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## THE PLAIN DEALER

### Pass the verve

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**Wilma Salisbury**  
Plain Dealer Dance Critic

The Pied Piper of Cleveland stepped in side the gym at Paul L. Dunbar Elementary School and motioned a group of fourth-graders to join him.

Without uttering a word, he led them in a fast-paced game of follow-the-leader. Squealing with laughter, the kids skipped in circles, ran backward, jumped like frogs, twisted their arms in knots, fell in a heap, rolled on the floor and bicycled their legs.

When the Piper finally signaled them to sit down and be quiet, they burned with curiosity.

Who could this character be? A mute? A mime? A brother of Jackie Chan? A crazy person?

No, he said. "I am David Shimotakahara, artistic director of GroundWorks Dancetheater, and this [indicating his partner] is Amy Miller, a dancer with the company."

Their purpose, he said, was to lead a dance workshop. The youngsters might be surprised, he added, to know that they had already done everything they were about to learn.

For the next hour, the duo deconstructed the opening game and identified the basic elements of dance: speed, direction, levels, shapes. Along the way, the students created examples. At the end, they broke into small groups and put together movements that formed a dance phrase.

A couple of weeks later, some groups showed their phrases at Cleveland Public Theatre, along with classes from Clark Elementary School, where GroundWorks had conducted a similar workshop, and Giddings Elementary School, where the company conducted a longer residency. The program culminated with GroundWorks' performance of Shimotakahara's newest piece, "The Book of Water."

The dance audience knows GroundWorks as a small contemporary ensemble that performs original choreography in theaters and landmark buildings. What the public may not know is that the company, like most other dance troupes in Northeast Ohio, also devotes much of its time and energy to education and outreach.

"It's a whole other world," says Tom Evert, co-director of the Tom and Susana Evert Dance Theatre and Cleveland's most renowned dance teaching artist. "It's not the glamorous part. People think artists need fur and chandeliers to do their thing at Playhouse Square. This is what artists do in the trenches. It really serves the community. It's part of our mission."

Dancers in a number of companies have also discovered that outreach programs provide satisfaction beyond ticket sales and applause.

"There are moments with the kids that are so great," Shimotakahara said.

"Sometimes a big light bulb goes on in their heads. When they come to the theater, you see it was not something they just forgot."

For Bill Wade, artistic director of Inlet Dance Theatre, the programs are a source of ideas for new choreography.

Inlet's residency at the Cleveland Sight Center inspired "imPAIRed," a dance of trust for a blindfolded couple. A project at HealthSpace Cleveland led to the development of a group dance "Dream of Sleeping."

Evert says his work as a teaching artist has deepened his humanity and sharpened his craft as choreographer.

"It's hard to do this kind of work," he said. "It's what small, emerging and medium-sized companies do to survive. But it's not just going where a dollar is."

Companies earn part of their income from grants that are earmarked for education. In some ensembles, dancers have the option of doing outreach or supplementing their salaries with part-time jobs. But the motivation is more than financial.

"We're doing it for the art and for the human condition," Evert said.

The mission takes dancers into a broad spectrum of schools and institutions. Inlet works with visually impaired children at the Cleveland Sight Center. Dancing Wheels reaches out to youngsters in hospitals.

Dance/Theater Collective has developed relationships with domestic-abuse survivors and teen survivors of rape. SAFMOD is staffing a residential arts camp this summer at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

Verb Ballets visits seniors in nursing homes. MorrisonDance is partnering with Hard Hatted Women in a program that teaches creative movement to middle school girls.

Although some programs are traditional lecture-performances followed by question-and-answer sessions, the preferred format is interactive.

Rather than simply showing and telling, the dancers give people of all ages the opportunity to experience the joy of dancing.

Getting people

to their feet

Evert demonstrated his interactive skills during a Dancing Wheels lecture-performance in the Cuyahoga Community College Showtime at High Noon series at the Allen Theatre.

While the dancers caught their breath and changed their costumes, Evert got the audience to clap in rhythm, walk in place, swing their hips, shake their heads and discover their bodies as instruments of self-expression. The only people who did not stand up were the ones in wheelchairs, and they - like the Dancing Wheels role models - danced with their upper bodies.

Evert, who has been involved in education and outreach since 1975, is well aware of its value, especially for children.

"I know that it makes a difference," he says. "It can be life-altering in terms of the arts. Problem boys with a lot of energy and behavioral problems see that dance is not alien or sissy. Shy kids who are not fitting in find they can excel. They feel good about something. It helps their self-esteem. One grandmother said her boy was transformed."

The Everts have had exceptional success with their Initiative for Cultural Arts in Education program at Cleveland's Oliver Hazard Perry Elementary School.

The multiyear project is administered by Young Audiences of Greater Cleveland and funded by local foundations, corporations, the Ohio Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Focusing on poets from the Harlem Renaissance, the Everts help students appreciate African-American culture and expand their vocabularies. By theatricalizing action words, kids learn the meaning of verbs, such as "wobble, wobble and slither," and they give physical form to poetic images, such as "the little bird shivering under the eaves."

Bringing joy

to an eager audience

The dancers of Verb Ballets also use word imagery in "Moving Connections," their program for seniors, including some with memory impairment.

On a gloomy spring morning, outreach coordinator Marissa Nesbit and dancer Kallie Bokal encouraged Eliza Jennings Home residents to "wake up" their bodies "and have fun."

Sitting in a circle and responding to lively boom-box music, the residents tapped their heads with an imaginary dose of energy, created fireworks with their fingers, marched in place and pointed their feet like ballet dancers.

Asking the participants to suggest simple gestures that all could perform, Nesbit came up with descriptive labels: "secret treasure" for cupped palms, "thinking cap" for a hand on the head.

Like the children who created phrases in the GroundWorks workshop, the participants choreographed a dance using their own movement vocabulary.

The theme, a trip to Florida, was developed with small movements that expressed swaying palm trees, swimming in the ocean, playing volleyball, eating fried chicken and kicking back with a margarita.

Although the participants remained seated to perform the phrases, Nesbit got up and did a sexy samba to Brazilian music, leading one woman to exclaim, "I wish I could do that!"

The goals of the Verb sessions are to bring back physical awareness, memories and feelings.

"We allow them to be free and express emotion," said dancer Elizabeth Flynn. "We bring joy and music."

During her performing career with Cortez & Company in New York, Flynn was involved in an education program for children. But senior outreach is a new experience for her and other Verb dancers.

To prepare for the challenge, they took a workshop led by dance therapist Lillian Weisberg and funded by the Bruening Foundation.

"She taught us to navigate through the group, have a concept and work with a purpose," Flynn said.

The warm smiles and grateful words from residents of Eliza Jennings and Menorah Park indicated that the dancers had succeeded in brightening the participants' day. And the performers came away feeling rewarded, too.

"They give you something of a profound nature," Flynn said. "They want to move. They want to share. I couldn't believe what they have to offer. It's mind-blowing."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

wsalisbury@plaind.com, 216-999-4248

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