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Dance

Young dancers explore other cultures

by Lynn Jacobson

Seattle Times staff reporter

More than 50 young dancers crowd the stage of the Moore Theatre. Most are wearing practice clothes: sweat pants, tank tops, shorts. Some are tap dancers, some classical Chinese dancers, some Mexican and African folk dancers, but all are intently following the movements of New York choreographer Abdel R. Salaam, who is leading the group through a warm-up.

Salaam bends and straightens his knees; the dancers do the same. He raises and lowers his shoulders; they follow. Then he doubles the speed of his shoulders, then doubles it again; they dissolve in laughter.

For many of these dancers, ages 9 to 21, trained in different disciplines, this is the first time they've ever experienced a contemporary American-style dance warm-up. But they're all game to try. They've come together to rehearse and present the second "Dance This" youth showcase at the Moore, and the spirit is one of cross-cultural collaboration.

Seven groups will perform on the program this Saturday night: Chinese dancers from the HengDa Dance Academy; Adefua African Music & Dance Company; Mexican folkloric dancers Perlas Tapatias; Tap Squad; Anomaly, a modern-dance troupe; Westlake Dance Center students in a hip-hop piece; and Ewajo Dance Workshop, presenting a Latin number.

Some are newcomers who've never before appeared on a professional stage. Others - like hotshot 18-year-old tapper Ambra Wates - are already old pros. Choreographer Salaam's job is to meld these diverse young artists into a cohesive unit. He has fashioned transitions to link each group's performance to the next, and a finale featuring select dancers from the seven troupes.

Salaam, who directs the Forces of Nature dance company based at St. John the Divine in New York City, knows all about fusing diverse styles. He was trained in modern dance,

ballet, jazz and African dance, and has taught, performed and choreographed on four continents. One of his goals is to open his students' eyes to the vast range of dance traditions worldwide.

"It's important for different young people to be exposed to a variety of cultures and the way passion expresses itself through movement," Salaam said.

"Dance This" organizers also want to demonstrate the links between various schools of movement. Ewajo artistic director Chris Daigre noted, "A lot of these kids got introduced to dance through what's popular." He said they might not know that styles like hip-hop, tap and modern dance share African and Latin origins.

At last Monday's rehearsal, the similarities between the different forms could not be missed.

The tappers displayed rhythmic footwork, as did the Mexican folk dancers; the Mexican folk dancers and the Chinese dancers performed with fans; and the Chinese and American modern dancers shared a supple use of the spine.

These correspondences were not lost on the participants. Aaron Pitre, a 17-year-old Franklin High School student who is performing at "Dance This" with Ewajo for the second year in a row, said the dancers have all been quick to embrace each other's styles.

"Since we're all dancers, there was a sort of a connection," he said.

Some have even been inspired to try new forms. HengDa's Shirley Yiong, who moved to Seattle recently from Taiwan, said, "I'm really excited about being here and seeing all the different styles. I want to take flamenco and salsa."

Still, the dancers appreciate their differences.

"I think Chinese dance is very unique, very beautiful," Yiong added.

"Dance This" is produced by Seattle Theatre Group, which presents performing arts programs at the Paramount and Moore theaters. Poncho is sponsoring a free, invitation-only performance for summer youth-program participants on Friday. The only public performance will be Saturday night.