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## Front Page News:

### Teaching Kids to Dance at AileyCamp

Sitting in the empty audience of Zellerbach Hall, David McCauley talks about AileyCamp, the educational dance project that he is the charter director of for Cal Performances. Simultaneously, on the barren stage, stripped of its curtains and scrim, some 15 adolescents are being led through modern dance exercises by M'bewe Escobar, who has taught and danced with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for over a decade.

As the students fling their arms upward, outward, forward and back, they shout out the name of the various arm positions. In one month, these students, many of whom have never danced before, will be performing on this world-class stage, under its lights and before a live audience.

McCauley explains that Alvin Ailey, founder of the famous New York-based dance company, believed that dancers need to bring dance—its joys and its disciplines—back to the community from which it came: “He has always had an outreach component in his technique.”

Ailey founded the AileyDance camps in Kansas City in 1989, “using arts to help with academics” through, McCauley explains, “that natural discipline that goes with the arts.” Since then camps have been established in many cities in the United States. In 2001 AileyCamp came to the UC Berkeley campus as part of Cal Performances’ educational community outreach. Berkeley is the first West Coast city to establish the program.

The participants of the dance camp are youths aged 11 to 14. All from the Berkeley, Oakland and Richmond school districts, the students are selected primarily from underserved communities. Although AileyCamp targets students with academic, social and domestic challenges—those things that contribute to an adolescent’s risk of later dropping out of school—the program also welcomes students who have little opportunity to develop their artistic interests.

This dance program is not meant to develop dancers, however; its aims are broader and farther-reaching. For six-weeks the students, divided into four groups, take daily classes in Modern, Ballet and African dance technique. Interspersed with the dance sessions are classes in personal development and creative communications. In these classes the students are taught to value their bodies and themselves as individual and unique beings in the world. And they are taught life skills to help them understand the world around them.

In today’s Personal Development class, the students of group P—the “Professionals,” a name they devised for themselves on the first day of camp—are trying to sort out the differences between being “passive,” “aggressive” and “assertive.”

Teacher Shawn Nealy asks them, “How can you tell a person is being aggressive? How does it affect their voice?”

“It gets louder,” says one of the male students.

“Louder?” Nealy asks.

“Bold,” shouts another student.

Nealy leads the class through other physical signs of aggression—how it affects their body, their posture. After, she asks them to break into pairs and devise a scene in which one student acts passive and the other aggressive. Then she asks them to construct scenes between an aggressive and an assertive person.

In another room tucked among the maze of studios and classrooms that constitutes backstage at Zellerbach Hall, Willie Anderson, principal dancer at Ballet San Jose, leads students in a ballet class. The combination of steps are simple but grueling, geared to developing muscle rapidly and efficiently as only ballet can.

The three young men of the class warm up at a barre in center floor. They are very excited about taking ballet; they have been told the benefits of taking dance class, and one of them hopes it will help his soccer career by improving his strength and coordination.

You might wonder how students can afford a program of five hour-long classes taught by advanced dance professionals, five days a week, for six weeks. AileyCamp, true to its commitment to serving the underserved, pays for everything.

Not only are classes free, but also the dance togs, the T-shirts, the shorts, shoes and backpacks, and, because nutrition is a major concern in the program, breakfast and lunch are also provided free of cost. Sign me up, Scotty!

Given its generosity, the program needs serious funding. It takes a year of fund-raising to put the program in place, and this year, due to cutbacks in grants and donations, the program had to cut back. Cut back, rather than be cut.

Over 250 students applied for acceptance this year, and instead of 80 students, the 2008 enrollment, the program accepted 51—15 young men and 36 young women.

Assistant AileyCamp Administrator Nicole Anthony saw this as a possibly positive thing for the current participants, who now have more "one-on-one attention." Nonetheless, such a large cutback indicates a perilous existence for this unusual and worthwhile program.

Aware of their great good fortune, the students are working hard; their focus and attention are obvious. As is their seriousness. On July 30 at 7 p.m. they will be taking the stage at Zellerbach Hall. Most of the choreography they will present that evening will have been learned in the last two weeks of AileyCamp.

Some of the program will be taken from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's repertoire, and some will be devised by the teachers at the dance camp specifically for these students. Admission to the performance, like everything in AileyCamp, is free, but you do need to make reservations. It will be worth it.



Teenagers practice dance moves at AileyCamp, where the goal is to teach them to value their bodies and themselves as individuals in the world.