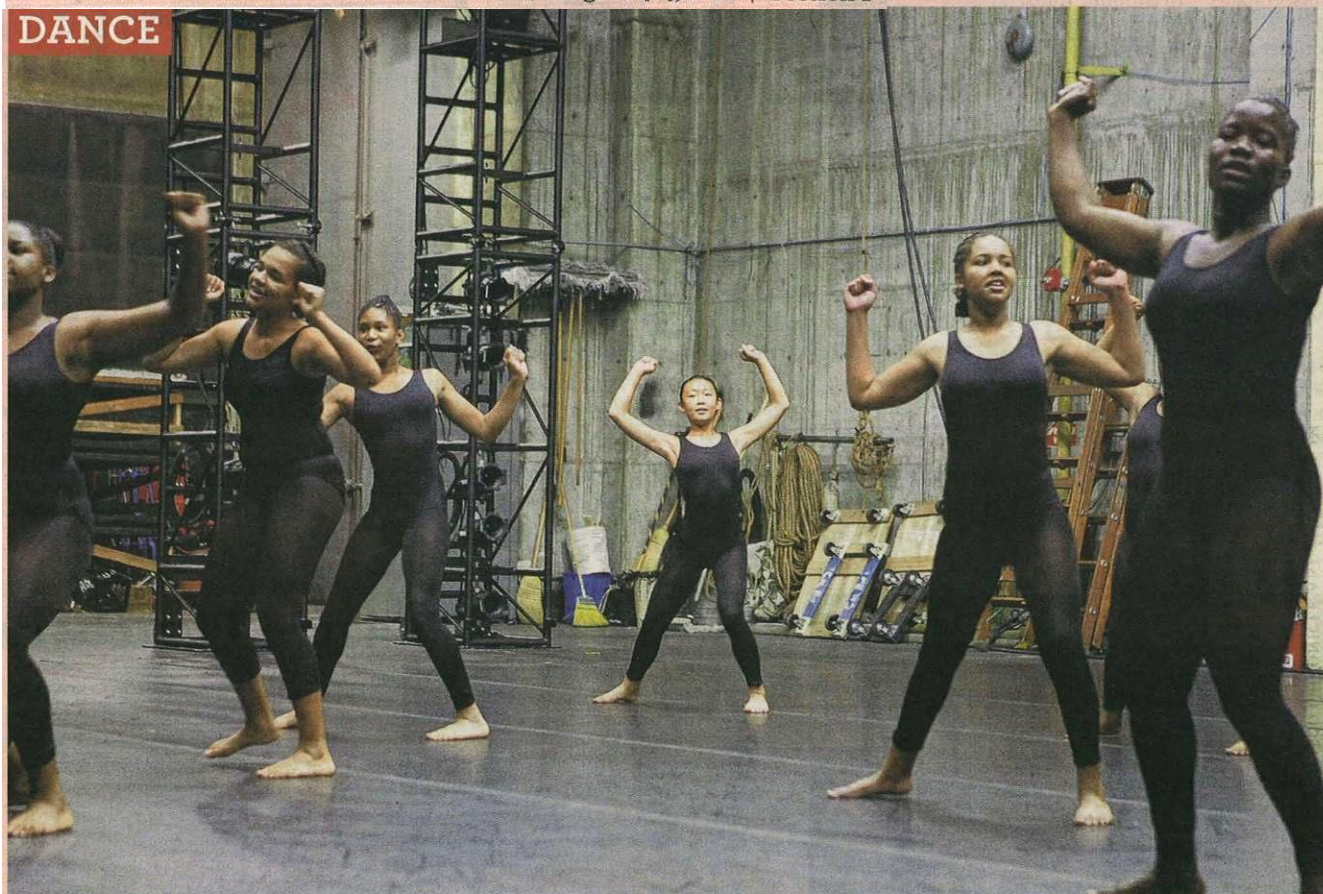


Ovation

Your Bay Area arts guide and companion to Sunday Datebook

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DANCE



Maddie McGarvey / The Chronicle

Campers at the six-week Alvin Ailey camp practice African dance at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, where they perform tonight.

AileyCamp keeps kids on their toes and reaching far

By Mary Ellen Hunt
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

On the vast stage of UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, rows of middle-school children are standing in vaguely organized lines. They're trying hard to be attentive, but they look fidgety, the boys pulling fitfully at their shirts, the girls ad-

justing their leotards.

"Stop moving," says their group leader Yejide Najee-Ullah, walking in front of them as she inspects their lines.

"Stop scratching yourself, just stand there. We're training you to be professionals all the time. You have to hold your yawn back, hold your sneeze back."

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DANCE

Challenging camp keeps kids focused

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It's only the third week of the six-week AileyCamp — the 10-year-old tuition-free summer dance program offered under the auspices of Cal Performances and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — but expectations for these children is clearly high.

From the front of the stage, instructor Naomi Johnson Diouf — or as she's known to the kids, Mama Naomi — watches them sharply. Satisfied with their focus at last, she gets her West African dance class under way.

