



## **Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children: From the Mouths of Babes, Some Hard Truths about Life**

by Bonnie Rosenstock  
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Miller Theatre - Columbia University School of the Arts 2960 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027

Since its inception in 1994, Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children has presented an annual spring performance, which showcases the creative talent of its students, who come from diverse backgrounds and range in age from four to 18. This year's 12 original dances, a choreographic collaboration between the 90 children currently in the program and their instructors, offered an eclectic menu of themes, including leaving childhood behind, bullying, hope, control, current events, the portrayal of women in the media and global warming, as well as an improvised duet and their first-ever parent-child dance. It was a tasty treat.

"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," said founder and artistic director Lisa Pilato.

In the song "Another World" Ane Brun sings, "I'm gonna miss the sea, I'm gonna miss the snow, I'm going to miss the bees, I'll miss the things that grow. . ." As danced to by the adorable, well-disciplined 5- to 7-year-olds, with older girls who volunteered to assistant teach, it depicted what could happen if we don't take care of the earth and each other.

"Standards," written by the performers, ages 7 to 17, responded to voiceover comments on what is said about women's body shapes, the need to be perfect, to "know your role and shut your mouth." The well-conceived and -performed piece concluded with "There is no one way to be a woman."

In "Carry On," the nine girls, ages 7 to 18, performed about hope. "You still have trouble you have to go through and overcome at any age," said Ting Berner, 18.

Ajali Harrison introduced "Imperium" by saying that people have the "instinctual need to control some aspects of their lives, but some things are out of our hands." The lone boy, Andrew Korn, 7 (the majority of the students in the school are girls), somewhat out of the loop, fluidly danced a solo, then found his way back into the group.

"Letter to the Playground Bully by Andrea age 8 ½" was excerpted from spoken word artist Andrea Gibson's adult work. It was a remarkable piece, both in verbal content and dance. To add authenticity, Pilato's daughter, Soleil, 7, one of the 15 dancers, narrated the voiceover. It depicted the many ways that children are bullied and taunted, with "Andrea" responding, like "Just because no one ever passes notes to me, doesn't mean I'm not super duper. In fact, my super duper may be a buoy or a paper boat the next time your nose gets stuck up the river."

Harrison, 18, and Calley Craig, 16, have known each other for more than 10 years. The engaging “An Improvised Duet ” was created in the moment as a demonstration of their close friendship. Craig told the audience, it was dedicated to all potential friendships waiting to happen and about “exploring trust and spontaneity in our relationships. Sometimes the most important relationships are in our class.”

The 20th Rune “Mannaz” represents the fundamental qualities of humankind. Its symbol was projected on the back wall. The mystical dance was accompanied by Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven,” which itself was based on lead singer and lyricist Robert Plant’s study of Celtic myths. The hooded and robed dancers collaborated on the choreography with Denise Dalfo, who co-teaches with Pilato. They also touched on the mythology of the earth's re-fertilization by the Goddess Danu and the One Tree. The electric guitar solo by Mina Grover rocked the house.

Nathaniel Philips, 21, guest choreographer at Loco-Motion, worked with the dancers on "Thread." Philips said it's about the connection between people, especially in their youth. “Some of our most important connections are made when we are young, and it is at times difficult but ultimately rewarding when we pay tribute to the threads that connect us."

“Somewhere in America,” written by Belissa Escobedo, Rihannon McGavin and Zariya Allen blasted out profound truths about what kids don’t learn in school but should. (Listen to their riveting spoken word performance on YouTube Brave New Voices Finals, 2014.) Powerful movements accompanied the hard-hitting words and brought tears and cheers from the packed house. “The greatest lessons you will ever teach us will not come from your syllabus,” said one of the poets. The list was endless, from banned books, like “Catcher in the Rye” and “To Kill a Mockingbird,” but not banned guns, “which can rip through flesh,” to poverty, racism, privilege, rape and “things missing from our history books.”

“The Year I Didn’t See the Rainbow,” depicted what it means to leave childhood behind, “when we become aware of understanding.” The kids carried poster-size headlines from The NY Times— South Sudan, Paris bombing, Thailand, Gaza, Nepal, Trump, Baltimore, “way worse than the monster under the bed,” said a dancer. “Now when I fall on my knees, I bleed.”

“Framework,” danced to “To Build a Home” by the Cinematic Orchestra, was a bittersweet farewell by four graduating kids, aged out of the program at 18, plus three current students and two alumni, continuing the cycle. “This is the place where I feel I am home,” Patrick Wilson sang, which is how the students feel about Loco-Motion. (The average stay is 8 to 10 years.) There was a lot of contact, hugging and heartfelt emotion. “They choreographed it in one rehearsal,” noted Pilato. Many of the alumni often return to dance with Loco-Motion, to work and teach, either as volunteers or paid, “depending on how much funding we have at any given moment,” said Pilato.

The finale, “Forever,” was a series of brief duets pairing a non-dancer parent with his/her dance-trained child, which they choreographed together. It was an authentic bonding moment. It’s what Pilato’s kids feel every day in her classes. The proof is in the performances.

Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children holds classes at St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery, 131 East 10th Street at Second Avenue. For more information, visit [www.lmdt.org](http://www.lmdt.org) or call 212-979-6124.



Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Another World."

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Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Letter to the Schoolyard Bully."

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Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Mannaz."

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Loco-Motion Dance Theatre for Children's "Standards."

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