

THE PILLOW'S YOUNGEST CHOREOGRAPHERS GET READY TO GO

BY KATE MATTINGLY MORAN

When Chloe comes bounding into class wearing a bubble-gum-pink leotard with an attached chiffon skirt, her fellow students look at her as if she's from another planet. "My usual leotard is dirty," she explains.

Most 6-year-olds wouldn't question the chiffon fabric for a dance class, but Ellen Robbins, their teacher, doesn't turn out typical grade-school-aged dancers. Instead of teaching the usual ballet and tap lessons that many young dancers cut their teeth on, Robbins has, for the last thirty years, offered New York City children classes in choreography, improvisation, and technique. In the 1970s, when she began her children's program, she taught one class a week. Now she teaches fourteen. "She's extraordinary," gushes Chloe's mom, Nora Brennan, a former Broadway dancer. This month, Robbins will receive an ultimate stamp of approval: twenty-five of her 6- to 17-year-old students will perform at Jacob's Pillow, an internationally recognized dance festival in Becket, Massachusetts, from June 28 through July 1.

During rehearsals for the Pillow performances, the students' confidence is striking. They are exceptional performers, fully invested in their movement. Robbins builds the children's commitment and comfort with movement in a number of ways. "I take time to help kids find music and to look at their classmates' solos," Robbins says. "Looking at dance is inspiring and helpful. I weave technique and improvisation together so that technique is never separate from dancing. I give responsibility and a voice to each student." She laughs and adds, "Sometimes that can backfire."

During Robbins's classes, students do speak up. They even suggest favorite warm-up exercises like "Jump Toaster," a jack-in-the-box-like exercise that has 6- and 7-year-olds popping out of the toaster at the beginning, middle, or end of a piece of music depending on how well-done they want to be. Robbins, now in her 50s, incorporates their ideas into warm-ups, along with lessons in timing, shape, and quality. She also works improvisation into the warm-up, saying it informs choreography and "gives a fluidity of movement."

The dancers' commitment and creativity also come through in their practical but individual attire (bare feet, leotards, sometimes leggings); it seems to reinforce the fact that



PHOTO BY KEN WITTENBERG

Ellen Robbins has been teaching choreography and improvisation to children for thirty years.



PHOTO BY PAUL H. TAYLOR, COURTESY ELLEN ROBBINS

Ten-year-old choreographer Ariane Rockoff-Kirk, center, doesn't shy away from a difficult theme. She and four other dancers will perform *Children of War* at Jacob's Pillow

they are here to work: to learn, to perform—and to make unique dances. "My class is for the parent who doesn't want rote learning for their child," says Robbins, who teaches children age 5 to 18.

Specific warm-up exercises vary depending on the age of the dancers, but the structure of the classes is roughly the same for all. After the warmup, students learn and perform group dances by Robbins—but here, too, creativity is encouraged. "The pieces are structured so that seams can open and characters can be created according to the children's desires," she explains. One of these pieces will be on view this summer when 11-year-old students present Robbins's *The Garden Party*, a Victorian tea party in which each student becomes her own refined lady.

At the end of each class, students work on and show their own dances. The 6-year-olds create one-minute-long narratives or explorations of the music. "Their pieces range from abstract—motivated by a kinetic response to the music—to pieces based on a dramatic or poetic idea," says Robbins. Older students present solos that are longer and more varied. In all classes, discussions follow each student's piece. After the kids watch another student's choreography, "I ask what they like, remember, and what would help the dancers' intentions become clearer," says Robbins.



PHOTO BY PAUL H. TAYLOR, COURTESY ELLEN ROBBINS

Julia Mounsey will show her own piece called *Mrs. Witherspoon and Percy*.

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"They learn from being on the viewer's side and on the participants' side."

Students hold their own rehearsals outside of class when preparing new pieces and Robbins often attends to watch and give feedback. Her process is very hands-off: rather than recommending movement, she asks the young artists questions about what the music makes them feel or the mental images they have. "Don't tell me, show me," she often says.

Parents of Robbins's students are as enthusiastic as the young artists. Carol Clements, mother of Livia Whitemore, was a modern dancer who knew from the time Livia was 3 months old that she wanted to enroll her in Robbins's class. "There's a sense of wholeness to Ellen's process. It's about creating, making, and analyzing something," says Clements.

And the themes the children tackle can be surprisingly sophisticated. Watching *Children of War*, a quintet choreographed by Ariane Rockoff-Kirk that will be on view at Jacob's Pillow, it's hard to believe it was made by a 10-year-old.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do," says Rockoff-Kirk, when asked what inspired the dance. "I was thinking about doing a dance to a poem. I was listening to the music and

thinking about problems we have today—like war. As I began to create movement, I thought a group piece that would express the idea of stress, like what pain people go through in war, would be amazing. The dancers came to my house and we talked about what children would be feeling if they lost their parents or were fleeing their country. Ellen visited rehearsals and helped us a lot."

Even though Rockoff-Kirk has never attended Jacob's Pillow, she appreciates how prestigious it is. "I'm really excited and surprised" by the chance to perform there, she says.

Robbins's program began, rather appropriately, at Dance Theater Workshop, a center for innovative performances in downtown Manhattan. Robbins credits David White, now executive director of DTW, with being the "inspired and intuitive" person who has backed her program over the years. He's also the person who brought about the Jacob's Pillow performances, since he and DTW's senior producer, Craig Peterson, are the ones who invited Ella Baff, executive director of Jacob's Pillow, to see Robbins's show at DTW.

"You can see so much work in New York that you get jaded after a while," says Peterson.

"But when you go see Ellen's show, it is really fresh. The performers feel everything they are dancing. Ellen is really good at getting kids to create dances that don't just look pretty. There's an integrity to the work."

Robbins is now holding her children's classes at Rod Rogers Studio on East 4th Street. But when DTW moves into its renovated headquarters in 2002, White hopes that Robbins will begin teaching her "technique of teaching," in the remodeled space. "It's so unusual," says Peterson. "It's not about jazz or tap or ballet. It's about creation. It's about expression." ■

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PHOTO BY PAUL H. TAYLOR, COURTESY ELLEN ROBBINS

Eleven-year-old dance and choreography students will perform *The Garden Party*, choreographed by their teacher Ellen Robbins, at the Pillow.