makers & Ground Makers," the Loco-Motion dancers, ages 5-17, have created and choreographed 13 riveting works in exploratory dance labs over the past nine months, under the tutelage of Artistic Director Lisa Pilato. At the end of the gestation period, the youngest dancers, ages 5-7, performed a work called "Little Boxes," lampooning the idea of conformity. Peeking out of holes in cardboard boxes, their arms and legs popping out in all directions, the dancers scuttled across the stage as they attempted to conform to the rules of the music. But as the lyrics of Malvina Reynolds wound down to a close with the words "little boxes made out of ticky-tacky, little boxes all the same," a renegade box worn by Eli St. John, dashed to center stage, defying the pastel norm in a vibrant multi-colored leotard.

Unlike other dance programs, where routines are assigned to dancers to perform in gala shows, Pilato has a gift for leading young artists on a complex journey of discovery, resulting in dances of their own invention. First, they brainstorm about ideas and themes, and then she asks, "What is it we are trying to tell in five minutes of dance?" For months they sort this out, combing through all kinds of music, as they search for inspiration. Pilato adds, "We constantly have to cut things out to make room for new ideas." In "We Are The People We've Been Waiting For," three black silhouettes stand on auction blocks in the blood-red light of the stage, as they

conveyed the pain and suffering of slavery. The scene breaks out into a lively procession of dancers carrying placards, with messages such as “No Child Is Born a Racist.” The dance closes with the placard “Unite” as if the youngsters are telling the adult world to cut out the old and make way for the new.

“Cartoon Relationships,” another dance examining human nature, offers a glimpse into how children perceive the ways in which grown-ups love, hate and fight with each other. The work features a frenetic Tom and Jerry, Popeye and Olive Oil, and a slew of dancers in cartoon character masks.

The fanciful piece “Keeping It Light” creates a world of childlike whimsy as the dancers push, pull and gyrate in colorful sacks of stretchy fabric. In an ensemble piece named “Imprints,” the dancers presented a poignant lament on growing up too quickly. With voiceover and music that included “From Black to Blue” by Yo La Tengo, the children dance to lyrics: “Trying to find myself in a hide-and-seek between worlds, I heard the sound of my 10-year-old joy this morning, speaking of something that is gone.”

These days, when children are zooming into the world of MySpace, Facebook, iPod, iPhone, right out of i-Childhood, it’s refreshing to watch these young “Dance Makers & Groundbreakers” give us a piece of their minds. If you missed the Miller Theater performance, you can catch this magnificent “Shout Out” this Sunday, May 25. These youngsters raise the roof with their dance moves, and remember—in less than a decade, most of them can vote!

Loco-Motion Dance Theater for Children. Sunday, May 25 at 2:30 p.m. \$15/\$10 students and seniors. LaMaMa Annex Theatre, 74A E. Fourth St. 212-465-7710, lamama.org.

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The Villager is published by Community Media LLC. 145 Sixth Avenue, New York, NY 10013  
Phone: (212) 229-1890 | Fax: (212) 229-2790 | Advertising: 646-452-2465 | © 2008 Community Media, LLC

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