Warm but relentless

Some are shy, some are less coordinated, but all of them seem galvanized by Mama Naomi's driving patter. A warm, maternal presence, she nevertheless is a taskmaster and has the whole group down on the floor executing relentless patterns of crunches — eight reps each, one leg up in the air, the other in the air, both in the air, oblique crunches, crunches with knees tucked. You imagine that Calvin Klein models do no less taxing a routine. A kid in the front collapses his feet to the floor and Mama Naomi prods at him, "Keep going!"

"I have new things to teach you, but it's not up to me," she says bluntly. "I have worked with 10 different dance companies, and I know. You can be the best dancer, but if you have a bad

attitude? Uh-uh. They don't want you. And you know, that's life."

Chosen from nearly a hundred applicants in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades from the Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond and Albany unified school districts, the campers receive not only dance instruction but also the dance clothes and shoes they'll need and other supplies, plus breakfast and lunch — all fully paid for out of the \$250,000 budget that Cal Performances raises each year.

Dance schedule

Students take a regular schedule of ballet, jazz, modern and West African dance classes. But AileyCamp — which has nine counterparts scattered throughout the country — offers more than just dance. The daily programming aims to strike a balance between physical expression and internal reflection, and it also addresses the realities facing these kids, who come from underserved communities. There are lessons on personal development, including nutrition, drug-abuse prevention and conflict resolution as well as developing decision-making and goal-setting skills.

In Erika Padilla-Morales' creative communications class, the kids are busy decorating the fanciful masks they've created with paint and feathers as part of the costumes for their final show — a freewheeling performance that takes

Transitions: Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp at Cal Performances. 7 tonight. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. Free. (510) 642-9988.

place at Zellerbach Hall today. They also keep daily journals to help them improve writing skills and give them another outlet for expression.

"Right now we're focusing on identity," Padilla-Morales says. "It can be hard to think of things to write about when you're faced with a blank page, but the one thing these kids are experts on is themselves, so we start there and build a toolbox for them."

The goal, she notes, is to train well-rounded people. Interchange among the students themselves is an important part of their classes, and although the program's 54 students are divided in four smaller groups, each subgroup ranges in age and level.

Good influence

"We find that the older students can positively influence the younger ones," says Padilla-Mo-

rales. "But it works the other way around, too. These kids know they don't have to put a face on for each other, and the younger ones enable the older kids not to be 'too cool for school.'"

"The point is to make the experience fun and enjoyable," says director David McCauley, "but also to teach the basic life lessons. All arts require this kind of discipline."

McCauley has directed the camp since it opened in June 2002, but the origin of the idea began with Alvin Ailey himself.

"His fundamental philosophy," McCauley goes on, "which is often repeated, but which is important, is that dance

came from the people, and it should be returned to the people."

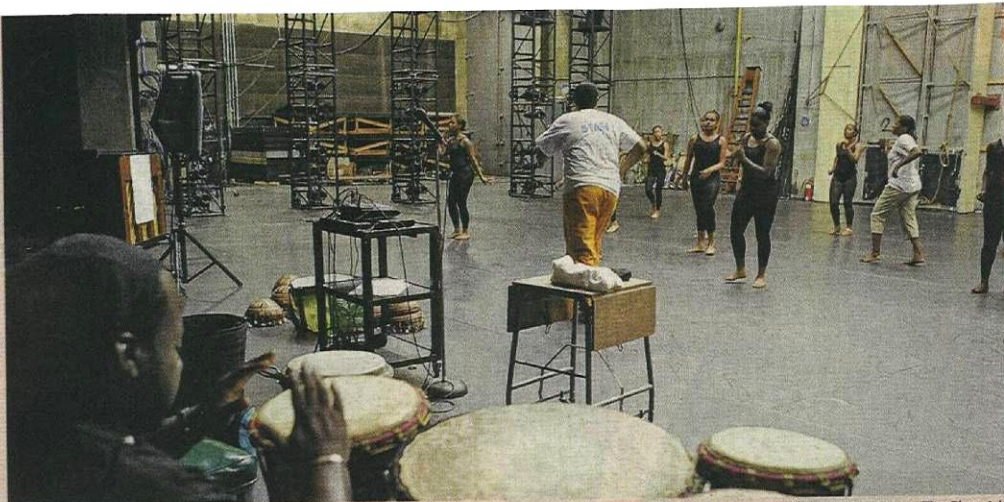
It's no overstatement to say that the program can be life changing. The statuesque Najee-Ullah, who guides groups of kids throughout the day, was a camper in the first AileyCamp in 2002, and although students can only do the program once, she knew she wanted to return. She has been a part of every AileyCamp in Berkeley since the beginning.

"I wanted to do whatever I could to give back," she says. "I want to help them understand how to unlock their potential, because this program is not just about

dance — it's so much more. These kids hear so much negativity in their lives — 'You can't do this, you'll never be that.' People are always ready to tell them they can't reach their dreams. We want them to step forward, take initiative and become leaders."

"The best part about being involved in this is watching the transformation they go through, seeing them grow and mature, push past their limits. Sometimes they don't even realize until later how much they've changed."

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Maddie McGarvey / The Chronicle

AileyCamp participants are schooled in dance as well as other skills: "The point is to make the experience fun and enjoyable but also to teach the basic life lessons," says director David McCauley.