

EVENT REVIEW

Arts Corps A phenomenal success story

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The excitement and energy is everywhere at the Intiman Theater. On the stage you can hear drumming, bells, vocalized rhythms, spoken word poetry, solo singers, dancers, and original instrumental music. In the lobby you can see collaborative murals, prints made with squid dipped in colored ink, paintings based on dreams, masks, and original ceramic sculptures with brilliant glazes, digitized photographs, video clips, and computer programs. Just off stage, children mill around with drums almost as big as they are, as even smaller children dressed in white shirts wait for their turn to dance. They seem like a flock of birds fluttering before they begin to soar. On stage, they are accomplished and serious dancers performing choreography of their own creation, no matter what their age or size.

All of these creative children and youth, all of this excitement, is part of the quarterly public celebration of Arts Corps, Seattle's unique after-school arts program. Arts Corps' slogan, "Make Art Anyway," is a wonderful pun on their mission, which is to empower children to be creative and imaginative in a society that considers the arts to be a marginal frill. Arts Corps hires professional artists to teach children in after-school programs. They collectively make art anyway they can and in spite of the lack of support for arts in our public sector spending priorities.

Only a year ago last falls, Arts Corps held its first classes with 11 teaching artists at six facilities. This fall they had 200 students; the program has already reached a total of 700 children with a budget of only \$275,000. This spring they will have 27 classes in 17 facilities. The program has exploded into a success beyond anything its founders could have imagined.

But it is no accident, and a lot of hard work by a tiny staff is what is making it all happen. Executive director Lisa Fitzhugh is the only full time staff, along with three part-timers. They operate out of a small house in Madrona and when I was there, between terms, it was one phone call after another, a question to answer, a fire to put out. These people are dedicated.

One of the secrets to Arts Corps' success is the teachers whom they have hired. They are professionals in their fields who give not only their time, but also their dedication to teaching and who bring their own equipment to support the program. For example, Bill Moyer, a percussionist and sound designer, teaches drumming. He carries his own conga drums around in his Honda civic. (Q.: How many drums fit in a Honda Civic? A.: Eight). He is teaching children the technique of vocalizing rhythms, an art form he learned in Northern India. His young students at Bailey Gatzert Elementary School are only in the third and fifth grades, but they went on stage with the calm presence of real professionals. Another creative teacher is Matt Marshall, a filmmaker trained at Montana State University. He provided a short animated film of a birthday cake that went through various amusing transformations. The students developed music for it as well as captions, calling it "Flags on the Castle." Marshall used his own editing software to assemble the

final project. The result was a witty, musical animation that stunned the children when they saw and heard their own creativity.

Sonya Boothroyd is artistic director of Turf, a break dance theater, as well as a multimedia artist. She taught "urban dance" this fall at Yesler Community Center and the Seattle Girls School through Arts Corps. Her technique is to combine hip hop and modern as well as some ballet. The children at Yesler were highly motivated, she said, to create dances together. Boothroyd provides her many personal talents, music, and energy, but in her classes she encourages the students to connect with dance from the heart, to create movement that speaks of their own experiences of the world. She believes that dance is a way of encouraging positive group dynamics and self-expression.

The visual artists are equally compelling and dedicated. Tomas Oliva Jr and Lauren Atkinson helped their classes design murals on the theme of "Seeking Safety." Lauren's class made a Mandala Tree, Oliva's class made a large jigsaw puzzle, part of a collaborative program with Cape Town, South Africa. The mural will travel there next year to join murals that children there have been making on the same subject. All of the murals will also be on display at the Seattle Art Museum this May.

One of the themes of Arts Corps is that the art classes are only the beginning or only part of their mission. Arts Corps is part of the community, not just an after school program. They are now talking with officials at King County Department of Community and Human Services, the Chemical Abuse and Dependency Youth Treatment Providers, and the Public Defender's office, who are eager to get their kids into Art Corps programs because they recognize how central artistic expression is to lifting a child's self-esteem. This idea of the arts is not new. Think of the government funding for community art centers in the 1930s. The arts then were seen as a means to help people through difficult times. Artists were sent all over the country to teach photography, printmaking, painting, sculpture, music, writing, theater. They became part of the life of people, on the model of John Dewey, who wrote a book called Art as Experience. Holger Cahill, the head of the Government Arts Programs and a devout disciple of Dewey's, spoke of moving "art into life." He wanted to democratize the arts and not confine them to an experience available only to the educated elite. Between the 1930s and now, continual cuts in art education for children led to too many public officials who did not understand the arts as a fundamental and necessary part of human experience.

Happily, Arts Corps is making it possible for youths in Seattle to once again enjoy the power of art to transform lives, communities, and society.