

## **Boston Ballet Leaves Many 'Dancing in the Streets'**

***By Christina Leonard***

The ballet attracts all sorts. However, with tickets priced from \$35 to over \$100, and training tuition as high as \$5,000 per year, the art is available in Boston only to those who can afford it.

Of course, not all dance training is this expensive, and one has to recognize the quality of training at lower-priced dance studios. These more affordable studios offer a creative environment for a child, with technical training at the same time. Boston Ballet offers professional elitism in its training - its purpose is to craft the perfect dancer. They know how to spot 'em young, too.

Citydance is a scholarship program offered to third graders in the Boston Public Schools, with the mission of offering students from all social and economic backgrounds free dance lessons. Jillian Scales, the program coordinator, explains that the program's employees visit third grade classrooms each Fall and perform a one hour ballet demonstration for the kids. Jillian attests that the students who "show a strong interest or a little bit of natural ability are invited to participate in the program."

Boston Ballet's efforts are noble, but seem skewed in their emphasis on natural ability. Instead of focusing on the benefits of creative expression and independent thought in dance for all children, the program seeks out those who have the potential to be molded into what Boston Ballet has come to stand for: the prima ballerina.

This year, Citydance visited 68 Boston public elementary schools, and presented to over 4,000 children; however, only 300 were given the opportunity to participate in the ten-week program. After the session concludes, the kids are invited to take another series of free dance lessons. The catch is that the students have to be recommended by their teacher in order to move up, which means that have to show improvement. Jillian Scales said that "we aren't recruiting new dancers; it's really about exposing them to this [ballet] world."

This opportunity for the naturally talented to receive free lessons is short-lived. It lasts for three ten-week sessions, after which any student who wishes to continue training must officially enroll in the Boston Ballet school, and begin tuition payments. Last year, only 15 of the 300 students enrolled in Citydance chose to continue their studies after the program concluded. For a low-level children's class, tuition is under \$1,000 per year. As the levels increase, students must attend more classes. Mid-level classes are between \$1,200 and \$1,500 per year, and upper level training can be as high as \$5,000 per year. This hardly seems fair to the children who were introduced to the art and then left with few options to continue their training.

This year, however, Boston Ballet is offering scholarship applications to the entire school, rather than just the upper level students. A former Boston Ballet student's mother explained, "They offered payment plans, but if you chose any of them, interest would accrue on your bill."

If the girls who loved their free dance lessons in third grade wait a few more years, Boston Ballet is happy to invite them back for their Taking Steps program, which introduces girls ages 11 to 14 to many cultural and theatrical dance forms. Taking Steps

places little focus on the technical aspects of ballet; program coordinator April Shepard explains that they strive to expose the girls to as many dance forms as possible, including folk, modern, and jazz. The program is much smaller than Citydance, with only 60 participants. While the girls work with their directors, Mila Thigpen and Paul Sedgwick, who say that the smaller class size allows for more personal development among the students.

Unlike Citydance, Taking Steps is not concerned with the children's technical improvement, and does not strive to make future students out of its participants. It provides a very creative and cultural focus on its repertoire. Last Spring, the girls brought the Harlem Renaissance to the stage in their annual performance.

While encouraging children to express themselves is the supposed motive behind Boston Ballet's free dance programs, one wonders why they do not make their art more accessible to the public. Instead of offering a creative outlet to all, the high-costs of tuition maintain a selective populace in the dance world. Boston Ballet can and should start taking steps of their towards public accessibility.