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Two DC-based choreographers create a literacy project for middle school students.

BY RACHEL CALDWELL

Matina Phillips and Eleni Grove had been working together collaboratively for three years as choreographers for Washington, DC-based Alight Dance Theater when, in 2015, they decided to engage their community in a new way. “We were looking to do something that was more playful and lighthearted, but still allowed for depth and meaning to come through,” says Phillips. “This idea of working with language from books, we felt, could let us dabble on that spectrum. We felt inspired and challenged by the idea of shaping what we do with words.”

The two decided to add an educational component to a work they had recently created, Page 115—a series of dance vignettes based on excerpts from the 115th page of a range of books, including John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill*, Isaac Asimov’s *The Planet That Wasn’t*, and *Analysing Performance: A Critical Reader*, by Patrick Campbell. They created a multidimensional learning experience that covered literary devices, creative and collaborative skills and theater etiquette. Funded by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities’ Field Trip Experiences program and presented by Joy of Motion Dance Center (where Phillips is on core faculty), this new Page 115 was performed at Joy of Motion’s Jack Guidone Theater for more than 700 local middle- and elementary-school students in March of this year to celebrate National Reading Month. The funding covered the cost of transportation and tickets for all students, as well as theater costs.



Page 115, performed by Alight Dance Theater

The Project Takes Shape

From the outset, Phillips and Grove knew that they wanted to use dance to tap into the creativity of local middle school students, while simultaneously reinforcing important concepts. “We wanted to take language and reading—something that they encounter every day at school—and allow it to be a creative, out-of-the-box experience for them,” says Phillips. “We wanted them to find a personal sense of empowerment in taking their ideas in their own direction while being in a collaborative environment.”

They chose three sections from their original version of Page 115: a section based on Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a section about the solar system based on *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, by Carl Sagan, and a section about body language inspired by *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, by Allan and Barbara Pease. Between performing each segment, Phillips, Grove and fellow dancer Erica Chamblee conducted three 3- to 5-minute lecture demonstrations to highlight specific moments and posed questions to the students like “What did you see?” and “What did you hear?” to engage their critical thinking. “We’re

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trying to narrow in on how they’re processing this information. It’s not just something they’re seeing. It’s something they’re really having to think about,” says Phillips.

Each one-hour event culminated in a 20-minute interactive improvisation activity. First Phillips and Grove reworked segments from page 115 of a variety of middle-grade books with interest



Creators Matina Phillips (in blue) and Eleni Grove (in red)

language, asking students to raise their hand when they heard a word that stood out to them. They then collected those words on a large pad of paper. Students then broke into groups of four to six, chose words they liked and then created their own shapes based on them. Phillips and Grove used this segment as an opportunity to talk about literal versus abstract interpretation of language. To conclude, the pair instructed students to take their shapes and move through space in different ways.

Takeaways for Students and Presenters Alike

Phillips quickly learned that for this age group, collaboration was especially beneficial. "We realized that many of them think 'Everybody is looking at me,'" she says. Having students work in groups and taking the time to jump in and demonstrate set their minds at ease. "It's helpful to see us take the lead," she says. "When we go up to them personally during this improv structure, they're very open to it. They just need that push."

While many students expressed some initial hesitation, their trepidation quickly melted away when they began dancing. The results were surprising. "There were so many times that I witnessed things from students that I would never have even thought of. I am so inspired by that," says Phillips. "I had a group that worked together to create a movement based on the word 'wave.' They all got on the floor and put their feet on the shoulders of the person behind them. Then they did what looked kind of like a snake. And I thought, 'Wow, who

would have thought of that?'"

Because many in the audience had never attended a live performance at a theater before, Phillips and Grove took the opportunity to enlighten them about theater etiquette, as well, having Joy of Motion school programs coordinator Kourtney Ginn give a pre-show speech about what it means to be a good audience member.

Whether the middle school students they worked with go on to become dancemakers or audience members, Phillips hopes they took something from the experience that they can apply in their lives. "They're working together, they're generating their own ideas and they're taking ownership of them," she says. "We demonstrate all of this mostly through movement, but we know that it can be applied in all sorts of areas as they grow and continue building a strong sense of self." Learning to work with others, thinking both critically and creatively and engaging in a kinesthetic approach to learning about language and literature were all encouraging takeaways.

With positive feedback from both students and faculty at the schools they worked with, Phillips and Grove hope to continue with this new educational component of their work. "This is part of Alight Dance Theater work now," says Phillips. "I look forward to continuing to bring movement and literature together." DT

Rachel Caldwell is a Dance Teacher contributing editor and writes from Berkeley, California.



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