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Dancers: Robert Farahid and Tiler Peck. Photo: Daniel Roberts

K-12



The Moving Life of Ben Franklin

BalletX takes dance into Philadelphia grade schools.

BY KAT RICHTER

With its bright-orange ceiling, cavernous acoustics and basketball hoops dotting the wall, the basement gym of Andrew Jackson School in South Philadelphia is an unlikely dance studio. But thanks to BalletX, it becomes just that every Tuesday and Thursday morning when upward of 30 third-graders tiptoe through its industrial-strength doors.

In its third year, the contemporary ballet company's Dance eXchange program pairs teaching artists with local elementary schools in an inner-city district that is otherwise starved for arts programming. Students receive 13 weeks of instruction culminating in a series of showcase performances at

Philadelphia's Prince Theater.

At the start of class, teaching artist Belle Alvarez requests "a nice *Pink Panther* theme" from her accompanist. Routine is paramount for these students, many of whom have never danced before, and the familiar tune sets the perfect tone for a quiet entrance.

"The space is not ideal," says Alvarez, who earned her BFA from Temple University in 2014. "But we use body language as much as we can to avoid losing our voices." She employs a variety of both visual and audio cues to engage the students. For a jazz square they chant, "Step across, glasses on, glasses off," while a side-touch elicits, "Check the time, look at your watch."

Photos by Audrey Simmons, courtesy of BalletX