

## It's Electric: Third Rail Dance Company

By ALIX FRIERICH

In the shabby basement of a west village church, with Halloween decorations on the walls and the patter of rain outside, LaGuardia student, Julia Paskin, leads a group of teenagers through a dance composition, as her teacher, Lisa Pilato, sits on the side and watches.

"Sometimes its really hard not to step in," she says, "but they'll remember it if they do it themselves. I like to give them a lot of freedom. I don't like to dictate."

This is the weekly rehearsal of the members of Third Rail, a dance company of students ages nine to seventeen. In Third Rail, the members can choreograph their own work while being trained by their longtime teacher and choreographer, Ms. Pilato.

Third Rail company members include five LaGuardia students: junior drama majors, Hale Appleman, Julia Hurvich, Michi Osato, Julia Paskin, and junior art major, Christina Martinelli. With the exception of Hale, these students have been working with Lisa Pilato ever since they were in elementary and middle school as part of the Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children.

According to the company's proposal summary, Lisa started the dance theatre in 1988, with a mission of providing children with a "combination of technique and creative exercises that are intended to extend the imaginative capabilities of each participant." After years of training with Lisa Pilato, students took, what Lisa calls, "the next step in their progression as artists," and, with the help of Ms. Pilato, formed their very own dance company.

Lisa's goal in helping her students form this company was to build "a forum where the students create their own work. I started Third Rail so that they could... do everything from the music to the movement, the lighting, the concepts, the themes, everything. So, that was really the reason, to showcase them as artists and mostly as choreographers. It's kind of cool. They've been a part of their own community for a long time."

Lisa is proud that the students create pieces that are not just a combination of dance steps, but have a story and a meaning. "Third Rail is dance theatre. It's not just dance; we don't just do routines. There's always... a story behind what we do or a concept or a theme. It's very theatrically produced and every year it gets a little bit better. Every year they take more responsibility."

The students feel that they are able to do a lot creatively. "Third Rail enables me to... Express all my emotions and concepts through dance," says Julia Paskin.

Hale Appleman adds in, "Lisa gives us freedom to explore choreography and find our own styles."

Speaking of styles, Third Rail's dance compositions encompass a wide range of styles. At last February's performance at the La Tea theatre on the lower eastside, Ms. Paskin performed a self-choreographed solo piece to a song by the new metal band Tool called "Echoes." Julia Hurvich choreographed an abstract Kubrick-esque piece called "Carton of Milk" and performed her own improvised dance. Paskin and Michi Osato did a duet entitled "Moonburn" to a pop song called "Never the Same Girl Twice." Two of the younger members of the company, Alex Tatarsky and Lana Barkin, performed a piece choreographed by Pilato for Michi and Julia Hurvich called "We."

The two current LaGuardia students had been performing the piece since they were eleven years old. It tells the story of two girls who are the best of friends, but fall apart, and are left only with an old dress to keep the memory of their friendship alive. Michi and Julia had been performing this piece for a few years and, for this performance, passed it on to the younger members of the program.

Lisa finds joy in the fact that the teenagers of Third Rail inspire the younger members of the company. "I've started [the younger kids] earlier based on what Third Rail has done. It's taught me a lot as a teacher, that you can do it younger and younger and younger. So, I don't have to wait till they're twelve to seventeen now to do it."

Ms. Pilato sits on the opposite side of the church basement, watching Ms. Paskin create her own work and jumps in from time to time to make minor changes. "My favorite part about what I do [is] watching a kid walk away from my class who knows what it feels like to be connected. When you've reached somebody or you've reached each other in such a way that it clicks; when they walk away feeling that they've made a contribution to me and I've made a contribution to them and they just walk out feeling good about themselves. I think that has to be my favorite part."

With that, she sits next to Julia, watching her interact with her dancers and gleams with approval.



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