

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Carolyn Merritt

Teaming Up: tD and Mighty Writers

by Lynn Matluck Brooks, Carolyn Merritt, and Karl Surkan

This spring, we at thINKingDANCE [tD] piloted our first youth program in partnership with Mighty Writers [MW], a dynamic non-profit that teaches writing to youth ages 6 to 17 at five locations throughout Philadelphia. Local dancers Guillermo Ortega Tanus and Eun Jung Choi worked with a team of tD facilitators to offer two dance-and-writing workshops at the MW El Futuro branch in South Philly. Thirty-five young people ages 6 to 13 attended each session, which began with 45 minutes of guided movement exercises and games, followed by 45 minutes of reflection, writing, and discussion. The fully-subscribed workshops were a hit with students and facilitators alike.

Workshop I - Monday, February 26, 4:00-5:30pm

On a late afternoon in chilly February, tD writers worked with Guillermo Ortega Tanus and the South Philly crew of Mighty Writers to play with movement and words. The tD team—Lynn Brooks, Patricia Graham, and Kat Sullivan—together with 19 youngsters, followed Guillermo's patient and persistent direction in circling up, paying attention to one another, and passing movements and energy through the group. A few initially reluctant participants couldn't resist being drawn in, and when break time came, everyone was so engaged that they chose another round of the movement game in progress rather than heading off immediately for snacks.

After the refresher, the tD team took over, forming smaller circles in order to share experiences from the movement workshop—exchanging thoughts, movements, and names, and writing words and phrases on butcher-block pads. Each group came up with its mode of word-finding and recording, sometimes integrating some movement with the process. Once again, when the allotted time was up, the Mighty Writers kids were so excited about their composite statements that they had to be teased away from their groups. As for the facilitators, we left energized (*and* exhausted!), and hopeful for further opportunities to team up with community organizations to share dancing, writing, and creative enthusiasm.

Workshop II - Saturday, March 24, 3:00-4:30pm

On a Saturday in late March, the Italian Market was in full force, with the usual hustle and bustle of produce changing hands in an open street-market. Pushing through the door of 1025 South 9th Street, a group of children gathered in the cheerful, open space that is home to Mighty Writers El Futuro, ready to take part in the second of two tD movement and writing workshops.

Eun Jung Choi warmed everyone up with name and word games before introducing basic concepts of energy and rhythm. She got the fifteen kids moving through space on imaginary maps of their own creation before tackling improvisation in a superhero-pose exercise. Even initially shy participants were drawn into the fun as they admired and cheered one another's moves, ending with a raucous group circle dance. The tD facilitators—Patricia Graham, Rhonda Moore, and Karl Surkan—then led the students in generating words and phrases in response to the movement exercises. Using colored markers and giant pads of paper, the kids drafted multi-colored word banks of images, sensations, and feelings. Some drew the maps they'd danced, while others turned their writing and discussion back into movement, transforming their bodies into sculptures and statues. While more than one participant confessed to feeling awkward or unsure at first, their smiling faces and the paper they filled with writing testified to the fun shared by all.

The pilot sessions of thINKingDANCE's Engaging Young Writers Initiative were made possible by a Project Stream Grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Based on the overwhelmingly positive response from facilitators and students alike, tD is eager to build on this initiative and to further expand our public humanities programming aimed at Philadelphia youth.

By Lynn Matluck Brooks

April 28, 2018