

Step in time

Anne Gilbert makes sure these kids can dance.

BY LODI McCLELLAN

FOR 18 YEARS, Kaleidoscope Dance Company has performed its annual "Gift of Dance" concert without ever receiving a real

KALEIDOSCOPE

'Gift of Dance'
Roosevelt High School Auditorium
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review. Before last Sunday's performance I wasn't inclined to review it either. The reason is simple. Kaleidoscope is a company of 23 kids, ages 8 to 14. It didn't seem fair to scrutinize them with the same exacting standards reserved for a professional troupe. I've had to rethink that assumption. The Kaleidoscope concert wasn't only good, it was refreshing and, somehow, important—a stunning reminder of how choreography as a manifestation of ideas can be more engaging than choreography as extension of ego or imitated steps. All credit goes to Anne Green Gilbert, Kaleidoscope's artistic director.

Before founding Kaleidoscope and her studio, Creative Dance Center, in 1981, Gilbert earned an MA in education, taught third grade for several years, and spent seven years as the director of the Bill Evans Dance/Seattle Children's Program where she developed her seminal teaching methodology based on concepts, not steps. Gilbert borrowed movement vocabulary from Rudolph Laban (foremost movement educator), adapting it into what she calls "Sesame Street Language": high/low, fast/slow, curvy/straight, big/little, etc. Each week a different concept is highlighted in class. The kids play with the material day after day, year after year. "The result is like this great lasagne," Gilbert says. "It's re-

ally rich and very deep."

Gilbert started CDC and Kaleidoscope as a model for what she believes should be in public schools. She was hired two years ago by Superintendent John Stanford to write the dance standards for an anticipated arts-based curriculum in the Seattle Public Schools. Stanford's death was a blow to this vision. "Washington is a very conservative state," said Gilbert in a recent interview. "I just heard that the state superintendent has decided arts assessments are not going to be mandatory. There's going to be a big fight about that." Gilbert is frustrated too about lack of government support for Kaleidoscope. "We've given up on applying for city and state grants. They don't fund children, which is a shame because I don't know where they think the adult artists are going to come from."

Still, Gilbert persists in nurturing her young protégés and her one-of-a-kind company. Children at more traditional dance studios typically perform in year-end recitals, which are usually choreographed by their teachers or more likely by the studio's artistic director. Gilbert's students

Dance

create and perform their own choreography, as well as that of outside professional choreographers, one to three times each month in public schools and twice each year at a pro-



Kaleidoscope is the type of dance program Gilbert believes should be in public schools.

fessional venue. Kaleidoscope has also performed nationally and internationally at music conferences, including performances in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Russia, and Canada.

PERHAPS THE MOST distinctive aspect of Kaleidoscope is Gilbert's belief in teaching children about choreography as process not product, all the while managing to combine this educational vision with professional performance standards. "I really hate to have a concert," says Gilbert. "It's the process I'm fascinated with."

Still, the product is very impressive. Gilbert's exacting standards for creating

choreography could be compared with any graduate choreography program in the country. The kids are responsible for all the choices involved in creating a dance: choosing dancers, music, costumes, title of the piece, and, most importantly, concepts, themes, and ideas. Acting as adviser, Gilbert videotapes the work in rehearsal, then asks each choreographer to write down the dance's strengths and weaknesses. "These kids are really smart about watching dance," says Gilbert. "They'll turn to each other and say, what's our focus, or, the ending is not right, or, we need to have more pathways, everything's in a circle." The rigor shows.

The "Gift of Dance" concert included six pieces co-choreographed by Kaleidoscope members. In *Stories by the Campfire*, set to a pulsing Caribbean-sounding score by Jim McGrath, six 10-year-olds performed a very sophisticated theme and variation abstraction of the title's idea—never once miming or in any way literally representing the theme. A trio of girls created a very tastefully designed ABA structure for *One Way Trip*, which explored the idea of running: to escape, to arrive, to bide time on empty.

Seven young teens performed the "Balls" section of Pat Graney's work-in-progress, *Faith*, which will be presented in polished form in the spring concert. The dancers performed this and the four other adult-choreographed pieces with surprisingly mature focus. The kids' transparency prevents them from elaborating on or upstaging the choreography; if adults performed this way, I'd call it humility in service to the work. The result: We see and remember the dance, not the performer.

Despite Kaleidoscope's performance talents, Gilbert says her goal is not to produce adult professional dancers. "My main purpose is to produce people who are educated in dance so they can go out and be advocates for the arts. I know these kids will be good dance audiences. I'd like to see Kaleidoscope members become dance critics, politicians, and CEOs... even the president. Now that would make some changes!" ■