

A dance company with a difference

Inclusive group gives young dancers ‘a safe space’

People say kids grow like weeds. But for Ottawa dance educator Hannah Beach, the analogy isn't a pejorative. After all, weeds are resilient, adaptable and spontaneous.



Dandelion Dance Company's teen dancers express their most personal feelings through movement. Friday, Dandelion performs a sold-out show at the NAC Fourth Stage that uses their lives as material.

And although they are usually overshadowed by their cultivated hothouse cousins, they have a beauty all their own.

"You can't stop dandelions, no matter how hard you try," says Beach, explaining the name of her Dandelion Dance Company, a remarkable group of young women aged 13 to 19 who explore and express their most personal feelings and experiences through movement.

Unlike other dance programs for youth, Dandelion doesn't focus on technique, exams or a fixed repertoire. Instead, its members are encouraged to create and interpret their own dances, using their life stories for material.

What makes the company truly special, however, is its commitment to inclusivity: although the girls are selected by an audition process, all abilities and backgrounds are welcome, including mental and physical challenges.

Beach's unorthodox approach was inspired by two youthful experiences. The first was going through traditional classical ballet training and its world of tutus and buns and starvation diets.

"It almost killed me as a teen," says the petite mother of three. "I mean, I loved it. But I never felt

I was skinny enough. Or perfect enough. In ballet, you're trying to attain this ideal. I finally realized that I loved dance so much when I could just put some music on and move. With Dandelion, I wanted to give young girls a safe space to experience that freedom and find their voice, without the pressure of needing to achieve perfection, either physically or technically."

The second inspiration was growing up with a brother who had Down's Syndrome. "Where I was dancing, at the time, my brother wasn't welcome."

At Dandelion, there is no segregation: all the girls work and perform collaboratively. Beach believes this teaches acceptance, compromise and empathy.

"We don't take a vote on things," says Beach, who also has a background in social work. "You'll always have half the kids who say, 'yay!,' and half who say, 'that sucks.' Everything we do has to be agreed on by the whole group, by consensus."

Whatever Beach and her girls are doing, it works. Dandelion has grown into a major local success. They tour area schools every month and have been invited to perform at national cultural and social conferences and events. On Friday, Dandelion performs a sold-out show at the NAC's Fourth Stage. The dances in Spilling Open include the story of an Iranian girl in a Turkish refugee camp, a foster kid's description of her difficult relationship with her mom, and a piece about inclusion choreographed and performed by a young dancer with Down's.

Beach's passionate commitment to children and dance goes well beyond Dandelion. She also runs Tournesol Dance, a school of interpretive movement for young children of both sexes, and she has published I Can Dance, a series of dance education books for kids.

"I think we tremendously undervalue our young people," she says. "We're always asking kids what they want to be when they grow up, as if what they are right now isn't important. We are so voice-oriented. But for children, or people with disabilities, even if they are non-verbal, dance gives them an alternate way to express themselves. And they have a lot to say."

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