

Little feet



These pee wee performers are little, yellow, different—and turning out thoroughly modern moves at Dance Theater Workshop.

Stage

Dance Theater Workshop lends its stage to a crop of new choreographers.

By **Elaine Stuart**

Modern dance has a reputation for being overly abstract and impenetrable. But don't tell that to 13-year-old Maia Sage Ermansons. Since the age of five, she has enjoyed the dance style not only as an audience member and a student, but as a choreographer as well. On Saturday 19, as part of Dance Theater Workshop's annual performance series "Dances by Very Young Choreographers," she'll present *Memory*, an exploration of shifting friendships, inspired by her experience of attending a small, all-girl NYC school.

Maia's piece is one of the 15 original works choreographed and performed by dancers ages eight to 18 that will be showcased. Ellen Robbins, DTW's longtime resident dance educator, selected the lineup from some 90 works students presented at her class recitals last

summer. Robbins says she looks for "a variety of styles to show how modern dance can stretch in every direction, from pretty to provocative." The result, she hopes, will yield "a program that children who have never seen dance before can appreciate, because each piece is in a child's distinct voice."

Maia's "short, compact" work, as she herself describes it, opens with three dancers (she and two others), then shifts into a solo that plays off the pattern of steps established by the trio. "My friends have moved on and I'm remembering," she explains. For the final segment, two more dancers join her onstage, and the new trio repeats the initial group's movements in reverse. The dance's cyclical phrasing mirrors the repetitive themes in her chosen music, Ravel's "Bolero."

Maia's and the other students' individual choreographic styles have been developed in classes during the year. Through lessons in technique, improvisation and composition, Robbins has helped her students explore shapes, stories

and dramatic ideas by moving through space. "I provide the structure and the kids provide the content," she says. In each case, the result is an original composition that's deeply stirring onstage.

"Since they've created the dance, they perform it with an authenticity that's their own," says Robbins.

Young audience members, in turn, are inspired by witnessing their peers' work. "After the show little kids are looking at you, and you feel like a role model," says Maia. In fact, it's the enthusiasm of the next generation of dance-makers that keeps this unique series running strong year to year.

"The children drew me to 'Dances by Very Young Choreographers,' but Dance Theater Workshop's consistent support made it bloom," Robbins says. "This concert shows the public that children's art is worthwhile."

"Dances by Very Young Choreographers" takes place on Sat 19. See Weekly Calendar for details.

Sunday in the Park with George

Studio 54 Previews begin Fri 18.

You had to hire a babysitter when you went to Tim Burton's bloody film version of *Sweeney Todd*, but not all of Stephen Sondheim's works are too mature for your show-tune-loving tween. Come February, Broadway's Roundabout Theatre Company will import a celebrated London revival of the incomparable composer-lyricist's Pulitzer Prize-winning opus *Sunday in the Park with George*. Inspired by Georges Seurat's painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, this intricate musical meditation on the art of making art details the Neo-Impressionist's struggle to balance life and work, and his great-grandson's similar efforts a century later. Although kids may not get all the adult themes (success versus failure; a relationship with a mistress), they should grasp the show's famous anthem on art, which laments that "Putting It Together" is never as easy as it looks. And they'll surely marvel at the wondrous visual effects, including a canvas that seems to paint itself and video projections that allow characters separated by centuries to sing together. It's a double dose of high culture, with sci-fi CGI to boot.

—Raven Snook



(TOP) JULIETA GERVAITES; (BOTTOM) TRISTRAM KENTON