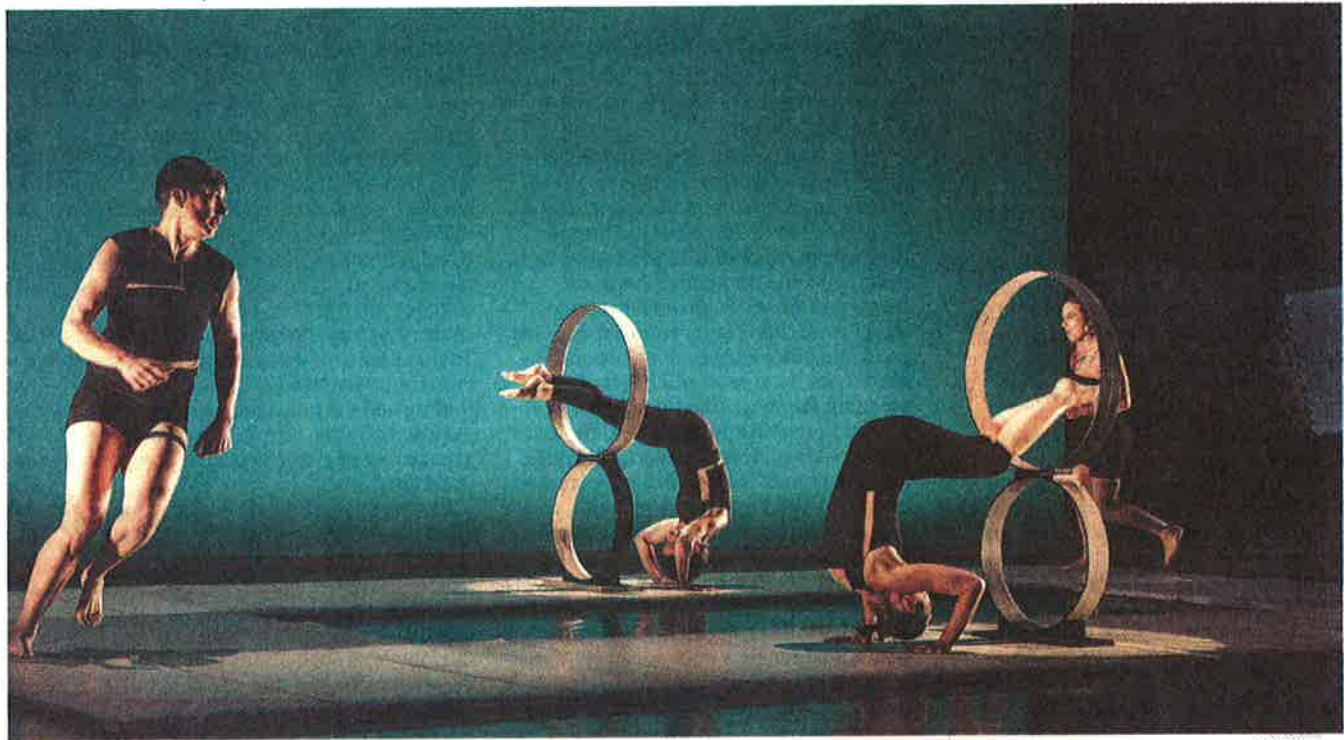


The New York Times

THE Arts

Grabbing Young Fans For Dance

From left, Lollo Romanski, Molly Chanoff, Sarah Dey Hirshan and Fe Fox from the troupe Lava performing as part of the Victory Dance venture at the New Victory Theater. Its performances and discussions attempt to help children understand dance and themselves. Page 5.



PAULA LOBO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Dancing And Hoping To Win Fans For Life

By BRIAN SEIBERT

There was nothing unusual at the New Victory theater last week in a request to turn off electronic devices, except that it was directed at audience members not entirely versed in theatrical etiquette. When the lights went out, they howled. In silent sections, they started clapping a beat. In between sections, they tested out moves.

The spectators were schoolchildren. For the New Victory, this was not unusual, either. The theater specializes in children's entertainment. Yet the performances were part of a new three-week experiment called Victory Dance. Through Friday, the theater is presenting wide-ranging programs of contemporary dance, free of charge, to children in participating summer schools, day camps and homeless shelters. (There is also one performance each week for the paying public; the last one is on Thursday evening at the theater, on West 42nd Street in Manhattan.)

Like all New Victory shows, this one has an educational component. The theater's teaching artists meet with the children to lead discussions. During the performances, staff members surround each piece with questions and activities. Hence, the try-it-yourself moments.

The midshow interaction isn't part of every New Victory performance, but the Victory Dance programs are typical of the theater in one crucial aspect: The dancers are performing pieces that they normally present to adult audiences.

"We don't do what people think of as children's theater," said Cora Cahan, president of New 42nd Street, the theater's nonprofit parent. "We don't even use that phrase."

Mary Rose Lloyd, the theater's director of artistic programming, explained that it's work "that doesn't speak down to children but that will excite them."

Victory Dance originated in discussions between Ms. Cahan and Ms. Lloyd about what to do with the theater this summer. Ms. Cahan thought of a mixed bill of dance, possibly like the ones she used to perform in. Then came the idea of free shows for children in the city. "These are kids that are going to grow up here," Ms. Cahan said. "I want them to fall in love with the whole spectrum



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAULA LOBO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

of what's available here in dance."

Ms. Lloyd came up with a "fantasy program" of nine high-profile choices, expecting most to decline. None did. As she discussed with them which pieces they might bring, she kept having similar conversations: "They would show me work and say, 'We couldn't do this,' and I would say, 'You can do more than you think.'"

Finding interested schools and day camps proved more difficult than Ms. Cahan had expected, but she was even more surprised to find herself crying during the first shows, moved by the sensitivity of the children's responses. "The project has exceeded our rather lofty expectations," she said.

After a morning show last week, dancers and choreographers gathered to discuss the experience. Monica Bill Barnes, who hadn't performed much for children before, said it was a pleasure "because I feel like they haven't learned not to react." She continued, "With kids, you hear this inner monologue on how it's going."

Mario Ismael Espinoza, a dancer with



Ballet Hispanico, a company with a formalized program of performances for young people, agreed. "Kids don't have a filter," he said. "If they're engaged, you know. And if they're not, you know."

Sarah East Johnson, the artistic director of Lava, an all-female troupe of dancer-acrobats, said that she was most excited by the opportunity to open up possibilities for how children might un-

Ballet Hispanico, above, performing as part of Victory Dance at the New Victory Theater in Manhattan. Children, left, are the target audience.

derstand dance and themselves.

As Ms. Johnson pointed out, that day's program had opened with her company of strong women hugging and holding one another aloft, and it ended with the men of Ballet Hispanico showing off together in a work by a female choreographer. Ms. Barnes and her dance partner, Anna Bass, while dressed in men's suits and ties, had danced with Rat Pack swagger to a Dean Martin recording. The jokin' star Lil Buck, from Memphis (and the festival's sole out-of-towner), had pretended to be a swan while gliding with great beauty and quivering emotion to classical music.

"Kids are my favorite audience," said Lil Buck. "I love to hear their reactions, because it's not just a reaction. You're putting something in their heads. You're changing their minds."