



# Introducing Our Early Childhood Program...

The Duluth School of Ballet's Early Childhood Program is specially designed to provide children between three and six years of age with a strong foundation in dance and movement. The syllabus was written by Lisa Michaels, co-artistic director of the school with Peter Garick until 1997, to specifically meet the needs and abilities of young children. The curriculum is based on her years of experience in teaching young children, as well as the best sources available to date for dance training for the very young.

Through participation in this program, young children learn the basic elements of movement and dance: space and how we relate to it, both as an individual and as a member of a group; the eight basic locomotor movements; musical rhythm, beat and time; opposites and directions; some elementary positions of ballet. Integrated with these physical concepts are the intellectual concepts of self-awareness, creative expression, imagination, teamwork, and basic body/health awareness.

As well, students also learn the basics of classroom behavior and manners, which remain the same throughout their dancing years. These concepts include learning how to take turns, following another dancer or leading the way, waiting patiently, working together with others, and having a positive attitude

Educators now know that training young children in the concepts of movement sequencing, patterning, and spatial relationships lays a strong foundation for

the later development of reading, mathematics, and other educational skills. Children in the DSB Early Childhood Program work actively in all of these areas.

The Early Childhood Program developed at the Duluth School of Ballet has been so successful that it is now being sold to dance teachers and studios throughout the United States and Canada. It has also been the subject of two major articles in the highly respected publication, *Dance Teacher Now*, an international magazine for teachers.

## How Classes Are Structured

Classes in the Early Childhood Program are grouped into four age-specific levels.

Children age three are enrolled in Creative Movement classes. Four year olds are assigned to Pre-Ballet A, while five year olds are placed in Pre-Ballet B. Six year olds enter the Primary level. These classes meet once a week and last from 45 - 60 minutes, depending on the level.

Class structure for all three levels is essentially the same, with the content based on appropriate developmental skills for the specific age. Each class begins with a brief sharing time. Students take turns moving around the room using an age-appropriate traveling step. Class continues with a center warm-up that includes all of the major muscle groups and is the basis for the barre work taught in ballet classes at a later date. From this, students learn correct pos-

ture and the placement of the body over the legs. (This is very important for both dancers and non-dancers!) The exercises in this section also teach balance, port de bras (arm movements), and include various types of jumps that are the building blocks for the allegro (jumping) steps of classical ballet.

Following the centre warm-up comes stretching. These gentle exercises progress in difficulty as students gain flexibility over the years. The third section of class develops the locomotor skills that form the basis for all ballet steps that travel.

The final portion of class is devoted to developing creative expression. Students participate in a variety of free movement exercises that teach listening skills (responding to the tempo and mood of the music), levels (high, medium, low), and directions (forward, backward, sideways). Also included are group skills, which involve learning how to relate to other dancers. Young dancers who are consistently exposed to this type of activity in class are generally more creative in their choreographic efforts in late years and are consistently freer in their movement styles as they develop. Besides, it's just plain FUN!

## Examples Of Developmental Skills As Taught In Our Early Childhood Program

It is important to remember that physical skills that often seem quite simple to us as adults are very difficult and complicated for young children.

### Creative Movement

Three year olds are quite new to learning how their bodies move, as well as how to behave in a classroom. Children in this program are gently introduced to the classroom environment. Because this age

child loves and needs repetition, the same class is repeated several times before being changed.

Some of the concepts taught are stretching the feet (the foundation for a balletic battement tendu), balancing on one leg (an essential skill for the dancer), weight transfers from one foot to the other (the basis for balancé), jumping, simple arm movements, stretching, and moving across the floor. Many types of movement characterizations are used to develop both movement quality and imagination. Toward the end of the year, skipping is introduced.

### Pre-Ballet A

The program for four year olds builds on the work done the previous year. Students at this age now learn to further control their movements. Weight transfers are done not only forward and backward, but also from side to side. Balances are more sustained. Jumps are now done in basic patterns, traveling steps are often done with partners, and skipping is learned both forwards and backwards. Students also start learning the concepts of counting music and opposites.

### Pre-Ballet B

Five year olds continue to work on the same concepts, but in greater degrees of complexity. Their ability to count the music is developed, they utilize opposite arms and legs while skipping, galloping, and balancing. Weight transfers are taught in more complex patterns, and traveling steps across the floor are done on half pointe. They also begin to learn the technique of spotting (the snap of the head that allows dancers to turn without getting dizzy).

## **Primary**

At age six, children move into the Primary level, a transition class for students preparing for the study of the classical ballet technique, which begins at age 7. Essentially, this class takes the concepts learned in the Early Childhood Program and begins to put them into the format used in an actual ballet class. By the time students have turned seven, they are ready both physically and mentally to begin studying the beautiful and disciplined theatrical art form that is called classical ballet.

## **A Note About Instructors**

All instructors who teach classes in our Early Childhood Program receive extensive training in the syllabus before they ever enter the classroom, and are monitored and updated in teaching techniques regularly.