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STEP BY STEP

AN INNOVATIVE PROGRAM SHOWS STUDENTS HOW DANCES ARE CREATED

By PEGGY McGLONE

Want to learn how something works? Take it apart.

That's the theory choreographer Carolyn Dorfman applies in her innovative education program, Backstage Pass, a performance workshop that provides students with the opportunity to observe modern dance and learn how it is created.

Presented earlier this month at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre on the campus of Drew University in Madison, Backstage Pass engages in a kind of movement improvisation, as Dorfman and her eight-member company work with school groups to help them understand dance and choreography. The three-part program starts with a performance and concludes with Dorfman deconstructing the performance, and then building a new dance with the audience's help.

"All of us move as we tell a story," said Dorfman, who founded the Union-based dance company 18 years ago. "It goes back to human gesture. My dances are a combination of what I see in life."

The workshop performance is especially suited to Dorfman's newest work, "Mayne Mentshn (My People)," celebrating her Eastern European Jewish heritage. The dances dramatize Dorfman's family stories - her parents' emigration from Poland, their holiday gatherings and her own cultural experiences growing up as a first-generation American.

Because they tell a story, they are more accessible than many modern dances. More importantly, they are created with everyday movements that help

Dorfman the teacher to explain her work as choreographer. The opening number, "The Klezmer Sketch," builds a series of gestures - from reading the Haggadah at Passover to clasping hands in prayer to passing food around the table - into a swirling enactment of a holiday gathering. Many of the same gestures return in the second piece, "The American Dream," a more demanding piece, physically and intellectually.

After the performances of these dances, Dorfman brought her dancers back on stage to improvise a new dance. To get the youngsters thinking about how movement is part of communication, Dorfman requested that they create their own gestures that tell something about their morning.

"You can't tell him, you have to move it," she said as she coached one of the first-graders from Far Brook School in Short Hills. "Did you have breakfast? No? Well, tell him you're hungry."

As she spoke, Dorfman leaned back, moving her arms in a big circle that ended with her hands clutching her stomach. "Make it broader (than real life), but be specific. You need a really clean image," she said.

The demonstration continued with the dancers forming a straight line down the middle of the stage. Dorfman set the scene - the dancers were waiting in line for an amusement ride - and she asked her audience for ideas of what they might be doing while they waited. "Block the sun," "eat something," "lean on the railing" were a few of the instructions. The movements were paired with emotions - one dancer was told to be annoyed, another bored, another impatient.

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Dorfman then told them to move out to the side to show emotion, and back to the centerline for their movement. Don't forget to use stillness to contrast the movement, she added.

And on her count, the eight dancers improvised their characters, creating an undulating line of movement that told eight different stories. The student audience cheered.

In addition to demystifying modern dance, Backstage Pass integrates the state-mandate curriculum standards for arts education. Dorfman's company provides study guides for teachers, outlining the vocabulary and basic techniques of modern dance, as well as its historic roots and important figures.

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Dorfman deftly included many of these ideas in the program's conclusion, a Q&A with the crowd. In addition to the obvious queries - How long have you been a choreographer? Where do you get your ideas? - the students asked

about Dorfman's use of speed, and the patterns that were created by repeating movements.

Some of the teachers said the hands-on demonstration was critical to their students' understanding of the art form.

"Dance allows the students to become more expressive," said Alphonsus Platt, vice principal of the Walter O. Krumbiegel Middle School in Hillside, who brought two seventh-grade classes to the performance. "Movement is a part of everything we do, and if we are going to involve the arts, this is where we have to start."

The program is important for the dance company, too.

"We're building our audience for later," said Tom Werder, executive director. "We see this as a way to bring in kids, and explain modern dance (to them) when they are open to it."